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Pre-Note

Don't have anything to say here other than this episode marks the beginning of the end of Arc 2. Two more episodes plus perhaps an episode max after this. I wanted to do 10 for a nice round number but unlike an epilogue comes and gets too big to be called that, it won't work... Well, we had 3 prologues already, so...

If you like and have it available, I suggest you listen to 1000 Words from Final Fantasy X-2 during the final May scene of this episode. It helped me writing that one. I like the orchestra version quite a bit myself but either will do.

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(Narrator)

A blue sky with nary a cloud, the sun is shining brightly. We see Ash and Dawn standing on a hill overlooking the stretch of beach, their ferry can be seen departing in the distance. "Finally they are here. After much sidetracking, shocking and life-changing encounters and revelations, Ash and Dawn have reached the site of the first qualification round for the new Harmony Cup. It remains to be seen how much they can concentrate on the event after all they have learned. But for now they are all fired up to go."

"I can't wait. This will be the first time Top Coordinators from all regions gather and battle each other," Dawn exclaims excitedly and skips ahead. Ash just smiles fondly and follows after her. But then...

Suddenly the ground gives in and the two crash down a long hole! Somehow this is familiar... And just as I am thinking that.

"Listen, is that a voice I hear?"

"It's speaking to me loud and clear."

"On the wind!"

"Past the stars!"

"In your ear!"

"Bringing chaos at a breakneck pace."

"Dashing hope, putting fear in its place."

"A rose by any other name is just as sweet."

"When everything's worse, our work is complete."

"Jessie."

"And it's James."

"And Meowth, now dat's a name!"

"Putting the do-gooders in their place..."

"... we're Team Rocket..."

"... in your face!"

Ah, I thought so. "It looks like our favorite villains are back after such a long absence and their timing, as always, sucks... or does it?"

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Opening Theme (Shining Days, Mai-HiME)

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

*aozora ippai ni
watashitachi no omoi ga chiribamerarete yuku*

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

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

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

*hikaru kaze no naka
yume no hane maioriru yo*

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

*yuuki dashite mirai e
sou utsukushiku...*

Misty breaks the surface of the water with a leap, suddenly at a beach. Leaf is sitting on the shore and waving at her. May is running towards a faraway image of Ash and Dawn with a smile of determination.

ugokidasu atsui kodou ga

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

ano hi to onaji hayasa wo kizamu yo

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

massugu na manazashi ga suki

zutto miteitai

Short image of Giovanni in his office with a dark disembodied form behind him. Scene switches back to Ash, arriving at a hill. Looking up he smiles seeing Dawn, May, Brock, Ako, Leaf and Misty standing atop and waiting for him. Camera shifts up into the sky and from where it fades out of Mew's eye again who flies down and into the prior scene, landing on top of Dawn's shoulders.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 07: Prelude to Finale! What Will the Uncertain Future Bring?

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Ash)

"Okay, am I the only one that is feeling weirded out?" I asked rhetorically as we got closer to the large Contest Hall that would host the event.

Dawn shrugged next to me, nursing a small bruise from her fall. "You tell me. You know them longer. I can sort of understand why they would do that. Still, you are right. That really came out of the blue."

In the first place I still couldn't believe we got caught by one of their oldest, most basic traps. I wasn't ten anymore, damn it! Perhaps I had been a little too comfortable and inattentive not to notice anything. The ferry trip was for once entirely uneventful and what rest we couldn't quite get back in town, we had gotten on the ferries. Of course, I couldn't quite deny that the new... state of our relationship had something to do with my general content and happy mood.

Something had definitely changed. There wasn't a repeat after the first time but it had been enough to give our love a whole new meaning and depth. I felt even closer to Dawn now, stronger and more firmly rooted, but also even more protective and determined to see her happy and safe. As much as I had worried that her aggressiveness that night had been rushed, a reaction to recent events, I didn't regret what we did.

So, perhaps it was to be excused, if I was a little less attentive. I did get my rude awakening after all and perhaps it had really been better to be in this way than while facing real danger.

Flashback

The heck? I stared up at the three figures that I hadn't seen for quite awhile. At the beginning I had expected them to jump out behind every corner and while I never quite thought that they had completely given up on us, not after giving me so much grief over all the years, it was still strangely... comforting to have something so routinely *normal* happen.

They had been far less on my mind lately, though. Which shouldn't be surprising. The rest of Team Rocket was suddenly far more important. The rest, yes... With some chagrin I realized I actually thought of them and the trio separately, not even really thinking about the implications of the three of them being an actual part of the organization threatening the stability and peace of our world.

Even making that realization, it was still hard to bring the two of them together in my mind.

Giving Dawn a worried look as she was rubbing her shoulder, I glared up at the two humans and the Meowth. "Alright, what do you want this time?" And did I really have to ask? Pikachu was already madly charging up to send the three biggest annoyances of my life flying. "You realize your chances of actually getting even one of our Pokémon is almost non-existent?" I stated bluntly.

"Ha!" Jessie exclaimed. "Do not pretend to know our plans. Our mission today is far more important. This time we will..." It was at this time that she took a step forward in her dramatic pose. Seeing as they perched right on the edge of the hole... Well, the end result was rather obvious. Thankfully the hole was big enough – which I found quite curious to begin with – and we could jump out of the way when the three of them came tumbling down as well.

However, we soon realized that this action hadn't been one of their usual clumsy blunders. "Alright, twerps. We don't have much time, so shut up and listen," Jessie said after dusting herself off, her face suddenly very serious and so much unlike her usual expressions that it actually made me swallow whatever comment I might have ready. I couldn't see any signs that they were getting ready for a fight either and Dawn also seemed confused at the lack of hostility. Which meant she probably didn't sense anything either. Mew was completely relaxed which pretty much cinched it for me.

"That's right. We cannot hold them off for you any longer," Meowth began and I was really starting to wonder what kind of strange turn this encounter was taking.

End Flashback

In the end it really was kind of shocking. Not so much what they had to tell us, but more so that they did so in the first place. Apparently their boss had handed them a new order around the time the Sinnoh League had been finished last year. That one had made it unmistakable clear that Giovanni wanted us removed. Permanently.

It hadn't set well with them. Being thieves was all well and good for them apparently, but even if they didn't come out and say so directly, actively killing someone obviously was a line they didn't want to cross. *We might have been at each others' throats the whole time, but we kind of grew to like you guys,* James had admitted. I actually did recall quite a few times when things got really hairy – world ending hairy – that the three of them had actually forgotten our animosity towards each other often enough and even went against orders.

Perhaps they really had some good in them after all. That didn't mean I could stand them suddenly but I had to admire the courage they were obviously taking with this step. Apparently they had been tailing us for the last year but now their boss's patience had obviously run out.

Of course, we had known already that we were rather likely on their target list and not just to steal our Pokémon either. Knowing that on a theoretical and abstract basis but hearing someone spell it out for you was somewhat different though. It made you actually think about the possibility and that's when it really began to sink in.

A powerful, criminal organization was out to kill us.

It wasn't a nice thought.

I glanced back at Dawn. "We definitely have to watch our backs now. I doubt something happens directly at the Contest but everywhere in between or after..." I trailed off with a frown. I wouldn't let it happen. No one would harm Dawn on my watch. I would make sure that she could fully concentrate on the event as well. Because despite everything that was already on our minds, she was excited to measure herself against so many other Top Coordinators. And I didn't want to spoil that experience for her.

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Sky over Johto (Leaf)

For the record, I still thought this was a waste of time. There were so many aspects that didn't add up. First of all the target given was far too obvious. It was the same as Twinheart really. Would Giovanni really do something as obvious as attacking Ecruteak. The only real value the city would have to him would be Bell Tower and I had no idea if the place was even important for us to begin with.

Therein, of course, lay the problem. Bell Tower was a mystical but even more so a historical place, perhaps about the most important historical landmark in Johto. If something did happen and we ended up ignoring it because we thought it was a ruse anyway, then there would be a public outcry about the League's lack of responsibility. Which would serve Team Rocket quite well, I suspected.

I suppose what annoyed me the most was that it would quite likely draw me away from the action. Yes, yes, I had offered. I had offered because everyone else was mostly accounted for in key positions and perhaps because I was so used to moving all over the place.

The next couple of days would be crucial. The Contest on Twinheart would start today. The most opportune time to strike would probably be at its height. Which meant the final in now a little less than two days. We should hit Ecruteak in a few hours but getting back until then might be a problem.

Of course, I wasn't alone thankfully. "I'm seriously glad that you are here. Would be rather boring by myself," I said jokingly to my companion. We both knew it was meant in a different manner and none of us needed to spell it out. Still, I was glad on a personal level with the help I had on this mission.

"I'm sure between the two... well, three of us we shouldn't take too long," Anabel replied and I grinned slightly at her knowing tone. I couldn't hide anything from her after all. Frankly, the young Frontier Brain with her level of empathy should have been a candidate for one of us. And I did sense a tremendous amount of power from her, too. I had to wonder if she was keeping something other than her empathic abilities secret from the general public.

We had hit it off quite easily and it hadn't been much of a surprise that she had developed a bit of a crush on Ash. Nothing too serious thankfully. I wondered, if she had swung my way, would I have been able to resist? Probably not. But it was too late for that now as well. We were good friends and that was enough for me, even if she was teasing me endlessly about my "far too obvious longing" ever since picking her up for the trip.

Well, excuse me for thinking of my girlfriend whom I hardly got to see because I had to prevent a criminal organization with sinister ambitions from taking over the world!

Anabel giggled and I scrunched up my nose. "That's so adorable."

"Alright, enough! How about you, huh? Still crushing after Ash or is there someone else?" I grinned at seeing her blush. There really wasn't much else to do than casual banter. We had long gone over everything we wanted to once we

reached Ecruteak and met up with Morty. And just doing nothing really did lead to boredom, which led to worrying thoughts which led to frustration.

"That's none of your business."

I laughed. "Suuuure, but you were still blushing when I said his name." Anabel tried to hit me but I blocked her half-hearted attempt. "You are only digging your grave deeper, missy. You ARE still pining after him." Which I had hoped not to be the case, so I did allow myself some concern for my friend. Really she had even less chances than over a year ago now.

Anabel huffed. "I don't pine after him. I can't stop what I'm feeling but I do know when there is a hopeless case, you know." True enough. For her age, Anabel was rather mature in that we were rather similar. It was no surprise she had made it to Frontier Brain this early. Technically I knew that she was even better than Brandon should they ever fight full out, all limiters removed. I did once... and got horribly beaten, no joke. That had been awhile ago and I would think I'd do better now but it went to show just what kind of rare talent that girl had. Really, all Brandon had over her were his overpowered Gigas.

And it wasn't just with battle skills either. Her empathic skills made her very useful to anyone on her side and very dangerous to anyone against her. Knowing the feelings of others so easily, allowed her to make judgments with a far more mature disposition than most adults twice her age.

