

Chapter Twenty: Impromptu Verdict

3:43 p.m. October 22nd, Thursday, 106 PH (Post Hoopa Event). Day 135.

Events: Rhea and the girls are on a Badge Hunt, trying to get all the Kanto Encrusted Badges before time runs out! Our girl started her journey on the 9th of June, and the end of registration for the Winter Indigo Cup is December 5th (43 days away).

Rhea felt a little apprehensive as the Psychic Grandmaster floated into the air. “I believe this performance deserves a proper exit. Please make your way down to the stage.”

They descended their side platform as pink outlines enclosed the whole set, spreading it apart and providing a stage for them to be seen. Sabrina’s illuminated figure drew eyes as she spoke, lifting the platform with her powers to allow the audience a full view of them.

She stepped forward with the other contestants, Lulu bouncing on her head and waving. When Mr. Raoul called their names, she joined them in bowing or curtsying. Serenity and Nova hopped forward with them, mirroring the other Pokemon, who performed their own unique gestures.

“...And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen,” Erika chimed. “Let’s hear it for our stars, background cast, and stage crew. Oh, dear, we can’t forget, Lieutenant Shiva, Sabrina. I am most interested in hearing your thoughts on the performance and the choice to so heavily push a background character into a more prominent role. This is my favorite part in an impromptu drama.”

“Indeed, indeed, Lady Erika!” Mr. Raoul cheered, the spotlight shining over the smiling Alolan Sandslash and her grinning Trainer, waving at the crowd as Sabrina lifted them out of the background crew. “What a fascinating choice, Rhea. You dedicated quite a bit of your time to developing that plot point while setting up your big transformation, and Amira supported the direction—even Argenti and Sir Something-Or-Other fed into the direction choice.”

Sabrina chuckled, pulling the audience’s eyes as she leaned against her fist in her air chair. “Nearly, Rhea knew that all the restrictions piling up on Nova throughout the drama were going to severely limit Nova’s actions, and so she pushed the narrative into a side romance and redemption arc for Argenti. It was a clever move. It also gave her the time to come up with that final scene. Bravo. I’d expect no less planning from the girl who obtained my Encrusted Badge.”

Rhea felt Butterfree swell within her belly at the praise, Nova squealing inside and asking if she thought her mom liked their performance. Rhea couldn’t see through the tinted glass box of the VIP section, where her parents and the current Champion watched, but she was sure Ambrosia was strangling her Trainer with excited glee to get her paws on her daughter.

Erika giggled and teasingly nudged her best friend. “Surely there is no bias there. Let’s be objective. Personally, I thought Princess Stella and Prince Isoroku Yamamoto were an excellent pair, spinning their side of the story in the background of the main conflict. Although Nova is an integral part of this narrative, Rhea’s work setting up a major shift in the second act was quite engaging near the end.”

Mr. Raoul’s chest shook as the Steenee curtsied, and the princely-dressed man bowed at the comment. “But of course, but of course, Lady Erika—no bias as the Grass Specialist Grandmaster of Kanto. Surely not! Go on, contestants, give us your opinions on your performance, and your thoughts on the directions your opponents and co-stars took in this

engaging drama. I must say that I adored Shiva's performance and the longing, divide, and desire that was played between her and her captain!"

He looked up at the online voting boards as the audience's thoughts on certain aspects of the performance were counted. "It seems we can start with one of the fan favorites," the judge said, the spotlight shining over the slightly nervous young woman. "Lady Kate and Lady Julia Sinister, 1st Daughter of the Lesser Noble House of Ratatouille! Give the audience your voice."

Kate held her tight hands at the front of her orange and tan-themed kimono, sounding a little nervous at all the attention; Rhea wasn't quite sure, but Nova really liked this woman from whatever her Raticate had said.

"In truth, I had planned on betraying Princess Nova at the start of our narrative, and that she would be kidnapped as a part of some elaborate plot that Harvy and I came up with before the play, but as time went on, and Rhea wrote me, uh, hehe, this letter, proposing something... really cool, despite us being opponents.

"Julia really started to connect with Nova and liked the idea of her house being part of this big conspiracy to cover up the former queen actually being a Flareon. It really sparked questions about the war and how it started or ended."

