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Author: Matthias aka MysticMew ([Solarsenshi@gmx.de](mailto:Solarsenshi@gmx.de))  
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## Pre-Note

Alright, despite all that I said, I didn't really end up doing anything else. Shame on me. I believe I have figured out something about my motivation. Ironically, I have always been much more active as a writer than I had far less time to write. This story kind of proves it since I have written the bulk of the first arc while actually having to work. The way I see it, having less time to spare, makes me use that time much more efficient. If I have a lot of free time, I tend to just do other things all day (play games, watch Anime etc.). With less time, I am much more inclined to actually do something productive.

That being said, my training courses scheduled to begin last autumn were sadly cancelled. Without warning, a week before the start, reason: too few participants. I shall make no comment, less I get worked up. Thus my work situation has not exactly improved. However, I did manage to make myself start on the second arc of TFSTTM Reloaded after all... somehow.

For your information. The first three parts which I have all labeled "Prologues" will be released in relative short order. Meaning, by the time you read this, the other two will already be finished and I'll post them in short intervals. They are mostly independent of each other, meant to cover three main group of characters, bridging the time skip between Arc 1 and 2. Essentially Arc 2 is a bit of a bridging arc itself, setting up a lot of things for the main action to come.

Before I start, I'd like to address a few reviews that came in after the last chapter.

RTMac1989: Thank you for the praise. As for the M-portion. Mostly my rating is a safety measure. I am not quite sure how "graphic" I will get. This arc will have some rather dark portions though, at least two or so I have planned. After that it's definitely going to get a lot darker. Just how descriptive I'll get, I don't know yet. ^\_^ If I do more than one higher rated scene (lemon \*cough\*), I might just handle it as I do my other stories and make an extra file where I dump them all. And May didn't take Ash and Dawn being together well exactly... You'll see just why in this chapter.

Lastly for the unsigned reviewer from 11.01.2012 (given for "Chapter: 4. 0103: Road to the Final!" for those of you interested):

I am kind of sad you didn't leave me a signed review or at least some way to answer. I wouldn't bite your head off after all. In fact, your review was one of the very few with honest, worthwhile criticism that I always say I actually appreciate but seldom get (not that I want to see only criticism but still...).

Your thoughts on my writing style actually did throw me for a loop. Not in a bad way by far but also not in a way that I can do something about it right away. I can certainly understand where you are coming from and to some degree I have to agree with you. In my defense I can say two things though.

First of all, the way I see my particular style of first POV is kind of like a pseudo recollection. As if the characters would sit down at some point after the story and write down/record their thoughts during certain instances. That can certainly give the way I portray thoughts a certain lack of individuality. Second would be the fact that Pokémon characters in general give fairly little in terms of complex personality to work with. I am quite sure if I you read some of my other stories (especially my Sailor Moon ones), thought process there is a lot more... diverse at least.

Despite that, I can certainly see that trying to make the POVs a bit more personalized, would be better. However, the writing style I am using is a style I have developed over years and as such changing something essential about it, is not something that I can do overnight, perhaps not even over the course of this story. I am afraid if I were to experiment in an ongoing story, I might just make it worse trying. I may try small things here and there but don't expect me to revolutionize a writing style concept that I have kept up for years because of that. The only thing this would accomplish would be that I start doubting every passage and I'd never get anything done this way.

Again. This is not meant to say, I disregard your criticism. I was actually rather floored because it makes a lot of sense, yet no one has ever said anything like that

before about my style, at least not in such a honest and direct way. I am very grateful for that and I'll try to do better. If not for this story, then perhaps for future ones.

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**(Narrator)**

And once again I am getting dragged into this. Literally. After all this time I had finally settled on another job and they just go and drag me back now... "Oy! What do you mean you are decking my pay..... No, no need to do it again. I get right to it." Man, whimsical slave drivers...

"Many months, almost a year, had passed since the conclusion of the Sinnoh League. It is a nice spring day in Saffron City. People go about their business the biggest city of the Kanto region, the atmosphere overall busy but peaceful..."

A loud explosion had people in the vicinity of the local Gym stop and stare, wondering what was going on, even as more sounds of battle that were clearly not of the normal variety the citizens of Saffron were used to came from the building. Some passersby for a moment seemed to consider investigating but then thought better of it, apparently more worried about getting caught up in whatever was happening inside. This was after all Sabrina and for most people that was enough to stay away...

Had they taken a closer look though, they might have been treated to a sight not seen since the conclusion of the Sinnoh League finals.

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**M&M DreamWorks Presents**  
**The Final Step to the Master Reloaded**  
**Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny**  
**Prologue 1: On Route to the Grand Festival! Training, dreams**  
**and... love.**

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**Saffron City Gym, Kanto (Dawn)**

Even after all that time, it was always a spectacular experience to witness a high level battle like this. The collision of the Focus Blast and Solarbeam was still throwing up smoke but the initiators were already moving again. The small form of the Bulbasaur shot out of the cloud with a cry without even a command issued, and fired a volley of razor-sharp leaves at his opponent. Equally moving without command – although considering its Trainer the normal observer would find that

much easier to comprehend – Jynx gracefully danced away, already inhaling sharply for the next move. But Bulbasaur was faster. Using his vines to grab a support pillar, he swung around in a fast move that took Jynx by surprise. Already in the middle of preparation what would have been a devastating Blizzard attack for its opponent, it barely evaded the Power Whip... which never was Bulbasaur's actual plan. Already poisoned by an earlier Sludge Bomb, the Venoshock at point blank hit with even more force. Jynx was out of it even before it hit the far wall.