"It would be better for you. The poor boy is going to have enough on his plate right about now." It was about the most interesting passage of the small bit that Zoroark had known about the prophecy. I really had to wonder how Ash would cope. Telling him in advance wouldn't have mattered, at least not in making the decision easier. It would have just made them feel pressured. And you can't force love. I knew that. A love that was rooted in less than total honesty wouldn't save anyone, much less the world.

"Well... I've never met Dawn except from what I've seen on TV but I'm not that surprised about May. Her feelings were quite open already back then. I suppose she just didn't know them herself at the time." Anabel turned her head to look out of the window. "But you are right. It's going to be tough for them. Ash has a good heart but he can also be rather stubborn. He might not understand May's intention the way she wants them to... I hope they'll be alright."

"You and me both," I agreed but I wasn't all that worried. Anabel was right that Ash had a good heart. A big one as well. If anyone could find it in himself to find room for two, it should be him. I was more worried about Dawn and how she would take it. I definitely knew how I would in her situation.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (May)

One would almost think it was the Grand Festival all over again. The Contest Hall was comparable small – at least in proportion to what they had orchestrated for this year's Kanto Grand Festival, from what I had seen on TV at least. Still, the atmosphere was similar... no, perhaps even more hyped.

That shouldn't be too surprising. To my knowledge there hadn't been an event like this ever before. Oh sure, Top Coordinators certainly would fight each other. But that was more for a personal, private assessment of who was the better. It never really reached the broader public. Contests had really made a great evolution over the last years and it seemed like I had jumped on board just in time.

All that was strangely secondary though and didn't hold my attention longer than it took for me to spot them in the crowd of people inside the registration hall. I almost missed them. Seeing it on TV was one thing but they certainly had changed over the years. The last time had been almost two years ago, during the Wallace Cup. Yes, then. At that time everything had changed and had become so complicated.

Was this really okay? I knew I had resolved to do this but... So much had happened between then and now. I had tried to banish it but the kidnapping had left a mark... or more like the events following it. Was this really the right time and place? Our world was on the brink of... something. I couldn't say what and I was afraid of even trying to think about it. However, something was happening and would I really want to make things more complicated?

Maybe it would be best after all, if I... With a start I realized that I had stood up and waved at them and before I could correct my instinctual reaction, it was already too late.

What a fool. I knew what Naru would say if she were out here and not so reluctant to let everyone know she could speak our language. Doubting myself again. I knew, of course, deep down, that what I was trying WAS foolish, ultimately doomed. However, those were my feelings. And I needed this. I needed closure. I would try, with all I had. If at the end nothing would come off it, I would hopefully be able to put this behind myself.

"May! I didn't know you would be here, too!" I couldn't help but smile, with just a touch of bitter sweetness. So bright and cheerful. She had struck me where I had least expected it, too, and where I had no defense against it. I did NOT want to hurt her but I knew how she would probably take it at first. I hoped she would at least understand that my feelings for her were equally as strong as for Ash.

Not so fast, you shouldn't just jump on them right away, I tried to reign in my emotions at seeing the two people, that had torn me apart inside for these last years, again, only to almost give myself away with a blush at how that particular thought sounded... "Yeah, well," I laughed, trying desperately to cover for my reaction. "We made our titles practically at the same time and I couldn't just let this chance go, right?"

Ash scratched his head adorably. He really had gotten quite handsome, a well-trained body. And tall, definitely taller. Hmm... No, bad May! This wasn't the place and time. "Um, you did? Ah, wait, I think I heard..." Dawn and him, glanced at each other and something was passing between them which I didn't get and made me seem only further away from them. "Sorry about that. We meant to call but something VERY urgent came up and we had to leave in a hurry right after."

Dawn chuckled and looked apologetic. "That's right. And after that... It's just been a crazy month, one thing after another, you know. It kind of slipped our mind." I narrowed my eyes slightly. They knew something. Something far more than just a vague feeling. I remembered that night. The night after Dawn's victory and the strange feeling that had kept me awake almost the entire night.

Out loud though, I said. "That's okay. I didn't call either and when I couldn't reach you afterwards, I just forgot to do so later." A bit of a small lie myself, I guess. It had been rude not to call. I had watched and had been finished a day earlier, but speaking with them with all the confusion in my heart, I had been afraid of letting something slip. So I really had no right to feel suspicious or left out about their activity.

The somewhat awkward moment was saved by someone else at this moment thankfully.

"Look at that. It's like a big reunion." We all looked towards the voice and I smiled slightly but genuine happily at seeing Brock.

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"Wow, that's some story," I noted after hearing the account of Brock and his girlfriend's adventure... no, wait that's fiancée judging by the ring! As if the former wasn't enough of a shock. It was certainly enough to make me completely forget for the moment about my plans of confessing to Ash and Dawn.

Brock with a girl, that was unconceivable enough. Brock getting married, that was mind-blowing. Mind-blowing enough that I didn't even think about getting depressed that everyone seemed to have found someone and only I was left with the impossible choice... or non-choice.

"I could say the same thing about you, May," Ash said. After Dawn had went and took care of her registration, we had all sat down and talked about what everyone had been doing since we last saw each other. "But I guess Dawn and I hardly are the ones to talk." Well, that's right. Mostly Brock, Ako and myself had been recounting events. It was their turn now and I couldn't help being somewhat curious.

"Is that why YOU are here," Brock asked pointedly, looking at something beyond Dawn... no, now that I noticed, it was more like he was looking straight at something over or on Dawn's right shoulder. But there wasn't...

No there was. A shimmer. Some kind of outline. It was getting clearer, then suddenly took full shape.

"Ah. You saw me. That's because you were there at that time. I can't hide my presence from you and the other girl as I can with others."

I gasped and Ako did the same. Was that...? Yes, no mistake about it. This was most definitely a Mew sitting casually on Dawn's shoulder!

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(Brock)

We had barely made it in time. To be honest, I was surprised we actually did and surprised at the reason. It had been Ako who pushed for a quick departure. Before the events at Aprico Village I would have placed such a behavior more under the need to get away from the place of such traumatic events. Yet Ako wasn't the same anymore. Something had changed subtly. More so than any of the crisis training at the academy or my attempts to force her into taking the possibility of battle more serious had achieved quite what these last days had.

There was nothing to show you what the real thing was like than a real situation itself, I suppose. Altaria's death had left a deep impression on her. There was a seriousness and focus now that hadn't been there before, not in this intensity. She knew now, she knew that the world wasn't as easy and forgiving as life at Heal Bell. People could die and Pokémon could die as well. And so she knew that anything less but our absolute best would result in more such sad memories. It was a sobering thought, for me as well.

Seeing everyone again, including May, was a nice change from these dark thoughts, even if we managed to quickly get back to these memories during the conversation. Ako was clearly enjoying herself as well. I had told her so much about my friends but this was the first time they had actually met directly in person. I was

glad that the others seemed to like her right away. Not that I felt it was that difficult. Ako wasn't the type of person you could dislike, even if you wanted to.

I listened intently to the story of May's involvement in the kidnapping incident. To be honest, I hadn't even heard about that one. With how busy the last days were, I hadn't been able to stay up-to-date on the recent events. I had also not felt much like watching the news while we were staying in Fortree since that would only remind me more about our own situation. Surely the news had been busy with the forest fire incident.

It seemed like we weren't the only ones with more or less exciting experiences though. May's account was fascinating. She had definitely grown, if she had really been able to pull off what she claimed and I saw no reason why she should lie or unnecessarily boost. Well, she did leave out a few details, especially on how exactly she was able to take out several skilled kidnappers all by herself! She did touch on having received some martial arts training from Maylene but I wondered if that was all there was to it. And then there were the concealed looks she was throwing Ash and Dawn again and again. I KNEW that look and I really had to wonder if it could mean trouble between my friends.

All that was overshadowed though by the constant distraction of what I had seen as soon as we had spotted and joined up with the three of them. The Mew sitting casually on Dawn's shoulder... and no one else seemed to be aware of it. No, I was quite certain Dawn was and if she was, then Ash would be as well. Either May knew and kept quiet about it as well – which I doubted since it didn't seem like they had met up for more than a few minutes prior to our arrival – or she just wasn't... aware of it. We were talking about a Legendary here, after all. And even little Zorua had been able to fool us until the very end with her Leaf act during the Sinnoh League.

Why could I see it then? Because we met before? That was likely. What worried me much more were the implications. I knew firsthand Ash's tendency to get into these kind of situations, meeting up with a Legendary wasn't as uncommon for him as it was for the ordinary person. However, travelling with one, as was apparently the case... What kind of situation warranted something like that?

Finally Ash did provide the opening for me to ask without sounding rude or stupid and I thought I saw a brief glow around Mew. Judging by the reactions from May and Ako, it became obvious that they could see now as well.

"Ah. You saw me. That's because you were there at that time. I can't hide my presence from you and the other girl as I can with others." Almost immediately the small Legendary floated into Dawn's lap, which effectively hid it from being seen by anyone other than coming straight past where we were sitting while actively looking. So it really had been some form of invisibility then. The Breeder part in me was

fascinated since I hadn't heard of a skill like that. Of course, the true scope of a Legendary's ability was vastly unknown.

The same probably went for the fluid speech but that didn't really surprise me that much anymore after everything else. Mew hadn't show capacity for speaking our tongue then. However, it could have simply chosen not to. There was far too little known about the Legendaries to make accurate assumptions. I could take that in stride. What I really wanted to know was why it was here and how it came to be with my two friends. From the way Ash had worded it before, there definitely was some story behind it that could easily keep up with ours and May's.

I was beaten to questioning further by May though. "That's why you didn't call after the Grand Festival and why you said you had to leave in a hurry. That night after your final," she nodded towards Dawn, "I had this strange feeling I couldn't quite explain that kept me up almost all night." My eyes widened slightly at that. May, too? What was going on here? And were we the only ones? This seemed to be far too obvious for a coincidence.

"I know you have questions but this isn't the best place and time for them. I will tell you everything soon, so please be a little patient." I narrowed my eyes – even more than usual. I really did not feel like waiting. My curiosity had definitely been piqued and a big part of me wanted some answers. I did not like being out of the loop after all of the training I had done myself.

Unfortunately Dawn cut in before I could even start to press for an answer. "I think that's a good idea. May and I are here for the Contest after all and you guys have your own work to do, right? Besides, there is something that would interest me much more." I inched back in my seat a little at the mischievous look the girl was sending me. Danger signs were already popping up all over my mind but it was too late already. "I mean I am still surprised you've got a girlfriend... But I wonder, is that ring what I think it is?"

Yep, doomed. There was no way I could bring the conversation back on track now. May would jump right in and once they got going...