She glanced over at Rhea, and Rhea smiled and waved. "It was... really brave and daring of Rhea to give me the direction she was trying to go since we could then sabotage it. To be honest, it wasn't a lot that she suggested, but it was enough that I thought it would be a better direction for the performance than what I had planned, so I played into it... admittedly, restricting Nova to a more delicate position than Rhea wanted to let Julia shine more."

"High praise for your opponent," Erika clapped. "I did find the twist that Princess Stella knew the truth about her sister and felt threatened, partly due to prejudice and fear of Fire Pokemon—being a Grass-Type—and the dynamic that played was a fascinating choice for you all to play into. It was an angle of manipulation the nobles could use against the princess to turn her against her half-sister. It was adorable when you had Nova say she would save her sister at the end. Very wholesome how I see this story ending."

"Once again, back to the Grass-Type," Sabrina mused, getting a light glare from her best friend. "Princess Stella certainly did have a few wonderful scenes involving her mother and father, and it is not all wholesome and rainbows since she froze and is uncertain about her path after the duke killed her parents.

"That being said, Julia was very attentive, and the nervousness in her acting was genuine. She truly did feel the responsibility for protecting Princess Nova and struggled with what it would mean to tell her the truth about her mother. The conflicted emotion of how the princess would take the news or believe her at all. The guilt she felt for plotting to kidnap her charge, and how she couldn't be 100% certain that she could trust the infamous Noctowl."

Mr. Raoul nodded emphatically. "Mmmh-Mmh! Speaking of the Noctowl, what were your thoughts on the impromptu contest as a veteran in the scene, Harvy, and Adam Becker? While you didn't have much time in the scene, your narration was top-class. How did you see the play in its progression?"

Harvy and Adam were brought up to take Kate's place, and he held out a hand for her to high-five on the way down, getting attention from the crowd and making Rhea smile with the warm fuzzies.

He cupped his chin, staring around at the crowd, the cameras, and finally settling on the judges. "It was excellent, in my opinion, Mr. Raoul. Adam and I attempt to enhance every

performance we are a part of, whether playing a background role, as the primary star, or perhaps the villain, we go where the wind takes us.

“I found the direction of a typical, and, to be frank, quite boring princess kidnapping to hostage situation would have been quite anti-climatic, which is why a solid impromptu cast can take that motif and build upon it in grand fashion. I was not disappointed in my co-stars. We each enter the stage with a basic understanding of the setting and branch out into dazzling new paths.

“I will fully admit that I do not believe our performance in the drama was particularly noteworthy. I took on a supporting role for Kate and Julia. We were happy to allow her the spotlight to show her inner spirit because this was her sole big act before she was forced to retire for financial reasons. While she is limited, I have plenty of Contests ahead of me.”

Kate and Julia stiffened at the comment, no doubt not expecting her partner to talk about that, which could be very embarrassing—her pink cheeks showed it—but Harvy moved right along, though, giving his unfiltered thoughts.

“That being said, Serenity and Lady Amira Rocket displaying the hidden powers the Feebas showcased were quite compelling, narrative-wise,” he added, glancing down at the graceful redhead next to Rhea. “I can only imagine where she was going with that angle, but I can see a few rather compelling twists, and there were already a few excellent twists revealed. I would certainly love to see this story through.”

“That’s a way to tug at the heartstrings and prompt crowdfunding for a movie,” Erika chirped. “There were a lot of potential twists that I could see happening, but I am intrigued by this romance angle you took, Rhea. With Nova being so heavily restricted in the scenes, you chose an angle I haven’t seen too often in Impromptu Contests... You shone a spotlight on the developing drama itself rather than your Pokemon.”

Rhea winced as the light fell over her, and she took Harvy’s place, Nova swapping to her Flareon form in a dazzling rainbow glow to the claps and cheers from the crowd. They glanced down at her competition and teammate with a real smile, flashing her teeth. She felt more alive and nervous since she was happy with their performance, regardless of the outcome.

“Personally, I entered this Contest mostly because I wanted to have fun. Our first Contest was... eh-hehe, a bit rough, as some viewers might have seen. We’ve come a long way since Gardenia City. We came into this drama wanting to be princesses, and we got that dream, so we wanted to make the story as good as we could!