"Winner of this round: Bulbasaur!" The judge announced and I had to praise him for keeping a firm voice. Gym battles rarely saw that level of fighting after all. Of course, Sabrina was still held among the very best, if not THE best Gym Leader among the currently active ones in Kanto.

There were no words exchanged when she and Ash recalled their Pokémon and got ready for the final bout. I couldn't help but smile fondly at my boyfriend standing below with that ever present calm he had developed ever since that final battle with Leaf almost a year ago. Not the kind of calm of someone unmoved by everything around them. No, his usual exuberant energy was focused, drawn inward and converted into an inner strength driving him and his Pokémon onward. That kind of change whenever he got into a battle was fairly amazing to watch and always filled me with a warm feeling, simply knowing he had everything under control. Watching him battle like this always inspired me as well, motivated me to do even better on my next Contest.

Well... There was only one step left. The big one. Kanto's Grand Festival would come up soon and perhaps watching Ash's training battle with Sabrina was the right thing to do. I could already feel my worries dissipating as I got absorbed in the match. Of course, worries were too strong or perhaps simply too inadequate a term. So far the Contests had gone well. Too well.

Five entries, five victories. It was somewhat... unsatisfying. I think I finally understood how Ash must have felt in the earlier rounds of the tournament and how hard it was to keep your concentration high every time when your Pokémon were so much stronger than the opposition. I knew rationally that the Grand Festival was an entirely different stage and that there would be experienced Coordinators who had participated in prior performances. However, breezing through Contests with such an ease left a bit of a sour taste in my mouth.

Well, there was one good thing about the fast pace with which I had earned my ribbons. After all despite that we had just barely made it in time for the Grand Festival. While it wasn't very surprising, I believe both of us had been unprepared just for the potency of Ash's popularity. The weeks after the tournament had been especially rough. We could barely get into a city, let alone take a rest at the local Pokémon Center before getting swarmed by fans or the occasional reporters –

though those decreased as time went by. It was bad enough that we had to resign ourselves to camping outside a city more often rather than a nice, warm bed.

Especially the kids had taken to Ash. The young Trainers seemed to adore Ash a lot for the example he had set in achieving such a high level of ability at his age. He could also connect quite easily with them, not too long ago having been on the other side as well. I wasn't really mad about this attention, in fact most of the times I found the way Ash was handling other Trainers quite endearing. Most of the time he always managed to find some way to teach them something important.

Down below, Alakazam was learning the hard way that even with all the hype and attention, Ash had always found time to train. And despite the shorter time available between travels, Contests and other events requiring our attention, the growth of his Pokémon was just as... if not even more amazing than during the concentrated three month training trip before the Sinnoh League tournament.

Feraligatr – who evolved in a short time after his training started – was a prime example. Not as agile as Buizel – by now Floatzel – it made up for that through sheer power and tenacity. While one might think that was a disadvantage against a powerful Psychic type like Alakazam, Feraligatr showed an amazing willpower, more than once pushing through a psychic grip and hitting his surprised opponent with powerful attacks. Especially the various ways in which it could employ his favorite method of biting an opponent gave his opponent a lot of trouble. Bite and Crunch were, of course, especially effective, yet an Ice Fang mixed into the patterns was not to be ignored either.

Of course, Sabrina didn't have her reputation for nothing and while she showed no outward sign of emotion, I could tell she was enjoying fighting all out without the usual restraints just as much as Ash did. Just as I thought Feraligatr would surprise Alakazam with a swift Aqua Tail, I felt a tug on my mind and the Psi Pokémon pulled off a quick Teleport, appearing less than a feet above the swinging tail and slamming a combination of what looked like a Psyshock and an Energy Ball mixed together into the surprised alligator.

I winced as Feraligatr was flung hard across the field, yet I wasn't that worried, proven moments later when he caught his fall and skidded to a halt. What got to me more was that I could swear I almost knew what would be happening, yet Ash didn't seem to have expected it. And that hadn't been the first time today. I couldn't explain it but somehow I seemed to be able to predict the moves of Sabrina's Pokémon almost perfectly. If I didn't know any better, I would think I was developing psychic talent... but that was ridiculous, right?

Being drawn back to the match, I shrugged off the mysterious event for the moment. Ash had regained control and once more Feraligatr showed that while generally considered as slow, when it had the opportunity to bite something, it could

move with an amazing speed. This time the Teleport attempt came too late and Feraligatr went in for the kill. And he did so showing off perhaps the biggest breakthrough in Ash's training these days. Fangs charged with Water and Ice Power on either side, the powerful Water type smashed into Alakazam with a vicious Bite, discharging not only Ice and Water but also Dark-elemental power into his opponent in a triple-elemental manipulation.