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"Do you think this will be enough?" I asked, putting down the folder after skimming through it and looking dubiously at the League Official across from us.

The surprise far outweighing the irritation actually made me grin inwardly. I bet he was more used to people asking him the opposite question. However, I would have hoped he had been better briefed. While Leaf said only the higher-ranked

League officials were aware of us – our role, not our relationship –, I would have expected that word of Leaf spending a lot of time here should have gotten around. I would need to explain a bit of this to Aisha as well since she was officially my assistant now.

So, of course I was worried. Security measures for the cities were apparently distributed everywhere. This mostly meant an increase in police, reinforced by resources from the League. The plans for Cerulean were pretty low-key though from what I could see after skimming through them.

The man across from us had caught himself quickly enough. "Cerulean isn't on the top priority list of possible targets. However, key personnel is deployed all around here, so even if something were to happen, I am sure help will be here quickly enough."

I snorted, not quite so optimistic. Help should have been here quickly enough after the incident at the cave as well. And surely Team Rocket had shown they were good at diversionary tactics. Sighing in defeat, I put the folder in my bag. There was no point in arguing with the man. Orders came from high up and I knew from Leaf that the League had enough trouble as it was with their resources. They needed to prioritize. Besides, they were probably right. What would an attack here achieve? "Alright, thank you for the information. We'll be sure to hold down the fort."

"Actually," the man interjected, "it's probably more likely that you'll be called on for additional support elsewhere. So please remain on standby for the next few days."

Wonderful. Well, that at least meant I had a valid excuse for closing down the Gym. In fact, looking over to Aisha who seemed a little nervous being a part of such a serious and important meeting, it was about time I bonded a little more with my new assistant outside of official business.

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"Here you go. It's your advance for the month." I grinned a little at the shocked look from the other girl. Surely she hadn't expected to get something this quickly. But never let it be said that I would be stingy with expenses for the Gym. Unlike some... other people I hardly put that much into personal things and appearance. Having the Gym run smoothly was far more important to me.

Aisha reluctantly took the money. Not that it was much. A small percentage of a monthly salary based on the few days she had started to work for me in earnest plus a little extra. "Ah, dinner and this... You are spoiling me, Mi... Boss." She was worth every Pokédollar that was for sure. In this small time her presence alone had relieved me of almost half my workload. Seriously, the challengers were just one

thing. Considering the lull as of late both of us hadn't had a lot to do. Still, ever since the first trial match I had made a point to have every challenger run through Aisha. Many got annoyed but as word got around, they took things a lot more seriously.

"Nonsense. You are a huge help. I would never have gotten all the extra training done without you." The little things made the biggest difference. Aisha took over a lot of the daily labor. Pokémon feedings, pool maintenance, all these little things necessary to keep the Gym running smoothly which otherwise would cost me hours every day. And she was very efficient. To a point that I caught myself wishing she had come to Cerulean earlier than this. "And please just call me Misty." It was kind of flattering to be called "Boss" but we weren't that far apart in age and I'd rather have her as a friend than just a coworker. I didn't have too many that weren't strewn all around the regions. Including my girlfriend...

"Thinking about her again?" I almost choked on the meat I had just taken a bite from and looked at Aisha curiously at the directness of that question. She wasn't exactly a shy girl but so far had shown that she wouldn't breach personal matters unless the other person did so first. A nice professional attitude, though it sometimes came over as a little too serious. "Ah, I didn't mean to pry. It's none of my..."

I waved her off and took a big gulp from my water, actually emptying the glass and then what was left in our bottle. "Mou, don't worry about that. I bet you were surprised to hear about me being with another girl." I signaled the waiter for another bottle and returned my attention to my meal.

"That's not the problem," Aisha replied quickly and serious. "Everyone should be free to choose what and who they like." I smiled slightly at the honesty, definitely a huge step up from the grief my sisters had caused me and Leaf. "I'm more surprised it's actual someone so famous!"

At that I laughed, a little embarrassed and perhaps just a little proud. Just a little. "I can't take too much credit for that. She just dropped into my life, literally, and couldn't stop flirting with me. As for being famous... Well, I don't really feel like it is a big deal. Perhaps because I used to meet quite a few famous people when I was still travelling, my best friend from then is now a League Champion and probably well on his way to a Master himself." And while not saying it because I thought it might sound too arrogant, I had done a lot to raise my own reputation. So perhaps, putting me closer to Ash and Leaf's class these days wasn't that farfetched.

Aisha smiled. "You really are amazing, Misty. Few people experience even a tenth of what you probably have at your age." A slight blush rose to my cheeks at the compliment but it was nice to hear a confirmation of my own unvoiced thought. Between Leaf and Aisha I could honestly say I had gotten a lot more confident in my own abilities and their worth. Not to a degree that I would slack off but enough to pull

off something drastic like with my sisters. I wasn't sure if I could have done that some years ago. No definitely not.

We ended talking a lot more about Leaf. After Aisha realized I didn't mind her interest, she quickly got curious as to what I liked about her. And that was something I wouldn't easily get tired off. In fact I was glad to do simple girl talk about one's beloved. I really didn't have anyone else for that. It seemed Aisha was proving her worth even outside the Gym and that the lonely days as a Gym Leader were suddenly not quite so lonely anymore.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Ako)

"They are all very nice and um..." I struggled for a better word because I felt "nice" was such a common, noncommittal term that it bordered on insulting or at least non-descriptive. "... very energetic," I finally settled on something that I found appropriate. I really had liked talking to May and Dawn and hoped I could do more so later. Contests fascinated me and to have the chance to hear about it from two fresh Top Coordinators was something I didn't want to miss out on. But that would probably have to wait for later. One could easily tell the tension and anticipation in the air. They were obviously very much fired up for this event. And we had our own duties, too, after all.

While May and Dawn seemed nice enough – and I really meant it like that – I wasn't quite sure yet what to make of Ash. I had heard so much about him from Brock, however, the image in my mind didn't quite match reality. From all the stories I imagined an energetic and somewhat brash boy, kind but sometimes a little over the top. The young man I had met in the lobby was noticeably quieter, composed and with an aura of focused seriousness and readiness. Yes, Brock had said that he had changed before the Sinnoh League tournament but this much? He came over more as a seasoned soldier ready to spring into action.

Noticing Brock's stare, I looked back, then after several seconds we both laughed slightly. I suppose my comment still sounded somewhat forced. It wasn't like we had talked much other than about what happened to us and May before the shocking revelation... I still couldn't believe I had seen a live Mew! Perhaps more shocking than that was how... casual everyone had been around a Legendary Pokémon.

"Well, I was glad to show off my fiancée," Brock beamed and I was sure I was blushing quite heavily, immediately recalling once more that surprising and wonderful moment.

Flashback

The night sky was beautiful up here. For this alone I was glad that our pilot had taken a small stop here for the night. The island was out of the way of normal travel routes but a bit of an insider spot for its fantastic beaches and hotels. They were quite expensive, too, so normally we wouldn't be able to afford it. For that one night a rather luxurious suite had been reserved for us. Our pilot had called it a bonus for the great work.

Great work, right. I wish it had really been great work. No... No, that wasn't fair to all the other Pokémon we had managed to save. Altaria wouldn't have wanted that. It had been hard but I had come to terms with his... passing and with the fact that he surely would have rather been remembered for the good and not the bad. Therefore I would not mourn him any longer. That was the least I could do in his memory.

We had done a lot of good. Downplaying that and working myself into a sorry state because of not being able to save him would neither bring him back, nor would it help the many others who would still need my help in the future. Next time would be different. Next time I would be stronger. I had promised that at his grave and I would keep that promise.

"Such a sad expression does not befit a beautiful lady."

I turned with a gentle smile. Brock had stepped out onto the rather large balcony as well, the pale moonlight shimmering across his face in a mixture of shadow and faint light. I knew he probably worried about me and my state of mind after the funeral, even though I had tried to let him know that I had moved passed all this. I suppose it was natural to worry. I would as well.

"I'm not really sad. He wouldn't want me to. And so I would live. Live and save many more lives." But I realized then that I was wrong. It wasn't worry, not foremost that I could see in his gaze. There was something else. Nervousness? What for?

"I'm glad to hear it. You've really grown stronger through all of this." I ducked my head slightly at the compliment. I would like to say that wasn't true, that I hadn't been strong at all. However, that would only lead my thoughts down the path I had resolved not to travel. Perhaps, I really had grown stronger from this. My conviction definitely had. For all of Brock's attempts to get me motivated for battle, the events at Aprico had been much more of an eye-opener. Because they were real. Really real. Not the faked real danger, regardless of how much convincing Brock had used to motivate me.

I had no choice but to look at him again when he lifted my face back up and was left momentarily speechless by the powerful emotion I could see directed at me. The earnest, steadfast love. He had made me feel special almost from the beginning. Brock radiated security and shelter, he was someone that could always be relied on.

Not an outgoing, overly energetic character, but more quiet and always with a good grasp on the situation.

I felt safe with him, knowing that he would always know the best way to even deal with a difficult and stressful situation. I think I was truly blessed to have met such a reliable man.

Right now there was something different though. He didn't seem quite as sure of himself as usual. "I really loved the old Ako. But I think I love this one even more." Well, he still was a good sweet talker at least. That's something he always could do and where other women might be put off, I liked these kind of comments. Growing up in a poor village and even after that with little contact outside the academy, I wasn't exactly used to being flirted with. Besides, I knew he was honest with every word, regardless how cheesy and overblown they might be.

"I..."

My attempt to return the affectionate word was stopped by a finger on my lips and then I could see determination settling into his whole body language. Before I could even begin to fathom the cause, he suddenly bent down on one knee and held out something to me. It was a small box, opened to reveal a very beautiful silver ring.

My heart skipped a beat... no probably a whole song. Was he...?

"Ako, would you marry me?"

End Flashback

It was the happiest day of my life and I hadn't really given a single thought to the forest fire and Altaria's death for the rest of our trip. Well, the night after the confession definitely had a rather mind-blowing effect! Oh god, did I really just think that?! Well better thinking than saying it out loud.

"Now that's a lovely expression."

I did blush again and swatted him on the arm. "Hush, you. For someone enjoying showing off his fiancée, you looked quite helpless when being questioned about it." The groan made me giggle. "I'm sure your friends can tell me a few embarrassing stories about your travels you have neglected to tell me as well."

Frantically, he waved his hands. "Alright, alright enough already. Remember what we are here for."

As if I could forget. The side trip might have served as a more serious distraction but we had been preparing for this so much, that being here also seemed

routine procedure compared to Aprico Village. I'd like to think it would be far less hectic and nerve-wrecking, definitely far less dangerous. However, Brock seemed rather worried since our brief meeting with his friends... since seeing Mew.