“Nova *really* liked Julia, and she felt so bad for Shiva, so... she kind of forced me to really put a lot into that romance drama since I think she wants justice for Shiva.” She giggled and knelt down to rub Nova’s fluffy neck, making her chirp.

“Nova going from a shut-in princess kind of resonates with me a little since I was so cooped up growing up. Having the princess sneak out and meet new friends was kind of a childhood dream of mine that I pulled from, and now I have amazing friends! Shiva being added to the scene fit so well, and she was so good at the part that I had to see her get her guy... Maybe I’m just a sucker for romance right now because I’m in a relationship.”

“Cute,” Erika whispered, yawning and causing everyone to look at her with concern. “False alarm. I’m awake. I’m awake.”

The Psychic’s eyes narrowed with a smirk. “The drama you can cause, Erika. Hmm-hmm-hmm. I don’t know if that is the best thing to announce over television, Rhea, but it certainly is cute. Your letter to Kate and the one you added to the scene from the duke set a lot in

motion. The unique colored Vaporeon and Flareon, with the ability to swap between forms, made for a twist unlike any other the Contest Scene has seen. Excellent use of your gifts.”

Mr. Raoul leaned forward, excitement on his face as he held a hand to his ear, listening to something on his headset, yet didn't expand on it. “Very true, Lady Erika, and Grandmaster Sabrina. Hmm. I can see the talent that all of you possess!

“Lady Amira! When I saw your name on the contestant list, I was not expecting this kind of character portrayal. The ugly, poor orphan, who has hidden powers and a mysterious past that she doesn't want to reveal. How did she get this confidence in herself? What is she hiding—this mysterious coral miner who keeps her head down until the need arises? I did enjoy the bribe attempt, which shows more of her character and personality. She isn't stupid.”

Amira stepped forward, Mariah in her arms, and Serenity by her side. Her rags swayed with her movements, and she came to a stop after bumping elbows with Rhea in passing. They'd done great, despite how little they'd been able to show off their Pokemon due to the restrictions the others placed on them in the narrative.

“There isn't much for me to tell. Serenity is a mystery, and she will remain so unless another narrative demands that I reveal her secrets. How she met Princess Nova, who her family was, and why they lost everything during the war is shrouded in the mists she can bring. I will leave it to your imagination.”

Sabrina's glowing eyes glittered in the overhead display. “The enigma with layers to be extracted and molded. A wonderful character within the narrative to provide a new angle when required. Bravo.”

“Hmm.” Erika's left eye creased. “Yes, Serenity's actions showed us that she is not to be taken lightly; draconic powers, a sharp mind, and an understanding of the streets, while also being loyal to those who are loyal to her. However, what of your narration itself, Lady Amira? You cannot deny that Rhea only had the chance to expound and guide this story because of your additions. If it had not been for you, the final scene might not have happened for Nova to transform.”

Amira shifted her head to the side, a thoughtful note in her throat. “Perhaps not, but, as was said, this is a team competition. Our goal was to create a compelling story, not to show off our individual Pokemon and their sole acting ability. It is a drama of twists and turns. I think we each covered weaknesses that the other hadn't foreseen, including our opponents. After all, the story and its active scenes come first before the struggle to stand out.”

“Well said,” Raoul roared. “Now, what about our sole performer in the castle and the dark underground tunnels beneath it, Prince Isoroku Yamamoto? By the way, I love acting out your character as a prince to match your princess! Her jealousy and the nobles' clear manipulation, with the added spectrum of her remaining a redeemable character, was a nice touch.”

Isoroku cleared his voice and held his hands behind his back while glancing down at Nova and her. “Princess Stella and I had hoped for her to be the sole royal in this competition, but we were pleasantly surprised by Princess Nova's introduction. I am only saddened that we weren't able to see the full drama unfold because we were getting excited about the upcoming acts. We had a twist for the duke's actions and the reasons behind them that would have been breathtaking. That is all I will say since we didn't really interact with the other contestants all that much.”

“Fair evaluation,” Mr. Raoul nodded, his grin widening. “That being said, you cannot downplay the background motif you shifted into place for the coming scene. There is so much to

expand upon in this world you have all created. Obviously, one of our judges was impressed by Princess Stella's solo act within the castle catacombs and the character she manifested for us."