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### **Lilypad Town, Sinnoh (May)**

My respect for Dawn was only increasing with every Contest I participated in. Sinnoh was an entirely different experience than anywhere else I had been. After having seen and participated in Contests in Kanto, Johto and my own home region – which was supposed to be fairly advanced when it came to Contests –, Sinnoh put them all to shame. The pace and the competition was much more fierce and the attention of the public was far greater than anywhere else. In most regions, Contests were just now getting popular whereas in Sinnoh, they had perhaps the longest, standing tradition.

And Dawn had managed to not only make it to the Grand Festival but also to a fantastic second place that to most observers felt more like a draw for first place. In her first try. Had it been the me who started my first Pokémon journey here, I doubted I would have even made it to the Festival.

Stomping down on the comparative thoughts before they could end up where they usually did – a distraction I couldn't afford right now –, I saw my opponent have her Arcanine charge Beautifly in a combination of Extremespeed and Flame Charge, leaving the Pokémon as little more than a blazing trail. By all means the move should be a guaranteed hit and considering the type difference a devastating one.

"Down!" In an impossible seeming move, Beautifly used her small – relatively flat – body to slip below her charging opponent, pressing herself extremely close to the ground, barely avoiding contact. "Psychic Buzz!" Overextended and unprepared the combination of Bug Buzz and Psychic caught Arcanine in midair. Sound waves, air pressure and psychic power nearly flung it off the stage but once again the Dog Pokémon proved resilient, barely catching itself.

My opponent was getting desperate though. "Flamethrower!" There wasn't even a hint of combination, merely relying on power now. So far Thomas had been an excellent example why winning Sinnoh Contests was so much harder but the continuing inability to inflict any kind of real damage despite the type advantage was taking its toll on his patience. All the training of the last months was starting to pay off.

"Counter it with Silver Wind!" That would normally be a stupid and useless move but Beautifly was a master with this technique. To the astonishment of both my opponent and the crowd, the fairly harmless – in strength and element – attack managed to funnel the powerful flames and direct them around Beautifly in a corona of fiery beauty, further costing Thomas points under the applause of the crowd. Not that I was finished, of course. "Quiver Dance!" Still with the potentially dangerous flames maintained around her body, Beautifly began an intricate dance.

"Would you look at that! What a spectacular display! It seems Beautifly doesn't have any fear of the fire at all!"

That, of course, was exactly how it was. Months of harsh elemental resistance training had first eliminated or at least drastically decreased the risks of so much exposure to fire. Blaziken had been an ideal sparring partner in that aspect. Of course, despite all that, Beautifly was still a rather fragile Pokémon which no amount of training could ever completely change. The inspiration for this particular approach of handling an incoming Fire-type attack had been inspired – as had so many things – by the final of the Sinnoh League last year. Ash had done something similar with his Staraptor to pull off a last second win against his opponent's seemingly untouchable Mismagius.

Witnessing the match had been an eye opener. I believe it had been for many people who had thought they were good enough already. In my case though, seeing how far ahead Ash was and in conclusion Dawn had to be, it was also motivation. I still was no closer to figuring out what to do with my feelings, unable to discard them regardless how obvious them kissing openly live on TV should have made it that my chances were slim to none. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite so simple and I couldn't stop my heart from longing... in fact it had only gotten worse over the last months.

Thus, I had to become stronger. I had to be able to prove to myself and to them that I could compete at their level. And so, as surprising as it had been, I had gladly accepted the help of the one person who could safely say she was already at their level. You don't get personal visits from Pokémon Masters – recently instated or not – very often after all and it would have been foolish to refuse her help. Of course, I immediately realized how taxing the training regiment she had proposed would be but Ash and Dawn had gone through it and I could not afford to stay behind. Even if all that accomplished would be to catch up to them ability-wise.

Thomas was definitely uncertain of what to do with his opponent's Pokémon dancing in the very flames that were supposed to ensure her defeat. When he finally did react, it was already too late. This time the attack was a bit more Contest-suited, a combination of Swift and another Flamethrower, making flaming stars assault Beautifly. However, by expertly manipulating the fire, the attacks all impacted harmlessly against it, in fact only adding more fuel.

I was betting many spectators were baffled at how such control could be possible by simple air manipulation. Of course, it wasn't that simple. In fact, I had quickly realized that employing Silver Wind like this merely helped to create the initial funnel, maintaining it had only become possible when Beautifly learned Psychic and applied it subtly, without visible effect, maintaining the flames around herself through a combination of both moves.

This also became the perfect setup for a powerful finish. "Now, let's finish it, Beautifly! Solarbeam!"

Thomas started to call out a command but didn't expect the instant surge of energy. The fire served as a replacement for the absorption of sunlight and had a similar effect as Sunny Day. Not only that but the beam that slammed into a wholly unprepared Arcanine was equally parts Grass and Fire elemental. And while neither would have been particularly effective against a Fire type, the combination and the sheer force behind it was enough to knock our opponent clear out of the match... Even if it hadn't, the spectacular sight of a Solarbeam emitting wild flames as it sped through the air would have been enough to take away all points Thomas had left at this point.

The crowd was quiet for a long moment before erupting into applause, almost swallowing the announcement of our victory. I breathed a sigh of relief. The Grand Festival was just around the corner. Training had cost me a lot of time, regardless how much it had been worth and necessary. Had I messed up this time, it would have become a real problem.