We reached the infirmary wing of the Contest Hall in silence. Upon entering though we were immediately greeted by an unexpected face. "Ah, there you two are!" I looked up and immediately snapped to attention spotting none other than Cynthia walking towards us. I had only met her a few times in passing. Lance was chief responsible for Heal Bell normally. "I'm glad you made it after all."

In the corner of my eye I could see that Brock was far less surprised to see her here. "So are we. I suppose you aren't here for just a social call?" I gasped slightly at the rather direct question that some could consider just a little disrespectful of her station. This really was bothering him even more than I had suspected.

Cynthia just laughed though, not shocked at all, probably not even surprised by the question. "Believe it or not, I am. We've been promoting this event very strongly, so for this one I'll be part of the jury." Now that sounded a little bit too convenient, even for me. I would expect one of the Grand Masters of the League to have better things to do than spending several days grading performances in a Contest, regardless of how much they had hyped up the event in the beginning. Now, if this were the actual Harmony Cup and not just a qualification round I would understand but this...

"And I suppose it has nothing to do with recent events?" Brock seemed relentless to get his answers it seemed. If Cynthia was bothered by it, she wasn't showing it though.

"I see you met with your friends already. How much are you aware of?" The question was pointed and I was starting to feel more and more out of the loop. What exactly was going on here. This was about Team Rocket activities, right? I mean, I wasn't stupid. People talked, even in the academy. I also knew this was part of why Brock had insisted to raise up the level of my training. Somehow though I started to get the feeling there was a lot more going on here.

Was that why my fiancé had been so... spooked seeing Mew back there with his friends? There definitely was a story behind that one as well, one he hadn't told me about. What Mew had said still stuck in the back of my head. What had happened that could let Brock see it and no one else, or as the Legendary had put it: made it harder to hide from him?

"Far too little I am afraid. Were you aware they were travelling with... it?" The situation was getting more mysterious and ominous. No, perhaps this really wasn't going to be so ordinary and routine as I had initially believed. I hoped I was wrong but the sinking feeling in my gut told me otherwise.

Cynthia nodded solemnly. "Yes, for the last month in fact. If she doesn't want to tell you, I have no business to do so either." I reached out and placed a calming hand on Brock's shoulder. His scowl was rather obvious and it was disconcerting to see the usual calm and rational young man so riled up.

Cynthia obviously noticed that, too, and continued with a small sigh. "All I can tell you is that we are expecting a huge operation from Team Rocket, most likely somewhere in Kanto. The signs have been there for almost a year now and we've been preparing on our end as well. Since we haven't been able to figure out their target but expect them to try something drastic that will gain them a lot of attention, we had to cover a lot of key locations." And that was why she was here in the first place. At least that made sense. And the idea of what exactly Team Rocket could be trying that would need such a massive counter effort was mind-boggling and I really didn't want to think about it too much.

However, there was still more. She had pretty much confirmed that by denying the full scope. For me personally this was more than enough and I would prefer to stay oblivious. It bothered Brock though and as such it ultimately bothered me. We wouldn't get more right now though, even my fiancé knew that.

"Alright, I guess I'll accept that for now." The tension drained a little from him to my relief. "I'm just surprised then that you are here. I would have expected Leaf to be here." Who? Oh right, the girl that had fought his friend Ash in the final. She had been made an official Master after that, if I remembered correctly. Why would Brock expect her to be here? Maybe because of Ash. It hardly seemed enough of a valid reason to be that certain of her attendance though.

"She wanted to come. Unfortunately, something came up and she is tied up elsewhere." The blonde-haired woman smiled wryly. "And I did dabble a little in Contests when I was still travelling, so I at least know a little of what I'm doing while posing as a judge."

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(Dawn)

"I welcome all of you to this brand new event. Each and every one of you has already distinguished him- or herself in the Contest circuit and added their name to the list of those that are allowed to call themselves Top Coordinator. Now, without further delay, let me explain the rules of this qualification round."

"Finally," I muttered in swelling excitement. It was really interesting if you thought about it. How easy it was to forget all the troubles around you, the uncertain future, the concern about destiny and other such things. But it was there again. That

feeling. Winning the Grand Festival had not diminished my excitement and passion for the stage in the slightest. As soon as I stood here with all the other competitors – the best of the best, just like me! – the motivation was there full force and recent events and their far-reaching consequences were little more than a background noise I could easily block out for the time being.

"Since the number of competitors is smaller than in ordinary Contests, things will be slightly different. We wish to provide you with a challenge quite unlike of what you are used to. All competitors will start out with two Appeal rounds and both scores combined will decide which sixteen will advance to the final rounds tomorrow and eventually the final the day afterwards. For both the Appeal and Battle rounds we will use two forms of stages, the one I am standing on is the normal one and the other is the field in the adjourning hall that I'm sure most of you have already seen."

Yes, I had. And it had puzzled me somewhat. The other one looked more like a specified arena in a Gym with differently modeled terrain. The participants had not been informed beforehand about the rules and proceedings of this Contest, obviously in order to keep us surprised. I could see that some looked a little worried about the prospect. Terrain added a whole new element to performance. A lot more could be done with it but you could also easily mess something up. However, I suspected the judges would expect us to make use of it.

"All of you are participating here to gain a place for the Harmony Cup, an event that will put Trainers and Coordinators together. You will need to show that you are able to adapt to new situations because mixed battles will most certainly be part of the event," Lillian continued and pretty much confirmed my theory about the idea behind these changes.

"Ah, so that's what they were up to," said Zoey and she looked as excited as I felt at the prospect. It had been a nice surprise. May and Brock weren't the only ones we had met again. I suppose I should have expected that none of them would have let a chance like this pass. Not only Zoey but also Nando who recently had made his title in Johto were participating.

"It sounds fun. I've been doing a lot of training like that, so it shouldn't be a problem to improvise." Of course, that's what it was all about. By keeping something like this a secret, they were forcing us to improvise our performance on the spot. Battles were one thing but Appeals might just turn out to be the crux. Everyone was so used to perform on a set, solid stage, you wouldn't even think of working the terrain into your plans for the performance.

"Heh, you are not the only one who got better. Just watch, I don't plan to fall behind." I grinned back, remembering our promise from after the Sinnoh League. Yes, I really wanted to fight Zoey again and settle the score between us. Nando had

done well against Leaf and surely had only improved, so he would be a hard opponent as well. Of course, no one here was easy.

There was the boy that seemed to be May's rival as well. I think Ash had mentioned him a few times. He was not to be trifled with either. And then, of course there was May herself. I really got the feeling she would be the hardest to beat. On top of that her attitude was... strange. I couldn't put a finger on it but something rubbed me the wrong way. More than once I had caught her sneaking concealed glances at Ash – which already got me suspicious enough – but then threw me off by giving me the same weird looks I couldn't interpret. Something was up.

This was not the time though. I assumed I would learn whatever was up with her soon enough. Right now I had a Contest to concentrate on. The competition was high and one mistake, one lapse in concentration could lead to defeat. And that was the last thing I wanted. After all, if I won, it would enable Ash to pick the other partner and I rather hoped we could keep this choice instead of getting stuck with someone we didn't want or would have trouble working with.

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Starting right of the bat, huh? So much for a lack of pressure.

Luck hadn't been kind to me and I had to do the very first Appeal. The question whether to set the bar high or not was rather mood. The first Appeal would be on a normal stage and that was what we had practiced for. At this point, a flawless execution was the best we could do.

"Togekiss, spotlight!"

The Appeal we had planned wasn't going to be the most spectacular light show. Oh, it would be flashy but that wasn't the point. "Let's begin! Aura Sphere!" Togekiss formed the attack and as soon as I called for it, formed two more, the first two floating and hovering a little up to the left and right. Already this was showing a great control. Aura Sphere was something generated more from physical energy – or chi – it was hard to control and keep from dissipating once separated from the body. Of course, Togekiss despite not being a Psychic type had just as much of its abilities.

Now for the real show. I took out a set of five small discuses and threw them in the air in quick succession. I had just recently started to learn to do this properly. The training from Mew had been most helpful. Exerting my mind I began to control the flight of the discs. At the same time Togekiss fired off her three Aura Spheres and for several seconds it became a game of who could control their objects better.

Of course, I was hardly adequate at this, especially when it came to complex maneuvers while Togekiss magnificently demonstrated that she could easily not only

maintain but control the Aura Spheres like homing rockets. It wasn't long until my discs had all been shot down.

"Great work, let's wrap it up." The three Aura Spheres suddenly arced upwards where they came together, for awhile not touching as they spun very closely around each other. In fact they were spinning closer and closer until to the casual observer they seemed to merge together. Only that there was nothing seemingly in there.

Now for the flashy part. "Use Fire Blast." That was a move we had worked on as of late to give Togekiss some more flexibility against other types. Now it served a spectacular finish as the blast that looked like a five-pointed star out of flames raced into the big Aura Sphere, making it – or so it seemed while in truth even that was part of Togekiss' control – explode in a mixture of blue energy and red fire, its particles raining down around Togekiss like a curtain of light.

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(Mew)

With a happy smile I listened to the judges giving high praises to my charge's performance. It was in some way simple but also incredible difficult and they were experts enough to recognize that.

"To take an attack meant for one time use and control it to your will is an incredible feat. I can only imagine the kind of things a Pokémon could do with it in battle," Cynthia concluded and I smiled faintly, having been used as target practice more than once while Dawn was learning that trick. If I didn't have the experience of my long life, I would have been in serious trouble. What we had just seen was for show, real battle application could get a lot more intense. "You have shown us that Togekiss possesses a great potential at control and that one shouldn't underestimate its mental powers."

Mmh, they definitely are impressed, I nodded to myself. Dawn was off to a good start. That made it easier to relax and watch the rest of the performances. Pokémon Contests were an interesting thing. I kind of liked them personally because they added another form of activity for Pokémon that lay outside of battle. Of course that part wasn't to be neglected either and that was something I felt a lot of Coordinators didn't understand. I was aware how a greater majority, especially those never dabbling in serious battle competitions, were thinking about the role of a Trainer. And to see Contests as a more peaceful, less violent form of competition wasn't quite so easy either.

The battle instinct was a large part of our existence, a legacy from our time as simple animals only strengthened by that monumental mistake. Almost all of the first

Pokémon had been unable to hold back the urges and even after sealing IT, the genetic aggression remained. For a long time, before the League was formed, there was a lot more fighting amongst our kind than now and only a part of that was for simple territory claims or hunting.

This instinct was not exclusive towards other Pokémon either. While by far not as radical as after the first transformation, aggression towards humans was a lot higher than in the days where most of our wild kind rather tried to avoid contact and only the most ferocious would actively threaten humans. The formation of the League was a consequence to bring our two races closer together. The system of capturing, training and battling under controlled circumstances was a good way to appeal to a Pokémon's basic instincts. As such Trainers held in fact a very important role and I had to admit the overall bond – of course, there were always sad exceptions – had gone a long way to bridge the gap between our races.