Erika tilted her head to the side, a small smile lifting her painted lips. "There was certainly room for improvement for everyone, regardless of my own enjoyment of the play. That being said, the true joy surrounding an impromptu play made into screenwriting is the ability to refine the base material. From what you were given, it is quite impressive for a Rookie Contest, even a ranked one. And, Rhea, I am also quite enthralled by the romance aspect. What of our Captain and his Trainer?"

Sir Something-Or-Other stepped forward, showing a dashing bow. "The story of a fallen knight's redemption is a story classic. The strong female love interest who is willing and able to fight alongside her man is one that resonates with us. I will wholly agree that Rhea's attention to Shiva really brought Captain Argenti's tale to life. Personally, I'd like to see the princess and Serenity help our Lieutenant past her troubled heart to rescue her Captain, bringing back the man she loves to face the villain behind the scenes with the others supporting him."

Whispers swept the throng as they discussed their various ideas and insights, and Sabrina ended the discussion. "A splendid play. We will discuss amongst ourselves for a minute and decide our rankings..."

The minute felt like an eternity as the three judges spoke silently within the limelight, making hand gestures and tapping the screen in front of them, where they each adjusted the ratings they'd give them. When they finished, Erika delivered the final verdict.

"Hmm. A hard decision on some aspects, and potentially a controversial one," she chuckled. "As the viewers know, this is a team competition, and one meant to support and complement one another. Therefore, all participants will be given the rank of Bronze to Gold, and at the end of the night, all Silver-tier Impromptu contestant performances will be graded in like-fashion."

She showed a pained smile as the lights flashed on Kate and Harvy, making the woman's shoulders slump. "In Bronze, we have Kate, Julia, Harvy, and Adam. Yes, you had a wonderful story, and Julia performed well in her parts, but your continual push to put more restrictions on your opposition rather than focus on the story itself decreases your score.

"I'm sorry, dears, but Harvy's support was only given near the end and was more of a solo act to help your story and character, Kate; it just wasn't enough to offset the negative aspects of trapping the princess in a box during the narration, pushing Julia to the forefront. A focus more on your competition's character than the impromptu story itself."

Kate's throat constricted as she tried to hold it together, making Rhea's heart break. She remembered her own experience in Pewter Gym and Gardenia City. "That is... entirely understandable. I was—no, that's perfectly understandable. Thank you for this opportunity."

Harvy didn't blink at the verdict, seemingly expecting it, or he was just a lot more accustomed to dealing with a stage like this. "It was fantastic to work with the other talents. I hope to improve upon my next Contest."

The light faded, showing over both Rhea's and Isoroku's groups. She held her breath, knowing both men had done quite a bit for the story; from inventing the Flareon War to filling out their opposition and villains to creating compelling characters in the narrative, while Argenti had a lot of story importance.

Mr. Raoul breathed out a laugh. "It was fairly challenging to determine who would receive gold in this performance and have a shot at the Bronze Key at the end of the night. However, objectively, in this narrative, one Pokemon is instrumental in its progression, yet chose

to play a more supportive role in the first act in order to build a more powerful story... Rhea and Amira, you will move on to the final evaluation of this Impromptu Rookie Contest to be eligible to receive the Bronze Key.”

The light over Isoroku’s group faded, and the two men sighed as needles cascaded up Rhea’s arms. When the drama ended, she had not expected to win, but the possibility kept rising the more the judges explained their reasons and judging criteria.

Clapping was heard across the stadium, yet Rhea saw sour expressions. They no doubt thought there was bias at play because of who she and Amira were. Sabrina’s words addressed the controversy, though, as the lights over Isoroku’s group reignited.

“While you did not put so much emphasis on restricting your competition over the Contest drama and plot, much of your narrative substance came from Rhea and Amira. It was a close vote between us, and both of your stories have a lot of intertwining future potential in the tale itself. That being said, it was not Nova’s transformation at the end that decided it, but the note that was added by Rhea, which provided so much potential to the duke, nobility, war, and royal family storyline. That is our verdict.”

Isoroku nodded as the microphone floated to him. “Completely understandable. I doubt Rhea and Amira would have won had they not had the unique advantages of their Pokemon, but that is also a part of the impromptu format—to make the best of what you have to create an enticing story. I suppose you could say that it was a skill issue on our part for not outshining their narratives. A valuable lesson.”