Now though, now I was ready to compete where Dawn had a year before. This was a big measuring grade for my own growth. Just what exactly it would mean if I succeeded I wasn't sure of. Neither was I any closer to figuring out a solution to my emotional troubles... However, perhaps after the Grand Festival I could finally concentrate on resolving this issue one way or another.

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### **Somewhere in a dark office... (Giovanni)**

"Preparations are about 80% complete. We should be ready to move soon."

Excellent. Finally everything was coming together. No longer would we need to stay in the shadows, shackled by those weak fools of the League who would rather bow down and recite weak illusions of living together in harmony with Pokémon. Pah. They would eventually learn their peril, of course. History had proven that in the end the strong would rule the weak and that is how it should be. Believing and preaching anything else was folly.



However, I would not be satisfied with such a result. This was the time for Team Rocket to show its superiority, the last over two decades of work in reforming this organization had been for this moment. They would not even know what hit them.

"Any new reports from agents Jessie and James?" I asked, not quite managing to banish the sour note out of my voice. Persian also hissed in displeasure, but it really couldn't be helped at the moment. Most agents were tied up with other important work in preparation for the upcoming operation. And at the very least those three had the most experience dealing with the target.

There was a moment of silence on the other end. "Nothing new, sir. Last report indicated that they couldn't get a good opportunity as of yet because of the high popularity of the target." I snorted in response. While I would grudgingly accept the reasoning from a competent agent, I didn't doubt the real reason any moment. I had no delusions about whether or not those three were capable of executing the order I had given them. They were soft fools who didn't really have a place in the new order anyway. I would deal with them at the same time I dealt with those annoying children.

"No matter. Prepare a strike team. We will deal with those pest personally when we make our move. The first test run should make a nice distraction." And once their Chosen were dead, even those meddling Legendaries wouldn't be able to stop what was to come. "Heh, heh, I knew those fools wouldn't be able to go through with killing them. Let them keep track of the Chosen for us, at least they are good for that one thing."

"Yes, sir." The intercom clicked off and I sat back in my chair. I had been leading this organization for over twenty years now. When I took over, it was little more than a band of thieves out for their own profit. Nothing but money had counted for mother. But I wanted... No, I knew there needed to be more. And there would be now.

I grabbed the folder with the latest reports on our research's ultimate result, the perfect tool. My mood immediately got better as I looked through the latest progress reports of our "Rage Pokémon". With this we had the perfect weapons. Yes, I had all the tools necessary to create a new order. A world how it should be. How it should have been from the beginning.

"Isn't that right, my friend?" I asked with a look into the deep shadows of the room. Anyone else would have been frightened when two deep red eyes stared back where nothing should be. I merely smiled. Even IT, as much as IT thought to be the one in control, was nothing but a tool in the end. A tool which's power would bring about my ultimate vision.

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## **Outskirts of Saffron City, Kanto (Ash)**

The transition had been surprisingly easy. Where others might have problems going from good friends to being in love, our relationship had been fairly uncomplicated in that regard. Perhaps that was due to the slow buildup that had been there for a long time without being properly acknowledged. Perhaps it was that the last months had been more stressful than anticipated, leading to a heightened awareness of that short time we truly had to ourselves without any other pressing matters requiring our attention. Be that as it may, there hadn't been any major problems in exploring this new field called love that we were both fairly unprepared for. Both of us knew what we had in the other and were glad for it.

As such, my body instinctively reacted to the missing body heat next to me, pulling me out of my own dreamless slumber into the world of the waking. Yes, we had started sleeping together for awhile now and no, it was nothing indecent! In fact it had become a practical act for various reasons that would end up with one seeking out the other simply because we were both more content this way and could definitely sleep a lot better.

No doubt one of these reasons, perhaps the most important one, was the case for Dawn's absence. Pikachu was still snoring lightly on the other end of the tent – he had given up curling next to us after several embarrassing accidents that had to do with a lack of space and unconscious movement while being asleep. A glance to the entrance of the tent showed no light filtering in from outside. I doubted it had been long since we went to sleep and seeing as both of us had been rather tired, there really was only one logical explanation why Dawn wasn't sleeping like a rock as well.

Grabbing my jacket, I quietly slipped outside into the cool, spring air. While the days were getting progressively warmer, at night it was still rather cold. I really would have liked to stay indoors for once, unfortunately running into another horde of fans shortly after leaving the Gym had quickly altered our plans.

The kind of fans Dawn really hated and I had learned the hard way could make her mad in ways that left me feeling rather bad about myself in general. Fangirls... ah huh. I really wondered how Gary could deal with them when he was still having an entire entourage following him around. Then again, he didn't have a serious relationship at the time either.

I didn't have to walk far to find Dawn a short way up the small hill overlooking the city. The spot had been ideal since it was fairly protected from the wind. Still, I couldn't help but worry that it was entirely too cold to sit around, especially away from the usual shelter.

Silently I sat down next to her and wrapped my jacket around her. "You are going to catch a cold and that really would look bad on stage," I said quietly with a light grin. Dawn didn't react surprised, instead merely leaning slightly against me. The awareness of the other that we had already discovered on several levels during the tournament had only increased to a point where it was almost impossible to actually surprise the other, even if they were deep in thought.