And the same went for Contests. A rather new way – especially in its widespread popularity – to bring humans and Pokémon together and made possible through a long time of intermingling. The Pokémon these days were generally more peaceful and there were a lot of species that had little to almost no aggression left to vent. For those performing on a stage, competing in this less direct way, was a perfect way to address the competitive instinct that was in all of us somewhere.

The Harmony Cup was an interesting idea to bring both aspects together. Part of me wished it had happened earlier. With times as they were, such an event could have strengthened the bonds between our races as well as the different groups within greatly. Now it would almost certainly be too late to make an impact on the near future.

Shaking off the thoughts, knowing there was nothing to be done about it, I settled for enjoying the spectacular shows. The first Appeal round as expected was a series of perfectly choreographed performances. All these Coordinators had earned their right to be here and there was pretty much nothing to put them apart by much. No, the true challenge would be the second Appeal.

There was, of course, an exception. Zoey, Drew and Nando were all solid and it showed in small things how hard they must have trained as well to keep up. The real challenge for Dawn would be May though. In more ways than one but I didn't want to think about that, in fact I was a little more reassured these days my charge might surprise us all in how she dealt with that development.

No, the other girl's skills were definitely a step apart from the rest and more on par with Dawn's own. Her show was definitely something else as well that took a lot of risk but was all the more outstanding for it. Basically what she did was sparring against her Blaziken. Full contact, human against Pokémon. Oh, I was sure Blaziken held back a little but it looked serious enough to have the entire audience in awe. I

wasn't too shocked. Her powers seemed to have started to awaken as well, not surprising so close to the pivotal point of their destiny and picking up skills that focused on attack and physical combat was rather in tune with the nature of fire.

"This is going to be a very interesting event. They are all very closely matched," Cynthia commented. "It's just as well. This will give them something to enjoy, perhaps for the last time in a long while."

I smiled a little sadly. "We know though how this will end up, don't we? The others are good but those two will decide this amongst themselves." It was the break between rounds and Sinnoh's Grand Master was reviewing reports from the League's counter operation in the meantime.

Cynthia laughed. "Don't sell the rest too short. In a competition like this a lot of things can happen." Then her demeanor changed to a more serious one. "You haven't told the others yet." It wasn't a question either, so she probably spoke to them, probably Brock and his girlfriend. I didn't detect any misgivings and would have known better anyway. Cynthia trusted me to know the best way to approach the situation, I just hoped that trust wouldn't be misplaced.

"The Purple Moon is coming up. Even if told them before, it would make no difference." It was a special time. Once every five hundred years, marking the anniversary of our biggest mistake and the only time in which the seals could be harnessed to awaken the dormant powers of the Chosen. There was a reason after all why I hadn't just outright told everyone and prepared them before the conflict broke out. That would have been a lot more convenient. The other side knew that, too. The timing showed that.

They would have to weather the first storm first in order to prepare for the bigger one.

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(Ash)

As expected Dawn made a great impression even on the modified stage. Clearly her opening act had inspired the rest of the competition and from what I could tell – after several years actively watching Contests as well as travelling and training with May and Dawn I would think my opinion was well-founded in experience – all of them were about equal. Dawn and May might have been just a little above the rest, although that might be more wishful thinking and playing favorites.

The second round made clear though who was better prepared for change. I personally thought this was an excellent idea. Contests usually always were held in

the same settings, the same kind of stage – merely differing in size and shape maybe and sometimes adding some water like during the Wallace Cup, but that was about it.

I admitted that Coordinators had to be much more flexible than your average Trainer to begin with. Combinations and presentation asked for a lot more than a normal, clear-cut battle strategy. As such the lack of innovation in stage design had always been a bit of a letdown. Well, obviously not anymore.

My girlfriend showed everyone that there was a difference between a Coordinator solely concentrating on their one occupation and someone that dabbled in regular battles quite often. The kind of spars we had daily were easily on par with League Tournament standards and I had no doubt at all that if she wanted to, Dawn would have no trouble earning badges and earning her place on top in that area as well.

Not to say that what she did today was extraordinary flashy. It seemed she was going for subtle this time, showing off her Pokémon's skill and control in a particular field. The big stage was composed of several small areas. Utilizing the part that had a rocky ground and was littered with small stone spires, Dawn had Lopunny show off her flexibility and balance by standing atop the small spires, barely enough to hold one foot and that was how Lopunny stood perfectly balanced. That alone would have hardly been enough. Balanced as she was, the Bunny Pokémon used Ice Beam to draw several complex shapes into the air above each spire, before jumping to the next and repeating the same thing. The ice drawings stayed in the air for awhile longer and eventually presented a colorful picture.

Both audience and judges quite liked the idea, I could tell. To be fair, this wasn't entirely unplanned. Dawn had been practicing something similar on the side. Such balancing was in fact a good way for training and could easily be performed outside in every kind of area that had a similar set up of small platforms.

May was going for radical approaches it seemed. Where her first Appeal had shown of power and skill in a rather unusual way for Contests, now she was going for effect. Using the entire area to her advantage, Beautifly performed a series of short but appropriate moves on each. Clever use of Psychic and various air manipulation moves made for several pretty effects. The clincher was obviously meant a bit as a challenge for Dawn. Finishing off at the same area where Dawn had performed, Beautifly used her own combination of Silver Wind and Psychic to make an even more complex drawing all around the rock spires.

She really had improved. However, that wasn't all I noticed about May. Her behavior this morning had been odd enough and it continued throughout the entire day. Something *felt* off about her. I couldn't define it, not yet. I had been shocked at first when I noticed that I was far more susceptible to emotions now. Mew had explained that having an empathic skill didn't just mean empathy towards Pokémon

exclusively, which honestly should have been obvious. Few people could use it to actually sense emotions though, instead it would rather manifest more on a subconscious level of awareness. Now that I had begun to actively use it for battle through use of NRE, it had started to manifest more strongly.

That being said, this skill was barely adequate to give me more than glimpses. As such what I got from May was a jumble of emotions I couldn't even start to hope to decipher. I definitely felt some nervousness or apprehension... no, perhaps anxiety when she was around us, mainly Dawn and I. Beyond that I couldn't say more other than that I believed something was up with her.

Perhaps I am just seeing things though, I mused. So much has happened lately, I tend to worry too much. Chuckling at the thought that sounded a bit Dawn-like in the early stages of our travels, I continued on my way to meet the girls now that the Appeals were finished. Results were as expected. Dawn and May made it out on top, putting them on different sides and guaranteeing that they wouldn't meet before the final if at all. Zoey, Nando and Drew had all qualified as well which potentially could make for a few interesting matchups. Christine had entered as well to my surprise – I had really thought that after the humiliation from Dawn she wouldn't dare – but it looked like she was out for revenge. Too bad that she would probably have to go through May in the quarter final if she even made it that far.

"You girls were great!" I exclaimed when I found Dawn and May backstage. It seemed they had just been about to start a conversation and the atmosphere felt rather... tense. For all I knew this was mostly due to competition and both of them wanting to win. Of course, I couldn't quite help think of my confusing observations regarding my old friend. She really was acting weird. Then again almost two years could change people – just look at Dawn and I.

"Thanks, but this was just the beginning." Dawn eyed May, definitely competitive but I could tell she was also a little confused at the brunette's attitude. While friendly and open on the outside, she was clearly shying away from more personal contact, keeping all conversations general or concerning business so far.

There was no need to ponder her behavior anymore though. "Well, I definitely don't plan on losing to you this time!" It seemed doing the Appeals had gotten May fired up and I had to smile at the mixture of excitement, seriousness and challenging attitude. However, that changed a moment later once more and it was somewhat disconcerting seeing her getting all nervous and... shy.

"What is it, May? I think we all noticed there is something on your mind." I blinked at Dawn's directness but couldn't deny that I was also quite curious.

May shuffled her feet nervously. "Um... not here, okay? Can we talk later? Meet me down in the lobby tonight at nine, alright?" Well, that was mysterious. What

was so important that she couldn't just tell us right here? May had never been someone to beat around the bush, so to say. There was something seriously troubling her and it had something to do with us.

I hoped there was something I could do to help. I felt somewhat terrible already for having missed her own Grand Festival win – never mind that it ran almost parallel to Dawn's. I still did care a lot about her and at one point had even thought there could have been more. This possibility was of course long closed now. I had Dawn and after all we were through, I couldn't even imagine being with someone else.

Then again... May had definitely grown into a beautiful girl. I suppose, IF I was still unattached, I might have tried my luck. As much as I wanted to chasten myself for the thought, feeling like I was betraying Dawn, May wasn't just any other random girl I had ever met after all. There were a lot of memories and adventures shared.

Well, regardless of all that, I could still help her out with whatever problem she had, that was for sure.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"Ecruteak, huh? That brings back memories." The last time we had been there things had really gotten out of hand, one of these extreme scenarios that occurred now and then if you happened to travel with Ash. The thought brought some fondness with it and I had to smile involuntarily.

Of course, seeing my girlfriend again, even if it was just over the phone and with a subpar picture provided by my Pokégear was uplifting and a good cure for my boredom. With League orders standing that for the next couple of days Gym Leaders had to remain on standby, ready to be called, there was nothing to do except some light training. After all I couldn't have my Pokémon tired out in case of a sudden emergency.

It was an entirely new experience for me. For the last years I had been so busy, having nothing to do outside of Gym duties and personal training had become a rare thing. Unfortunately this wasn't a vacation either, so I couldn't just go somewhere and enjoy myself.

"You look as bored as I feel." I chuckled at Leaf's blunt and observant comment. She had often complained how absolutely boring it was to sit in a helicopter for hours. Sure, for most people it was exciting since you didn't get to do it all the time. After the first couple of times that excitement was quickly lost, or so she claimed.

"There is nothing to do. Aisha went and got a couple of movies already. I really don't like sitting around and waiting for something to happen." If not for my new assistant's company I would probably go mad all by myself with nothing to do. Yes, I really, really wished Leaf was here. Now there was actual an opportunity for some private time but she was held up for the same reasons I was sitting here utterly bored out of my mind.

"The new girl is settling in well then, I take it?"

That brought a smile to my face and I spent the next several minutes vividly describing how much of a relief my assistant had been so far. Even after I told her a bit of a condensed version of what Leaf had shared with me, she had taken it in fairly calmly and didn't try to press for more. I still remembered how she had reassured me that she would make sure the Gym stayed in good condition if I had to be away for a longer period of time. Honestly, the girl was a blessing and it definitely helped that I had some like-minded company that I could actually talk to freely. There was no baggage or family routine between us like with my sisters, just two girls getting along well.