Sabrina didn’t seem convinced he understood her point by the smile she gave him. “We are each entitled to our opinions.”

Sir Something-Or-Other took the handed-over microphone and chuckled, shifting around his armor as his Calvary Pokemon floated next to him. “I don’t even mind losing because of the fun Argenti and I had in this tale. It really did resonate with us, and can I just shout out Shiva for being such an amazing actress for a background character. She really stepped up to the stage and made it her own, getting on Argenti’s back to man up and take responsibility. I liked it.”

With that, Rhea was directed off the stage, and cheers followed them as Sabrina’s voice entered all of their minds, including their Pokemon. *“Excellent work, all of you. As a bonus, it seems a director in Hollywood was in attendance. He is a fan of my work in Unova and has constantly been asking for me to do a movie for him.”*

All of them almost tripped as they made their way into the locker room. *“He wants to work out a deal with you to acquire the rights to use your creative property since your work here is protected under copyright. Well, if I agree to join the cast... and I have. He is waiting for you in the second room on your right. Good luck. Nothing moves forward until you all give your permission.”*

A movie?! Us?! She asked her Pokemon in shock, Nova practically jumping for joy as Lulu spun around her neck. No way, does that mean—oh, she’s not in our minds anymore.

Rhea’s gaze shifted to Kate as the woman held her stomach, her Rattata comfortingly rubbing her leg. It didn’t take long for Nova to swap legs and talk to the rat, their connection transferring concern. Sir Something-Or-Other—whatever his name was—and his partner were chatting excitedly, but Amira wore a frown she’d seen all too often on the redhead; she was expecting a catch, and the Rocket girl had experience in these kinds of circles.

The truth came when they entered the room to three men, each in their mid-40s. Who she assumed was the director, jumped forward to shake *only* Amira and her hands.

“Girls, girls, wow, what a show! What a story! Imagine this, Nova—the brilliant star of a kingdom divided, her past heritage unknown, and starring in a production with her father! Vee and Red have already agreed to it if Nova were to sign on. I’m talking a budget in the hundreds of millions of credits—prominent stars from across the scene—the best actors and actresses in the business!”

“W-What?!” Rhea choked. “Hold up! Hold up! Vee—Nova hasn’t even met her dad yet. This is really a lot to—”

“No need to rush! No need to rush! We can have dinner and discuss it—my treat,” he swiftly interjected. The other four contestants all gave each other looks before shuffling off to the side as he just pushed forward. “Naturally, having Rocket’s connections will push it to the moon! Of course, Serenity will have the exact spot in this play. We can storyboard later! Anyway, what do you say? I have the contract already being drawn up,” he asked with a toothy grin.

Amira placed a hand on Rhea’s arm and pulled her back a little, taking the conversation. “I think it sounds like a wonderful *initial* offer, Mr. Ayn Rand. I can contact my lawyers to get in touch with your own after we iron things out. We will reschedule with you for, say... Friday?” She showed a sweet smile. “We have plans already to dine with Champion Elaine, among other prominent figures that we cannot move for this.”

Ayn blinked as she shut him down, and Rhea cleared her voice, trying to keep up. “Also, I won’t join the production unless *all* of us are invited, especially Kate and Julia. We do it as a team!”

She saw the older woman’s throat constrict and eyes water, and she held back tears as her Rattata held her leg, trying not to shake. Her other two opponents looked entirely taken aback by her insistence.

However, Harvy promptly canceled his role in the play. “I’d be happy to sell my shares in the title for an acceptable payout. I have other goals than becoming a Hollywood star.”

“Naturally... naturally,” Ayn muttered, not looking so thrilled now as he considered a few things. “Their acting roles could be quite... demanding for their talents when there are already very renowned actors and actresses that can take the roles. You would be voicing your own Pokemon, after all...”

Amira took out her phone and began scrolling through her contacts. “Which is why you will generously offer lessons for them, as you would for us... at least when everything is drawn together. Productions like this take time to get the ball moving. We can work on the complete storyboard through email and texts. In the meantime, we have places to be. We can exchange our numbers and work out a proper deal on Friday with my lawyers present.”

“Sounds quite reasonable, Ms. Rocket,” he quickly returned, adding a fake smile. “If that is the case, then... Mr...”

“Harvy.”