"Sorry to wake you up. I couldn't sleep," Dawn replied quietly but it was obvious she knew I wouldn't buy it, nor let up so easily. This had been going on for awhile and tonight there was something in her voice that put me on edge. She had gotten good in hiding the true extent of her emotions on such nights, yet I could actually detect the remaining quiver of... unease – to put it very mildly – in her voice.

"You had a dream again." It wasn't a question and neither was the next. "A really bad one."

Dawn shivered lightly but then shrugged, looking at me with a forced smile. "It's nothing. They are just dreams."

I didn't believe it. And neither did she. "If they were just that, they wouldn't affect you like this." Ever since the first ones during the tournament, the number of them had increased more and more, just as their obvious dreadful nature. Dawn said she didn't really remember much details and most of the times they really were just vague images. While I had no way of accurately confirming whether or not that was true, I knew how much it affected her.

"I said its okay! We can't afford to get distracted right now!" Dawn bit back, then immediately flinched away slightly upon realizing her outburst. She really didn't like to worry me, often enough pushing it to the extreme, bottling up whatever was bothering her until I finally noticed and had to make her talk.

Wordlessly I pulled her into my arms, ignoring her brief struggle until she ceased resistance. Tugging strands of unkempt hair – a sight you normally wouldn't catch Dawn even in death with – I placed a soft, short kiss on her lips until I felt her relax slightly. "Hey, it's me. We shouldn't hide these things from each other. You know I worry and I want to be there for you."

It seemed to be enough. Normally she would put up much more of a struggle but this time her dream must have really rattled her, or perhaps it was finally getting too much to ignore. My grip tightened as she began to tremble slightly, obviously trying hard to keep some measure of control. "I'm scared, Ash. Something is going to happen. Something really bad. And it's going to be soon. I don't know what to do. These dreams... I'm sure they are warning me of something but I don't understand what they mean." She sniffed and I softly began to stroke her hair.

While I was waiting for Dawn to calm down, my thoughts were drawn to some of the events of the last months. There had certainly been enough signs. Team Rocket activity had increased to a point where, despite Cynthia's promise to leave us in relative peace for now, the League had to call on me to resolve minor incidents. Usually nothing more than a robbery or other small crime scene by comparable weak agents. But the fact that I was asked to take care of those if we were in the area was a strong indication that the other Masters were tied up with much more important tasks.

On top of that, Jessie, James and Meowth were back as well. That alone wasn't worrying. With our increased battle skills they were even less of a threat than usual. What was puzzling was that even taking our increased strength in account they were hardly trying anymore, just popping up randomly and pulling off a half-baked scheme. As if their hearts weren't in it anymore.

And then there was, of course, the most concerning issue of Leaf's ominous warning to Dawn on the eve of the Sinnoh League tournament. If there was one thing I knew, then that my old friend wasn't the type to joke around with these sorts of things.

"Why don't you go and see Sabrina tomorrow and talk to her. Maybe she can help you with those dreams," I suggested, half expecting her to refuse and downplay the issue again. So I added an argument I knew she couldn't so easily win against. "Regardless of what all this means, it will affect your performance for the Festival."

I needn't have worried. It seemed Dawn had finally reached some sort of limit on her patience as well because she actually agreed without further complaint. When we went to sleep again, it was much more restful, I could tell.

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### **Lilypad Town, Sinnoh (May)**

This was no good.

Just as I thought, my performance yesterday wasn't quite what I would call flawless. Yet, nothing but flawless would do for the Grand Festival and my hopes of ever catching up to them.

I had made a point to video review every Contest. Technology had after all advanced far enough that eligible Trainers and Coordinators could access video feeds of official tournaments online in order to analyze their own or opponent's performances. That was more widely known for the big Leagues but Contests had begun to offer the service as well.

Already I had caught several flaws throughout yesterday's Contest which I could all recall and relate to moments where I had been less than attentive. During the performance I had thought I was doing well and shrugged those moments of as inconsequential but now I could see where a more experienced opponent could have used those instances to take control of the match or even finish it altogether. I could certainly see where I would have done so.

"So much for not letting it affect me," I moaned morosely and switched off the screen. Sure, all in all my performance was still as good as ever. Thanks to my extensive training I could safely say that, even with these distractions, I was probably as good as during my last Festivals. That wasn't enough though. I had to be at the top of my game, anything else wouldn't do.

At that moment my recent companion chose to voice her own thoughts. "Are you still pining after them? Honestly, don't waste your time on something you have no chance at anyway." The bigger than normal Eevee answered my light glare with an indifferent gaze that didn't seem to care whether or not her words had any effect on me. Not that I wasn't used to it. Ever since I had... acquired her, Naru had been rather cynical and closed off. Considering her past experiences, especially with humans, I couldn't fault her. I held no illusion that she stayed with me for more than the sake of her sister. We worked quite well with this understanding and I hoped that I was gradually winning her trust. Otherwise she would hardly care about my emotional state of mind, right?

Dropping my ire, I heaved a sigh. "I know. I know that it's probably pointless. But I can't help it. I can't just drop it as much as I try. And that's only making it worse. If I don't get this under control, then I'm going to mess up at the Festival... again." And I wasn't sure if I could afford that. Losing would mean that Dawn almost certainly would pull ahead completely. I had to do this now. Waiting yet another year would certainly guarantee that I would lose any chance to prove myself as an equal to her... to them.