Speaking of my sisters. "By the way, my sisters called a few hours ago." Seeing Leaf's face darken with concern and some remnants of guilt, I quickly continued. "Hey, stop that. I told you none of this was your fault. Besides, I think we are starting to come to a bit of an understanding." Well, understanding might be going too far yet. My relationship with Leaf hadn't been touched directly and I hadn't pressed to bring it up.

"They admitted to having reacted 'a little too strong', I quote." I couldn't suppress rolling my eyes as I must surely have done during the conversation. Still, it sounded genuine at least and that was about as good and close to an apology as I would get from them. For now at least. I wasn't going to cave in easily after all, that would undermine the whole meaning of the argument. "We agreed that we all needed to cool our heads a little, so they are not coming back anytime soon."

And I actually agreed that was for the best. As hardened as the fronts had been initially, open exposure to the other would probably only make it worse instead of better. I was glad we were at least talking to each other again after the period of silence that followed the unplanned confrontation. It was a step in the right direction, the rest would come with time.

Leaf looked visibly more relieved as well upon hearing the news. I guess I couldn't completely convince her that she had no reason to feel guilty. I would have probably been the same in her position. "That's good to hear. And it's probably all for the better that they are out of town at the moment... I hope you told them to avoid the hotspots?"

I nodded and it really wasn't the problem at all. "They are touring Sinnoh actually. I think that was something they had wanted to do for quite awhile." Reminded once more of my situation, I couldn't help but be curious. "You really think it's going to be here in Kanto, huh?"

Leaf grinned but it was without real humor. "That's the general consensus. Personally I think Giovanni is just entirely unpredictable these days. But yes, if I had to place my bets I would put them somewhere in Kanto as well. This side trip smells of distraction but I guess someone has to do it." I could tell from her voice that it galled her that she couldn't be where the action was likely to be and part of me could sympathize. I would rather like to do something than watch others put themselves into danger as well.

There was a brief silence, then Leaf picked it up again, her tone serious. "Misty, be careful alright? I really can't say what exactly is going to happen except that something will. I know it's boring just sitting around but keep your guard up. As I said, this man is unpredictable, even more so recently than ever before."

The genuine concern made my heart flutter. With anyone else I would probably have answered something to the effect that I didn't need to be cuddled. Leaf was my girl though – wow, that sounded kind of cool – and she was entitled to worry about me as I was about her. "You be careful, too."

Leaf smiled thinly but it was happy nonetheless. "I will." A pause. "Looks like we'll be there soon, so I better cut this short. Love you."

"I love you, too."

I wondered if our relationship would be like that the majority of the time? Spent with phone calls, brief visits and lots of longing? I had known that of course when I accepted her feelings and actually forced the issue but it was undeniably... less satisfying.

No, thinking like that would only ensure a bad ending before it had really started. Right now I probably should take her words to heart. Maybe it was time to get a little bit more actively involved in the defense of MY city.

Resolve set, I scribbled down a short note for Aisha that I was going out to check with the local police and see how far the coordination was going on. Only for a little while but it would give me something to do and perhaps help to settle some of the restlessness and anxiety I was feeling.

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Location Unknown (Giovanni)

No one should ever say I was the type to rule from the shadows. Reading and hearing reports was one thing but it was always better to assess the state of your troops personally. Especially when it came to final inspections. And that's what they were and why I had no problem with showing my personal support. Troops. After this Team Rocket would no longer be a simple criminal organization.

It had taken a long time to achieve this. A painstaking process of changing the very face of the organization my mother had founded. Bit by bit I had sought those that could carry out my vision, those with ambition. Not the petty thieves most prominent in the old Team Rocket, not those that would shy away from greater tasks that went beyond the mere concept of making fast money. I needed those that wanted more out of life, those that wouldn't hesitate to do anything, no matter how ruthless or dangerous.

Now, finally this was what I had always sought. My personal... army ready for the first stage of a rebellion that would put the world order back in its proper place and reestablish dominion of mankind over all things. Harmony, pah. What a useless ideal. One only needed to look at the brilliance in modern technology to see that we had always been destined to be the supreme species. And yet, those fools from the League had been holding us back for ages.

No longer. I would see to it.

"I trust everyone and everything is ready to go, Agent?"

I knew, of course, but I wanted to see for myself. I needed to see the morale of my troops, needed to know if they were ready to deliver a crushing blow to the League. It would only be the first of many but the opening strike often determined the course of a battle. It had to be as clear, decisive and as crippling as somehow possible.

"Sir, Teams Alpha to Epsilon are all ready to go. The production of Rage Pokémon was high enough to exceed our optimum by a bit more than a dozen, so the diversion teams will also be far more ready to achieve their goals with minimum losses," Domino reported. Yes, that was very good. Our firepower was better than I could have hoped for. I doubted our enemies would expect this kind of force. All those months of preparation and laying low would pay off now. All they had was their best guesses and I was fairly certain reality would far exceed those.

"Very good. There are no changes to the timetable. The main operation will begin just as planned, diversion teams are to set out to be in strike distance an hour earlier." The strategy was perfect, there was no way they could prevent the primary blow from landing. I highly doubted the target would be on their priority list – I

wouldn't expect it either in their situation. Of course, defense teams were already spread out over the region and could react and move in quickly. That was, of course, if they weren't occupied themselves.

I smiled darkly in satisfaction. Yes, everything was in place. It was time for the fireworks to start. "And the status of Special Teams Ypsilon and Omega?" After all, there was more to all this than just effect. The opportunity was too good to pass up. They would already be baffled by the strength of my troops, it was the perfect time to take care of some other important business for the long-term fruition of my goals.

"In place and waiting to execute their mission," was the crisp reply.

"Excellent." I turned to the gathered men and women lounging around in a state of anxious expectation. The air was filled with nervous energy. But not the kind of nervousness expected of people unsure of themselves. No, they all wanted for this to start. Good. "Attention!" I smiled as everyone immediately did so, jumping up quickly from where they were sitting or stiffening in an appropriate posture. "I expect great work out of you. All of you have been selected because of your skills and your dedication. When this is done, we will no longer be disrespected as petty criminals, we will be the ones remembered to have started a... revolution!"

My smile widened at the thunderous roar of approval that came in reply. Yes, personal motivation was best when the situation called for it.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Brock)

Business was relatively slow this far... Okay, that was an understatement. It was nonexistent. Routine checkups after the Appeals were over but that was it, nothing that one or two Nurse Joys couldn't have done. The participation wasn't as big as during a regular Contest after all and as such even the number of checkups was probably nothing more than on a slightly more busy day in a Pokémon Center.

Not that I had honestly expected otherwise. It was the first day. Appeals for the most part weren't meant to hurt or even damage a Pokémon, they were for presentation. Honestly, May's Blaziken had the most... markings, couldn't even really call it bruises. That Appeal had been something else alright and it had really floored me seeing my younger friend do such feats.

ALL of them REALLY had grown up. With Dawn I had been present for that first change though the calm way she carried herself after the year apart was also somewhat disconcerting. May, however, I hadn't seen since Ash's run on the Kanto Battle Frontier except for the brief meeting at the Wallace Cup. They had all grown up into respectable people, perhaps not chronologically in the case of Dawn and May

but to some degrees probably with more maturity born out of experience than others several years their age.

It made me think about home for a moment. I had spent so much time travelling, it already amazed me how much my siblings had grown up every time I came home. The next time they'd probably all been up and around, pursuing their own paths in life. That was, of course, if the future permitted it.

I sighed at the intrusive thought. That was the problem just sitting around by myself doing nothing. I was on emergency shift while everyone else was grabbing something to eat, even Ako. I had to push her actually. She had been working hard, even if it was just checkups. Part of me was worried that after the events at Aprico Village she was developing a bit too much of a focus, pushing herself too hard. I would have to watch out that she didn't overdo things.

Before I could put much further thought to the surprising and ominous meeting this morning and all the possibilities it could hold, I was thankfully saved by the arrival of the girl that had just been on my mind. May stood a little uncertainly in the doorway, as if she wasn't sure whether or not she should be here but then obviously made up her mind and entered. Footsteps were light, almost nonexistent. No wonder I hadn't even heard her approach! Was all this a result of her training as well? There were so many strange things happening and I hated not getting a proper answer.

Focusing on my old friend, I waved her in. "What can I do for you, May?"

The brunette shuffled nervously. This was different from her normal self that was for sure but she had been acting strange this morning as well. The few times we had been able to leave, I had also caught her interacting with Ash and Dawn. I thought I had a pretty good idea why she was so awkward around them but hoped I was wrong. Because if I was right, it would only end up in heartbreak.

However, I doubted she was here for that. This was a different kind of nervousness. "I was wondering if you could do a checkup on the last Pokémon I am going to use tomorrow," she said eventually, holding up a Pokéball. Contest rules for this event stated that the competitors could freely exchange between three pre-selected Pokémon, whether it was for single or double battles. I just wondered why she hadn't brought this one in with the others. "Naru's a bit of a special case and I don't want too many people to know about her."

The Pokéball sprang open and an Eevee emerged from it. Not your regular Eevee mind you. It was bigger, with a darker kind of fur than usual. The Breeder in me took in all these details and a lot more almost instantly. This Pokémon seemed to have a high level of intelligence as well, considering how she was watching me carefully and guarded.

"Well, I can see she's not your regular Eevee. But I doubt you mean just her appearance." There were so-called Shiny Pokémon after all, so it stood to reason that there were enough other derivations from the norm. No, there had to be something more about this one for May to be so secretive.

Pokémon and Trainer exchanged a look and eventually the small Eevee nodded slowly. "Please keep this to yourself for now. Naru here had been subject to experiments by Team Rocket." My eyes narrowed. Them again. Everything these days surrounded the criminal organization. They were at the core of all the events and mysteries of these last months. I withheld my opinion for now, more interested in the tale. May was clearly reluctant to talk about it. "Her genetic structure has been messed with and well... why don't you show him?"

Naru grunted, a rather human-like sound, but that was topped several times moments later. "Fine, but only because you said we could trust him." The fact that the Eevee just spoke was completely forgotten and further overlooked when she began to glow briefly and her form began to shift much like during evolution. And that's what was happening because a moment later – much faster than the usual process – a Vaporeon sat on the ground. Then, again before I could even marvel at the fact that no evolution stone was involved, the same thing happened again, this time ending in a full-fledged Espeon before finally shifting back again to her initial Eevee form.

I was speechless. In all my years learning to become a Breeder, all the experiences I had made, this was right up there with the strangest ones, perhaps even the strangest. Part of me marveled at such a scientific breakthrough but I immediately chastened myself for the thought. It had been unwilling experimentation. If Team Rocket had been involved, there was no doubt this Eevee's life had been hell before meeting May. I could definitely understand the level of distrust and bitterness I could see in her eyes.