“Mr. Harvy, why don’t we dine at the newly opened gourmet restaurant nearby and discuss your share in this creative work?”

Amira guided them out and toward the divided locker rooms without much more communication between them. Although, the moment the door shut, Rhea jumped on the redhead.

“That was... crazy!”

“Flare-Flare!”

“He *really* got Red and Vee on board—Nova’s dad?” she asked, spotting Kate white-faced and trying to remain on her feet at the opportunity that just struck her in the face.

“Of course, he didn’t,” Amira chuckled, her ruby eyes sparkling. “Ayn Rand is notorious in Hollywood. Yes, he produces huge movies that hit the box office with massive numbers, but most of his films never make it off the ground because of how many promises he makes. He wants my grandpa’s support because it is a sure shot for the ridiculous funding he needs. It’s business; he doesn’t care about the movie. He cares about the names it could bring, including your mother, Nova, the current Champion’s Ace.”

“Flare...” Nova huffed, spewing a few flames from her mouth at being used to get to her parents. “Flareon?”

Rhea rubbed the back of her neck as they paused in front of the divide between the female and male locker rooms. The two men listened intently to Amira’s expertise in the scene. “So, he’s going to try to cut out everyone but you and me?”

Amira tilted her head to the side while giving Kate an apologetic frown. “Sorry to say, Rhea, but it’s business. It has a far better chance of getting views by having names people recognize, and your family stands at the top of the Trainer world while mine stands at the top of business. It’s a sure-fire bet that it will pull numbers.

“No offense, but Kate is a nobody. This kind of shot is... one in a billion, and only you are going to be able to make that happen, Rhea. So, be prepared for them to try to pay you off, Kate, or... maybe even darker tactics to get you off the project. Something like this... a lot of money is on the line. That’s the best I can do to warn you.”

The redhead turned and put a hand on her hip, giving that confrontational look that said she was about to say something she didn’t think Rhea would like. “I’m dubious to think this will even work for us, Rhea. I don’t plan on giving up the Gym Challenge or becoming a Trainer to be an actress. Yes, that is privilege talking,” she bluntly stated.

“I could be an actress whenever I want; I can get a role on almost any set. It isn’t a big deal to me, and that’s the truth. I don’t care about money or fame. I enjoy traveling with you and exploring while we grow as Trainers. I am not going to give up Training for something like this. I have your back, Rhea, but I can’t say the same for Kate. This is on you to make it work if you want it to move forward, and I know Lori will be in the same boat as me.”

Rhea set her ground and nodded as the redhead smiled at her, and gave a parting wave. She entered the locker room to contact her lawyer, leaving them outside. The men looked at one another, considering Amira’s words before thanking her, exchanging numbers, and going to their own locker room.

Kate fidgeted with her hands, looking as if she were about to vomit. “Umm. Thank you for sticking up for me... even if I tied Nova down so much in the Contest. Being an actress—in Hollywood? I, umm... It’s a dream I’ve had—bigger than Contests even... I’ll have to think about it, though, because... Yeah, he doesn’t want me. He wants you.”

Rhea held back her own tears and opened her arms, making the girl force a laugh and accept her hug. “Hey! I’m all about making dreams come true. Nova likes Julia and wants to help you guys. Plus, no sleazy director is going to force me into having her lady-in-waiting be anyone else, but the person Nova is connected to! So, trust. I’m on your side. Okay?”

“Okay... Thank you, Rhea. I think I’m going to join your fan club,” she cried, unable to hold back her tears any longer. “This is like... the worst and best day of my life! I thought... I thought it was over for us.”

“Good things happen to good people!” Rhea comforted, hugging her tighter. “Even if we were opponents, Julia was nice and encouraging to Nova, and we needed that after our last Contest. Friends?”

“Hah! Like I’d say no after what you just did for me? Thank you, Rhea... I’m sorry I’m a mess!”

“It’s okay! Want to go to dinner with us? I’m sure Sabrina will get in contact with us if we win; she’s actually a softy,” she winked. “But, shhhh. You didn’t hear it from me!”

Laughing with the crying woman, Rhea followed her inside past the next contestants, who had fear on their faces and were no doubt wondering if it had really been that brutal of a Contest. Rhea felt on Cloud Nine, though. She had another friend, a Contest friend who would soon enter the actress scene.