Why? Why had it become like this? It had been easier when it was just Ash I was pining after. If it had just been Ash, I could have just allowed myself to be jealous of Dawn, perhaps letting that push me forward. No, I think, if it had just been Ash, I could have let things go and accept that they were happy together and there was no chance for me.

But then the Wallace Cup happened and Dawn came into the picture, throwing my worldview into chaos and my emotions into utter turmoil. I had never been remotely interested in that sort of thing before. However, with Dawn it was different. Her vibrancy, her grace and skill on stage. Something had sparked right there and that spark had become a wild, uncontrollable flame that I couldn't sniff out anymore. Instead of overwhelming what I was feeling for Ash though, this new fire seemed to

have merely sucked in these feelings and made them stronger. Before I even realized it, I had fallen in love... with both of them.

It was a dilemma. I couldn't really bring myself to make a clean cut precisely because I had no one to be jealous over. Begrudging them a relationship was pointless as well since I wanted them to be happy. But my heart still longed for them. The more I tried to forget, suppress or distance myself from these feelings, the stronger they would come back eventually. And in the end I had no one else to blame but myself for not saying anything to either of them when I still had had the chance.

Naru snorted and I was actually startled when she jumped into my lap and nudged my hand. Absently I began to stroke her fur. "You are thinking too hard. Just moping around over the unfairness of life won't get you anywhere. The only way you'll ever get closure is by telling them, regardless of the outcome." Leave it to Naru to vocalize bluntly what I had already known for a long time.

A confrontation was inevitable. Yet... I was scared. Scared of their reaction. After all Ash and Dawn seemed to be quite happy with each other. Why would they even want to risk that for something uncertain? Wouldn't I just be an intruder? When I thought about it like this, I always reasoned that it was better not to have an answer than to have your hope crushed.

Besides... "The way I am now, what chances would I have? What could I even offer them?" How ironic. I needed to confront them to have closure, yet to even remotely find the courage to do so I wanted... no, needed to prove my worth. Yet, winning the next Festival with all this doubt and emotional chaos in my heart might just be impossible. The solution to this dilemma was...

"Idiotic human... Since when have you ever given up before trying? If you need a motivation, then why not use the Festival? If you win, you tell them."

... simple like that. I stared silently down at Naru, the Eevee with the dark brown-colored fur wasn't looking at me, instead enjoying the movements of my fingers through her fur. Maybe she really did care after all.

"Thanks, Naru." I picked her up and much to her protest hugged her tightly. It was so simple after all. Somehow she had understood perfectly. This was what I needed. A clear goal. I could concentrate on that and shut out everything else. If I concentrated on the Grand Festival with the resolve that, if I was victorious, no matter what, I would confront Ash and Dawn about my feelings, then I was sure I could push all further consequences back until then. And Naru was right about the other thing, too. When had I ever given up before trying? Being afraid of the outcome before giving it a try was not my style. That was something Ash had taught me as well and not just for Pokémon battles either.

Yes, if I won the Grand Festival this year, I would tell them how I felt. No... not if. Right after I did.

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### **Saffron City Outskirts, Kanto (Ash)**

"Alright, guys. We are going to step up the training a little bit. It's just a precaution for now but we are really worried that something big is going to happen soon. I want all of you to be as ready as possible."

The group of Pokémon all gave enthusiastic replies but one could see that they understood the seriousness of the situation. Any one not knowing of the mechanics among the Elites would be wondering how it was possible that there were so many Pokémon in one place. There were Charizard, Feraligatr, Bulbasaur, my recently returned Pidgeot, Gabite, Buizel, Swellow, Staraptor and Jolteon, my most recent addition.

"Alright. Charizard, we need to work on your ground speed a little more. Feraligatr, pair up with him and practice your long-range shooting. Bulbasaur and Gabite, you two are sparring today. You did well against Sabrina but I'm sure you also realized where you still have room left to grow. Floatzel you will join Staraptor, Pidgeot and Swellow in the air. Pikachu, Jolteon, continue from yesterday."

I sat back for a moment and took out my Pokégear, the device calling up stored information about the team's training progress. The two biggest among my current lineup trotted off to the side where soon Feraligatr began to shoot water attacks at Charizard who would do his best to run away from them without using his wings.

Charizard had already been well-trained before and the training at the Valley had brought him close to his natural limit long ago. It had been no surprise that he had pushed past it very soon. The motivation he got from Infernape being my overall second-best from my Sinnoh League team only edged him on to do better.

Feraligatr on the other hand had shown the most potential when it came to an alternative to Floatzel. Unlike the latter he hadn't quite reached his limit yet but was close enough that it was merely a matter of days now. Both of them had enough distinction in their styles that interchanging them depending on situation made our team only more versatile.

Upon evolving about the same time he reached his limit – the Sinnoh League final giving him a huge push – Floatzel's midair control got even better. As such having him train right along with the true fliers was an excellent way to sharpen his reflexes against those that called the skies their natural home. Staraptor proved an

excellent teacher and role model in getting Pidgeot and Swellow to catch up to her. Out of the two of them Pidgeot had made the most progress but the gap was rather small.