"Naru is the oldest out of a greater family. When I found her, she had only just barely escaped. It was slow-going at first but in the end she stayed with me because it turned out I had acquired one of her sisters. Remember the egg from the ranch the one that hatched into an Eevee?" I nodded, even as she released her Glaceon. "She wasn't born yet when they were captured by Team Rocket, that's probably how it ended up at the ranch somehow. We've been looking for clues as to what happened to the rest of her sisters. When they managed to escape, they ended up separated." May finished her explanation. "I'm sure you understand that I had to be careful not to let her be seen too much, especially her abilities. Team Rocket probably wants her back badly."

I nodded dumbly, slowly starting to get out of my stupor. As fascinating as this was, the tragic story behind the tale had quickly doused any excitement over an Eevee that could shift evolution forms freely. Mostly, not entirely.

Then a random thought snuck up on me and for a moment I wanted to put it down as wishful thinking. It would be too much of a coincidence. Then again, there were a lot of things lately that were too much of a coincidence. I was starting to believe all this was part of a greater design.

"Well, I'm sure I can look her over for you, but more importantly..." I reached for two Pokéballs, one containing Leafeon and the other Genki whom Ako had left here. Really, this couldn't just be random chance, right?

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (May)

Staying in high-class hotels had become a bit of a habit upon late, I mused. With the League making a lot of effort to promote Contests more, the standard also rose. I'm sure the purpose of the pretty though rather extravagant fountain was to induce a sense of calm and tranquility upon the guests in this hotel, Twinheart Island was after all quite a tourist attraction normally.

The calming effect was lost on me though. My heart was pounding loud enough in anticipation alone to almost drown out the constant sound of the water. Regardless of what it would be, I doubted anything could calm me now. This was it after all. The moment I had been hoping, dreading and awaiting with an almost fatalistic drive for so long. I held no illusions of success and Brock's warning – he had always been the perceptive one although I doubted he suspected more than the one side of my feelings – that I would cause heartbreak was still floating around my mind. It didn't touch me though or made me waver. It might be doomed from the start but I needed to do this, for the peace of my own heart at least.

Thinking about Brock gave me at least a moment of genuine distraction while I waited for Ash and Dawn who should be here any moment now. Yes, it had been a surprise to find two of Naru's sisters like this. She had been very delighted and I was very happy for her. It was good to see her lose some of that gloom that seemed to always surround the young Eevee – because regardless how she acted, Naru wasn't that much older than Glaceon – while she got reacquainted with her sisters.

Was it a coincidence though that Brock and Ako both had collected one of them? Perhaps Ash and Dawn had one, too... I would have to ask, later. If they were still talking to me after tonight that is.

My musings about Naru's family were cut short when I saw Ash and Dawn emerge from the elevator. The hotel was quiet at this time already. Most of it was rented out to the Coordinators and visiting Trainers. It wasn't the normal bustle of activity to be expected of a tourist center and so it was easy to spot them. That the

area was pretty much devoid of any other people was also a big benefit right now. This way there would be no interruption or someone to see the coming drama.

Alright, enough of this. You made up your mind to do it, so do it and don't go in already thinking that you lost. I took a deep breath, then two more, thinking back over what I wanted to say and found it slipping away quicker than I could hold onto it. *All the same, I guess. This is something you can't and shouldn't rehearse.* Ash and Dawn had reached my position and greeted me while I did the same.

While I had them sit down on one of the benches facing the fountain, I was pacing a little myself, taking the time to study their faces. Both of them looked concerned, curious and a bit confused. No surprise there. While I hadn't exactly broadcasted my intention, my avoidance of getting too personal with them until now must have caused a good bit of all those feelings.

Dawn looked... expectant. I wasn't entirely too surprised there either. No doubt she had to deal with rabid fangirls and thus feelings of jealousy all the time. She probably suspected something, but much like Brock it would be only half of the truth. Aside from that her expression was fairly neutral and unreadable. She didn't look like someone ready to rip your head off if her suspicions were confirmed. I wasn't sure how to take that. Ash was merely genuinely concerned in contrast. Knowing him, I suspected that he thought I had some sort of personal problem and was determined to help his old friend out. The irony in the fact that I would actually hope for that wasn't lost on me.

No more time to think, the longer I waited the harder it would get. It was just like Maylene had said about me and my fighting style. Direct and to the point, charge ahead and don't worry about the in-between. "I think it all started a little while after I came to Johto," I began without any further ado. "Travelling alone was... hard. I thought at first it was all it was but the more and more time went by, the more I realized my heart was longing for only one person. And that was you, Ash." It was a hard realization then, a bitter one. I spent days chastening myself for not getting it earlier. I would have never left otherwise. Going to Sinnoh would have been fine as well after all. But it was too late to change plans in the middle of my Contest run.

I glanced at Dawn but she was still not showing any visible reaction and her stoic patience was unnerving me. I would have expected her to explode at this point, at least showing that she didn't like where this was going. In contrast Ash was actually more direct about this. "May, that's..." He glanced at Dawn, then back at me, expression pained but resolute. I smiled sadly, seeing the resolve there. They really were close and I expected nothing less from him... In fact I probably would have been disappointed if he wasn't ready to defend his feelings for Dawn right away.

I held up a hand to cut him off, adding a pleading look that made him swallow his words. "Please, let me finish." I needed to. I needed to get this off my chest and I

needed them to understand before making a decision. "The Wallace Cup was a bit of a blessing. I had it all planned out then. But... it wasn't to be. It would have been so easy," I chuckled humorlessly and to my irritation realized that there were some tears in my eyes as I remembered that day I first met them at Lake Valor. Angrily I swiped them away. "But..." I choked a little. Damn it, this wasn't how it was supposed to go. "You were there." I looked at Dawn, unsure of how much of my true feelings were visible as I was right now. "You made it so much worse." I expected a puzzled expression from Dawn in reply but she was looking at me surprisingly... understanding? That threw me off for a bit.

Ash was more as expected again. "But we weren't..." he begun and I cut him off heatedly, not caring anymore that I was losing my cool. Could anyone blame me? I had tried to approach this calmly but it had torn me apart for months... over a year even. Rationalizing and focusing on a confrontation could only suppress these feelings after all.

"That's just it. I wanted to tell you then. I wanted to tell you how much I loved you. But, Dawn... she... I only realized much later what it was exactly but it only made things worse. At first I just thought I was fascinated, attracted to her style and way of performing. That wasn't it though, it was much worse. I had fallen in love... again." I stared quietly at them for a moment and it became apparent that it wasn't quite clear to them who exactly I was confessing to right now. "Both of you... I love you both."

It felt... surprisingly good to have it off my chest. These words. I had wanted to say them, to both of them, for so long. I blinked away another tear, however, I was feeling much... more relieved now. Regardless of what came next, whether it was the expected rejection or, by some miracle, acceptance, I felt that I could deal with it eventually.

With a lighter heart but still anxiously waiting for a reaction, I looked at them expectantly while the two people that had dominated my thoughts as of late were trying to take in what I had told them. All I could do now was... hope.

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(Dawn)

I quite honestly wasn't sure just what to expect when we came down to meet May. Ash was convinced that the girl had some sort of serious, delicate problem she needed help with, yet I couldn't be so sure. He was so sweet like that and had apparently completely missed the undercurrent I was at least strongly suspecting. Unfortunately the inconsistencies remained and I hadn't come any closer to figure them out. In fact I hadn't even found much time to think about it.

While I felt pleased to have come out of the Appeals on top, I was reasonable enough to understand how very close the gap was compared to regular Contests. Not all of them had close to my level of combat training but all of them were professionals, victors, experienced competitors. None of the final matches would be easy, most of them would probably be on par with my battle with Nord... and I had a feeling that if it came down to May and I it would be a rather equal match.

Thusly, I could only push my thoughts away from battle strategies as we got to the elevator and when we reached May in the lobby with the beautiful fountain as a background setting, I tried to gauge her reaction. It was hard to tell and I had amassed quite a bit of experience by now. Reading people's emotions wasn't as easy as some probably thought it would be for the mentally gifted. Oh, it was easy with Ash because he and I shared a deep bond of love and trust, we were already attuned to one another long before I fully began to realize and train these abilities.

Reading May was made much harder by the complexity of emotions I could sense, tangled and mingled and all these things that made it hard to determine individual ones. And to be fair, I was hesitant to pry deeper. The more you knew the other person, the more it became a moral issue of invading privacy.

Thus I tried to keep my cool and an open mind. Part of me was surprised just how calm I could be. Even if my suspicions were proven, this wasn't like with Christine. I had learned from that, right? Yes, I had and I had also remembered Mew's words and puzzled over their deeper meaning at length. Greetings were exchanged, the atmosphere was tense. May was clearly nervous and it seemed to rise exponentially the closer it came to whatever revelations she was going to make for us. But then her focus shifted and there was a burning resolve, almost bordering on fatalistic. Considering what came next, fatalistic was actually not so far off.

"I think it all started a little while after I came to Johto. Travelling alone was... hard. I thought at first it was all it was but the more and more time went by, the more I realized my heart was longing for only one person. And that was you, Ash." So I had been right, I thought, not terribly surprised about that bit. The emotions from May were much clearer right now, agitated and... conflicted. Yes, she was probably immersed in her own memories as well. But why conflicted? Because of us? Because we were together? It was the simple, logical answer. There was more though. There had to be.

And I was proven right as she continued and the tale shifted to the Wallace Cup. That's when it became so much more complicated and I started to realize just why this was apparently tearing the other girl up inside. "You made it so much worse." That would have stung if I wasn't already starting to comprehend just where May was going with that.

I think I had to thank Leaf's initial flirting a year ago to make me realize the existing possibility or I wouldn't have understood until it had been spelled out for me. Even afterwards I might not have. As it was I needed the confirmation and didn't have to wait long for it. "I had fallen in love... again." It was one thing to be playfully flirted with by a girl you knew wasn't serious. It was another to hear a straight-out confession.

What was I feeling? Honestly I didn't know. Figuring it out before the actual confession wasn't helping much because it was still a lot to swallow. The most immediate issue, however, was still left open to confirmation. I needed to hear it, I needed to know if I understood correctly what exactly she was saying because right now the only thing clear was that May had fallen in love with both us at individual points. But did the latter override the former or...

"Both of you... I love you both."

Ah. So I was right. Wonderful. *You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?* I wondered and for a moment was seriously contemplating broadcasting it telepathically to Mew up in our room. And was that why I felt so strangely detached and calmed? Because this was somehow important on a grander scale? Because the Legendary wouldn't say such things without deeper meaning?

"May..." Ash began again, hesitating a moment at the clearly distraught girl but then I felt his resolve firming. "I don't know what you expect to hear now. You knew we are together, right? I can't and I won't hurt Dawn in any way regardless of how much..." He trailed off but I caught the end of it in his thoughts. Regardless of how much she meant to him. I wasn't angry. I knew there was some lingering affection. His words did make me feel special, yet I could also tell he wasn't fully comprehending, even with it being spelled out clearly, what exactly May was saying and consequently hoping for.

Not that I blamed him. I was still amazed by my own calmness, watching as May smiled at him a little sadly. "I do. Ash, it's not my intention to make either of you unhappy. I love you BOTH." It seemed to get a little more through to him this time but there was still doubt, confusion and a deep sense of protectiveness. Protectiveness towards me. I was moved but it didn't really help the matter. "I can't help what I am feeling. I wish it would be easier, too... so, please, all I am asking for is a chance. Think about it a little, just until the end of the Contest. Let me prove to you that I don't want to hurt either of you."

And she was honest. I could tell. As tangled as her emotions had been before, the floodgates had been opened, so to say, during the confession and I could read her emotions like an open book. Only that right now it made things worse by telling me all these things that would have been easier unknown or ignored. The honest emotion behind her words, the agony of being torn up over this for so long, the relief

of finally admitting but also the anxiety at the reply. May was expecting to be rejected, I realized with a start. The thought caused a deep pang of sympathy in my heart.

What made this so different? I had to ask myself again. What made this different from Christine? Ultimately both were an attempt to disrupt the happiness I had with Ash. What May was saying and even more so what she was hoping had no future, right? Relationships didn't work like that. Was it just because this was someone I knew however briefly? That alone was part of the problem of knowing how to react since honestly it was too brief a meeting for a stronger attachment and I hadn't fallen in love at first sight either. Was it because it was someone important to Ash? Was it because of what Mew had said? Or was there something entirely else I understood subconsciously but couldn't really grasp?

It didn't matter. In the end it didn't matter. And yet, I probably was the one most surprised by my words, more than Ash who I cut off before he was going to reject the idea outright, more than May who seemed ready to accept defeat. "Alright." I met the incredulous stares evenly. "I think the most May deserves for having the courage to tell us her feelings, is that we'll give it at least a little more thought." Which mostly translated to: *We have to talk about this in private, Ash.*

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Ecruteak City, Johto (Leaf)

"I still think this is a ruse," I voiced my opinion to my partners on this mission. It had taken us surprisingly little time to hear witness reports about an old fort that decades ago had served as a bandit stronghold showing signs of activity. That could be anything from a low-level gang to wild Pokémon making their nest there. I didn't like it.

"It's too obvious," Morty agreed. My thoughts exactly. The timing was too convenient. Giovanni had known we would come to check this out as soon as he heard his men were captured. It smelled more and more off a diversion tactic. Of course, leaving the matter unattended wouldn't do either. If there really was a small army hiding... No, that was ridiculous. If it was anything more than a small team designed to draw attention, they would have drawn much more attention already and Anabel was quite certain that she didn't feel a big concentration of people from the direction of the fort.

I groaned. "Mou, this is a waste of time after all. I'm missing all the good stuff." I had secretly really been looking forward to the Contest, curious just how much better Dawn had gotten and despite all the emotional conflict it would certainly bring, I had wanted to see Dawn and May fight it out. I had been able to check up on updates and wasn't surprised both came out of the Appeals in the first two spots. I'd still miss tomorrow mostly if we were going to raid the fort.

Angrily I left the room to get some fresh air. The frustration was rising and I tried my best not to let it get to me. Why exactly had I agreed to be the one to do this? I knew it wouldn't happen here. I had been almost hundred percent certain. And all three of us also knew that being stuck here meant that we'd never make it back before the real action started. This was supposed to be our fight, so I should be there.

"Worried about your girlfriend?" I jumped slightly, then glared at Anabel. She held out her hands in a placating gesture. "Hey, I was just thinking. You've been awfully distracted the entire day. And I think this isn't just about being away from Kanto at this time." I grimaced, I just couldn't hide anything from her. "Come on, Mel, what is it?"

Her nickname for me as well. She knew I didn't really like it although she was about the only one I had ever allowed to use it. No, Anabel wouldn't leave me alone until she got a satisfying answer. "It's probably nothing. I just had this feeling all day."

The other girl snorted. "Yeah right. Mel, for us having just a feeling is equivalent to a detective having a hunch based on information... at the very least. You might not be Psychic but you were granted strong powers, right? Now, just what exactly are you feeling?"

Faced with the raw logic of someone experienced enough in this sort of thing, I couldn't suppress it much longer. Having put it off as nothing but nerves and a reaction to what I already knew – after all something would happen soon, there was no surprise in that –, I had pushed it away and concentrated on the mission. No need to further let myself get frustrated at my confinement to this place while playing to Giovanni's tune.

It had only gotten worse. Now that I was no longer ignoring it, the feeling of terrible dread was imminent and... urgent. No, it wasn't something about the mission here. Something different, something that touched my heart and soul and made me tremble regardless of how much I tried not to.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I can't define it. It's more than just a strong sense of danger. Something really bad is going to happen, something I feel I will regret for the rest of my life if I can't prevent it. It..." I trailed off, grasping for words, for a meaning. I wasn't good at this. This was Anabel's forte and probably Dawn's as well. I was their complete opposite and I didn't think I ever had to deal with such heavy mental stuff...

But... was it really a mental thing? Or was it rather an emotional thing? Anabel might have only been half-serious with her comment, however, what if...? I closed my eyes, trying to feel deeper inside me, reaching for the core of my feelings for a certain redhead, the love that had built there so recently and yet so strongly. The reaction

was so strong, I gasped soundlessly, hunching over as my body began to seize up, then shiver. It was just a brief flash, not even barely enough to get a detailed picture. But what I had seen was more than enough.

"Misty..." I choked out, shaking off Anabel's concerned hand as agitation and an all-consuming trepidation gripped my heart. She had been right. Anabel had been right. This didn't have anything to do with the overall situation... Well, it might but only in consequence. I knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Misty was... or more likely would be in terrible danger, danger she wouldn't survive if I wasn't there.

For a moment duty and love warred inside me and even before I came to the inevitable conclusion, realizing with some irony that this was exactly what I had tried to escape by denying myself a relationship at this point, Anabel took the decision out of my hands thankfully. "Go," was all she simply said and I didn't question it. Psychics could be quite scary with the way they understood things without a word... Logically I already knew, of course, that she and Morty could handle this even without me. I still felt guilty, just a little, but not enough to impede my decision.

Switching out one of my Pokémon quickly, I called out my personal Pidgeot, a shiny one in a deep red instead of the dark brown and a silver sheen for the rest of the body and his crown. "You up for a long trip, my friend? We need to make a lot of ground fast." This was one Pokémon that I was fairly proud of. I dared say it was the fastest Pidgeot I had ever seen so far and as such just the right thing.

Swinging myself on Emperor's back, I turned back towards Anabel. "If you get into trouble, please call for backup." Though I doubted it. After all Anabel was quite strong herself and if we were correct, then a small team would be no problem for her.

Without a further thought I gripped tightly at my Pokémon's back and Emperor shot up from the ground without a further word, knowing without even a word where I wanted to go. Yes, this was exactly what I had wanted to avoid. But then again... if I hadn't allowed myself to form a bond like that with Misty, would I have had this... warning – yes, definitely a warning – as well? I doubted it. The feeling of anxiety, this premonition of sorts was born from what tied Misty and I together already, regardless of how fresh and underdeveloped. That it was still so strong, over this distance... I didn't want to think about it.

What could it mean? Cerulean wasn't a hotspot. What would Team Rocket gain from it other than the fear factor. Or was that all Giovanni was after? What if it was just Misty? I wouldn't put it beyond the man to use the actual operation to hide attempts to take us all out. The more I thought about it, the more likely the possibility appeared.

"Be safe, Misty," I murmured, my heart aching in worry.

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(Narrator)

"The first day of the Contest comes to a shocking conclusion for Ash and Dawn after May confesses her feelings. How will this affect the rest of Dawn's performance and what will their final answer be? Meanwhile Team Rocket amasses its forces and the eventual confrontation draws ever nearer. Do not miss the next explosive episode!"

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Maia's Prophecy

MysticMew: Well, I think I got a good one. We won't have any problems with this narrator... *looks suspiciously at Maia* Riiight?

Maia: ...

MysticMew: Uh... What's with you? *cautiously pokes her with a long stick* Are you dead?

Maia: ...

MysticMew: Hey, come on! It's your section!

Maia: I... seeeeeeeee...

MysticMew: I think she is broken... *pokes her some more*

Maia: *suddenly grasp the stick and it bursts into flames* I SEE! *MysticMew jumps 20 feet away in fright* I see death! I see everyone's death! A horrible death!

MysticMew: ?

Maia: I SHALL MAKE IT HAPPEN... unless you... FEED ME!!!

MysticMew: *trembles and looks at YOU* Please?

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Author's Notes

Yes, honestly a bit more feedback would be appreciated. For the last couple of episodes it was about one review for each. That's a little... discouraging. We might lose interest. Seriously. Yes, I said I don't write for the reviews that's true. But a lot of the motivation for this story is carried by you readers. I've got several other ideas I'd like to try but haven't really touched because reactions for this one were so good and I got more motivated to give you more. I will finish Arc 2 anyway but how long the gap for Arc 3 will be, might depend on your feedback for the last episodes. So... don't just click the boxes but type a few words, be it only a "I like it", I take that every time over mere favorite alerts without even a small word of approval. I can only know what you liked or disliked and try to improve my writing, if you tell me about it.

Story. Actually there isn't that much to say. I realize this chapter was still comparably slow. Yet it was a necessary buildup for the final. The next two episodes will be explosive. I guarantee that. So, anyone who has been demanding some action, you shall be provided. The stage is set now. Everyone is where they are supposed to be, May has confessed, the Battle round is coming and Team Rocket is ready to make its move.

Okay, I said Jessie, James and Meowth would be in here. And they were. Frankly I wanted to do more but there wasn't too much more room. I might do another, real scene (from their perspective) next chapter. But they'll show up again before the end of the arc, I can promise you that.

I always thought Contest environment was too ordinary, too plain. Considering the main theme behind the profession is to present your Pokémon, wouldn't factoring in things like different terrains and areas (and I'm not meaning just some kind of water) serve for more variety? Trainers have to compete with that all the time in Gym battles and elsewhere.

Anabel was a spur of the moment inspiration. I needed someone to go with Leaf and the rest kind of worked out from there. Quite well actually, she fit the need perfectly. Yes, we'll probably see more of her. Not permanent, probably not even semi-permanent, but there'll be enough to do in the future that she'll get some action. ^_^ And no, there will be no further complication to Ash's love life. As explained, it's a crush and she knows better than to try and interject herself where she has no chance. She's not going to be heartbroken about it either...

Hope you enjoyed, please let us know.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias aka MysticMew