Gabite and Bulbasaur were about the same growth rate right now. Bulbasaur had been one of my first and quickly caught up to the rest. On the other hand Gabite had worked extra hard, the quick loss in the finals clearly motivating him to do better. He hadn't evolved further yet. However, much like with Feraligatr's limit, I didn't think it would take much longer. Dragon evolution was naturally slow after all.

That left the in all regards mismatched pair of Pikachu and Jolteon. Well, it was more of a mentor/student setup. Jolteon was still very young. I had gotten her from Nurse Joy in Fuchsia City along with her sister, an Espeon who had become one of Dawn's Pokémon. Apparently they had been abandoned near the edge of the Safari Zone. While I didn't know the details behind their story, it was obvious whoever had them before hadn't been very kind to them. The evolution had obviously been hurried. I had spoken with Brock briefly – still couldn't quite believe what he was doing these days – and he said that forcing baby Pokémon to evolve early, especially through the use of stones, could cause a lot of strain on the body, hindered and in the worst cases actually stunting growth. I had at first debated sending her to Professor Oak for now but she seemed to have grown attached to our group very quickly and had an honest desire to learn.

That had really been the first time I really appreciated the benefits that came with the provisional Master's License. Allowing a maximum of ten Pokémon to be carried, it really made training easier in many creative ways. The system was connected to the special Pokégear I had received, whereas the badge served like an ID card. While normally the release of all ten carried Pokémon was only permitted outside official battles, together with the badge, an emergency override could be initiated. So far I never really had a need to do so but that might change soon.

Dawn had gone into the city earlier to speak with Sabrina. As much as I had wanted to go with her, I understood how uncomfortable she was to speak about her dreams to begin with and that this might be something she had to overcome herself. Which left me with the only thing to do, training.

I was very proud of my Pokémon. Those that had fought in the Sinnoh League had only grown stronger while the rest had worked hard to catch up. I had to make some hard choices at the beginning. Even with the expanded capacity, I simply couldn't focus on every single one of the Pokémon I had ever caught. Doing so would seriously hinder the time I could invest in every individual one.

After an initial test phase I had to settle on roughly two battle teams, consisting of those showing the most promise for now. Next to the six Sinnoh Champions those turned out to be Charizard, Feraligatr – Squirtle did join us sometimes but his squad



duties had him busy far too often for a more active role —, Bulbasaur and Pidgeot. Swellow was competing with the latter and I had realized that I seemed to have developed a certain aptness for aerial combat, so I did tend to have more than a few Flying types along. Other than Jolteon whom I was still hesitant to use in actual combat for now, there were a few others waiting in reserve. Snorlax provided some elemental variety. Noctowl served for special situations where his special talents could become useful. And Sceptile and Bayleaf hadn't quite given up on earning their place either.

Yes, we had all definitely become stronger. Personally I felt that within a few more months, we should be ready for the Master League and with that hopefully for any other challenge the future would hold for us. Still, I couldn't help but worry. Especially for Dawn. She had already given me so much and this time I had promised that I would support her in achieving her dream. Already the hype around my Sinnoh League victory and the increasing Team Rocket activity had hampered our travels more than I expected. Now her dreams seemed to be getting worse, too, and I couldn't help but draw a connection between the latter two.

No, just being ready wasn't enough. I couldn't allow myself to be caught off guard or those I loved could very well experience the consequences. Nodding to myself in determination, I closed my Pokégear and went over to my team.

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### **Saffron City Gym, Kanto (Dawn)**

The door was rather unassuming. A simple, normal door. Nothing special, in fact almost too normal for a Gym with one of the youngest, most renown and powerful psychic adepts in the world. Perhaps there was some hidden secret? Maybe it couldn't be opened normally but only through telekinesis? Maybe if someone stepped through they'd be pulled into another dimension...

Okay, okay, I was stalling and I knew it. Yesterday night and even this morning it had seemed like such a good idea. Now though, I was getting scared. Scared of the things that were happening with me. Scared of what it could mean. I wouldn't admit that out loud, of course, but that was the blatant truth and reason why I had shied away from addressing this problem further.

"Come in."

I nearly jumped to the ceiling, hearing Sabrina's voice loud and clear through the door. Before I could even try to process how she knew I was here, the door ominously swung open... all by itself. I suppressed a shiver and squared my shoulders. Nothing would be gained from standing around, ruled by indecision. All that would accomplish was worrying Ash further which I really didn't want to.

The office once again was fairly normal, aside from the various dolls lining the shelves on the wall. Sabrina was sitting relaxed behind a desk, yet I felt her eyes studying me with an uncomfortable intensity. She was really creeping me out.

"Um..." I began, suddenly feeling quite self-conscious. "How did you know I was here?"

I think her smile was creeping me out even more. I know what Ash told me and that the young woman here wasn't the same as the person he had first met and whom had remained in many rumors, but I couldn't help the reaction. "You checked in at the gate." Ah. I began to smile hesitantly in wry humor... then she added, "And your thoughts were broadcasting all over the place. I couldn't help but hear, even during yesterday's match." Well, that was at least more like what I had expected.

When Sabrina gestured for me to have a seat, I did so wordlessly, my thoughts and emotions still in turmoil. I was sure she could tell, perhaps every single one of them. "Dawn, was it? What can I do for you?" Apparently she wouldn't make it easy on me though. That intense gaze was burning away all my defenses and I felt exposed like never before. Why couldn't she just look into my head and take the information from there?

I bit my lip upon realizing just how childish I was behaving. Nothing would ever get done by agonizing over the topic but never addressing it. I had done this all the time so far and that didn't make it any better. Ash trusted Sabrina to help me out and so should I. In the end, I was not afraid of her. I was afraid of the truth, the meaning behind my dreams.

So, reluctantly but with a quiet resolve, I began to tell her about the dreams that had started the first time during the Sinnoh League tournament and had increased over the last months in frequency and intensity.

Once I was done, Sabrina sat back with a thoughtful but otherwise unreadable expression. Seconds, then minutes ticked by without a word spoken. Just when I was ready to burst, something happened. It was like someone had run an electric feed inside my head. It was just for an instant but I cried out more in surprise than discomfort. "As I thought," Sabrina finally spoke. "Tell me, during the match yesterday, did you feel something? Like a connection to my Psychic types?"

My eyes widened but I really shouldn't have been surprised that she had picked up on it. "To be honest, I think yesterday wasn't the first time." I plucked a Pokéball out of my bag and pressed the release button. Espeon popped out and almost instantly focused on the Gym Leader, her eyes measuring and guarded. "Ever since I got her, I felt a stronger connection than I ever had to any other Pokémon I

just caught. I tried to ignore and shrug it off to just coincidence, but when I felt the same thing yesterday, I wasn't so sure anymore."

Sabrina nodded quietly. "I will be honest with you, Dawn. Just now was the first time I tried to actively read your mind since you came here. Your reaction is proof enough for what I suspected already. Tell me, you've never had any psychic abilities that you are aware of so far?" I shook my head, still amazed that all the time she hadn't used her powers at all, wondering just what exactly that meant.

"Well... For some reason, it seems you have awakened some kind of psychic potential. For someone to just pick it up though without having possessed the ability from the start is rather uncommon. No, almost unheard of." I gulped deeply, as she stood up. "I am afraid I cannot provide you with an answer for your dreams, but perhaps I can help you find an answer by yourself." She walked around the desk and came to stand directly in front of me. Espeon hissed quietly at my side but Sabrina ignored it.

Suddenly I felt rather tiny and insignificant, smothered by an unseen weight that, if I wasn't careful enough could easily crush me. Again I felt a brush against my mind but this time it was more soothing and I began to calm down slightly. Her gaze now wasn't as intense as before. It was gentle and understanding and I felt foolish for ever experiencing discomfort in this woman's presence. From what Ash told me, she had lived with psychic powers all her life and it had nearly destroyed her and her family. If anyone could and would understand my problems, then it was her.

"The only question you need to ask and answer for yourself is. Do you trust me to help discovering what you can do? Or... more importantly: Do you trust yourself to find the answers you fear and make these fears into something to draw strength from?"

Despite how close those words came to my own turbulent emotions, I didn't think she had to read my mind to figure this out. And the answer was something both of us knew already. However, it couldn't be just a decision born out of necessity. I think that was what Sabrina wanted to say. I had to make the decision for myself and with the resolve to live with the outcome.

"I do," I finally replied firmly. As much as I tried to run away from it, I could feel, deep down in myself, that whatever these dreams meant, whatever these powers were Sabrina thought I was developing, they had a purpose. And I refused to believe... No, I knew they were meant to be a good thing.

Sabrina pulled back and walked towards the door. "Then come. You don't have much time. So the best way to do this is... if we have a battle."

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## **(Narrator)**

Dawn and Sabrina stand across each other on the field of Saffron City's Gym. Espeon and Xatu were squaring off in the middle, ready for an intense battle. Slowly the screen fades away as the match starts.

"And so our heroes are starting to prepare for the next challenges ahead of them. Both professional as well as quite personal. Yet, on the horizon, an ominous darkness awaits, much more dreadful than anyone can imagine at the moment."

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## **Author's Notes**

That's it for the first Prologue. And yes, I realize that ca. 8000+ words is not exactly small for something called Prologue. ^\_^ Since this will be released in short intervals with the other two, I shall refrain from blabbering too much here. Just two story specifics to address.

If anyone didn't get May's troubles in 1-8, then I think you do now. I was half-tempted to dance around the subject longer but simply couldn't be bothered. Keeping things like this in a way where it might actually still surprise the readers as much as the protagonists, is rather tough and, much more important, can get rather awkward. After all, you don't really try to keep your secret affection secret in your own head, right? At least not unless you are still in denial. From prior experiences I know how stupid prolonged continuation of such a practice would look like. So, there you have it. Since you do not know where exactly I am going with this development, I still retain a few options of surprising you a bit.

The other thing is once again a reminiscent of the old TFSTTM. Yes, I am speaking of Naru and the other Eevee evolutions introduced very briefly in this chapter. If there still are any older readers, you probably caught the parallel and where I might be going with it, otherwise you'll just have to wait and see.

Lastly, let's all take a minute and honor the end of Negima. Regardless of how flawed and rushed the last chapters were, everyone should admit that we all had a lot of fun with this manga, right?

Feedback as always appreciated and very much welcome. Considering my fluttery motivation, it can only help to keep me going. Do not be afraid to leave signed ones on ff . net or at least give me some means to contact you. I do appreciate healthy criticism and any opportunity to discuss your or my ideas.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias