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Pre-Note

Okay, I got an interesting set of reviews just before really starting to write this episode. I am not quite sure how to react to you Yukilumi. I wouldn't quite go and say you were flaming but your wording could have been better. I see the well-meant criticism in them but the way it was written pretty much just sums up to: I don't like how the author writes. If that's your general impression, turning away and not reading further would have been better instead of blatantly ripping into someone's else's style that they have been writing in before the reviewer probably even knew about fanfiction...

For the sake of the other readers who probably don't want to see me tear your points apart (especially since I have addressed most of them off and on in different notes throughout the series), I am going to stay civil and merely wish to clarify one point.

Yukilumi... I'm NOT a girl... Not that I'm aware of at least. *looks in mirror* Nope, no sudden gender changes. Thank you very much for taking the time for reviewing but that's all I'm going to say because otherwise I would have to treat this as a flame rant and I really don't want to do that.

Now thanks to everyone else who reviewed. Especially kyuuu. Yours was short, yes, and while I can't answer any of your questions because that would be spoiling the story, it does show that you are genuinely interested in what is going to happen. Since I got yours a day after Yukilumi's set, that really helped me out. Not

that I was going to get distracted by one person's opinion. It just made me think, a lot more than I actually wanted to, about it.

Finally a little service for everyone (and a bit of a response at the pre-teen romance jab from Yukilumi). Main character ages, I've finally settled on concrete ones. All dates are as of the current time in the plot. Meaning second arc, subtract roughly a year and you have what they are around the Sinnoh League Championship.

Ash: 17
Dawn: 14
Misty/Leaf: 18
Brock: 20
Ako: 19

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Attention: Request for Artists and Beta

I was thinking... Yeah, yeah, I do a lot of that. But seriously. The original TFSTTM had a few nice pictures by a good artist that I have no contact to anymore. If there are any decent artists among you, who would be interested to draw a few things like characters, a logo (since we do have story covers now), please give me a call either by PM or Email and we can discuss ideas. Though if you are seriously interested, you'd better be ready to share your email to better exchange files.

At the same time, the call for a good beta is still open. Twilight is doing semi-betaing, more like some rudimentary plot betaing which often consists mostly of giving first impressions on what I wrote before everyone else. My conditions haven't really changed though. You need to be firm in the language since I consider myself fairly capable already, so I'd need someone really fluent to actually point out flaws that I have not caught. And, most importantly, you should have time for it. My last attempts ended with people who said they would try it and I am still waiting for the first test episode. You get the point. I'm not saying you should be done the day after I sent it to you. But an episode within a week at least should be reasonable. I proof-read this one in several longer sessions over one day. So doing it in three or four should actually be possible.

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Fuchsia City, Kanto (Leaf)

Full concentration, senses alert into all directions. It was totally silent, no noise betrayed the other presence in the room. But I knew she was there. Waiting, patiently waiting for that one lapse in concentration to exploit. That was the art of fighting from

the shadows and while I was still mostly a beginner, my opponent was an expert in her own right.

Several more minutes passed in this game until the silence was abruptly broken by the faint sound of air displaced as something came racing towards my position. The shuriken would have hardly made that much of a noise but with the quietness all around me and my senses sharpened to maximum, I picked them up as soon as they were released. Spinning around, I made to deflect the attack with the two kunai I was holding but then my senses screamed in alarm.

Reacting on instinct, I twisted out the way instead, spun to my right and caught the second volley, then flipped backwards twice as the last wave came from where I had originally faced. Coming up on one knee, I scanned my surroundings for any sign of further attack but none came and when my opponent dropped from her hiding place on a support beam up above the large hall, I finally relaxed my posture.

"Your reflexes got better," the purple-haired young woman stated, straightening out, her cape flapping upwards slightly. Other than that no excessive movement was made. "You might catch up to me soon this way."

I laughed a little. "I don't think so. You've been doing this since you were little. Besides I have no intention of becoming a ninja." Yet I couldn't deny that this sort of fighting style should work extremely well for the kind of powers I was supposed to receive soon. That hadn't been planned, really. At the time I accepted my old friend's offer to teach me some of her family's art, I had merely been curious, fascinated somewhat. It looked cool and I thought possessing some fighting skills would come in handy one day.

That had been a few months before the Sinnoh League Championship last year. I knew then already that I would be accepting the Master title formally but hadn't met Zoroark yet. In relation to my upcoming work I had merely reasoned that I would rather have some skills in sneaking around in hostile environment than some kind of martial art skills only suited for direct confrontation. That the ninja arts were so very well suited for my future role was a nice bonus.

I took a few deep breaths. While this kind of exercise wasn't exactly physically tiring, the absolute concentration necessary got to you even more in exchange. Frankly I hadn't really planned to get a training session like this in for some time but after the events at Cerulean Cave I had been restless and unable to properly focus. Able to concentrate on just one thing for about an hour straight had definitely been a blessing but even that seemed to just be a temporary respite. "Besides, I don't think I would be any good at being one right now."

Sighing, I sat down on one of the benches lining the edges of the Gym, meant for spectators and such. Already my thoughts were wandering back to that day and I

knew that would ultimately lead me back to the realization I had made then, the realization I could no longer deny.

Janine dropped her own emotionless posture and smiled gently, handing me an energy drink which I gladly took and immediately emptied halfway. "Don't be so hard on yourself. Now, if you'd ask my father he'd tell you emotions are weakness and that a good ninja shouldn't rely on them. Personally I don't see it that extreme and plan to find myself a strong, noble man. Also... I suppose I have to admit Father is a tad hypocritical. After all I wouldn't be here otherwise." She paused briefly and for a moment a faraway expression flashed over her face. "I know for a fact that he loved Mother dearly."

I chuckled weakly. "I wasn't planning on being celibate for the rest of my life, you know?" She grinned back at me but didn't comment, instead sitting down next to me and waiting for me to continue. We made a bit of an odd pair at times but I always appreciated that Janine could be a good listener. She wasn't really my type to begin with and had made it quite clear in the beginning that she liked boys just fine.

That was okay with me and right now my heart seemed to have focused on someone else exclusively. Which was the real problem. "I just don't think the timing is right. There's so much going on. If this had happened earlier, perhaps I wouldn't have minded. But trying to build something in a time like this... You know what they say, relationships built in times of crisis barely last longer than said crisis." And yet I couldn't deny it any longer. The surge of emotion as I had been racing through the cave to find Misty, the mix of raging fury, concern and protectiveness upon finding her almost getting killed... This wasn't really an attraction any longer. I had fallen in love.

And I couldn't afford that. It was better this way. For both of us. Not that I thought love could not be a source of strength. But compared to Ash and Dawn who had time to build their feelings slowly and slipped into their relationship comfortably, I didn't even have the time for that. There was no telling when Team Rocket would make their move, only that it would be soon. And even ignoring that, with our diverging duties the times I could spare to visit the beautiful redhead was far too little to build a strong foundation. And a strong foundation and understanding of each other was what every relationship needed. My own past had taught me that painful lesson.

Janine had been silent for awhile but finally she turned back to me with a serious face. "Balancing love and duty isn't an easy thing, I suppose." She laughed. "I'm not exactly the most qualified person to talk about this but if you want to hear my opinion on the matter..." She trailed off, waiting expectantly until I inclined my head for her to continue. "I don't think that is your real problem." I blinked at her, not understanding and more than a bit confused. "Your biggest problem right now is that you still, after all these years, haven't gotten over Rebecca."

Shocked, I jumped up from my seat, staring unbelieving at my friend in the face of that kind of accusation. "Don't you dare..."

Janine held up a hand and I found my ire wilting under her calm and... knowing gaze, biting back my heated reply. "The fact that you are actually getting upset about it right now again just confirms my theory. You've done a good job to suppress thinking about the way your first relationship ended. But I think you never really worked through and came to peace with it. And now that you are faced with the possibility of finding real love again..."

"That's enough." I gritted my teeth and turned away. A fresh flood of memories accompanying the sharp accusation from my friend. The calm from the training had all but evaporated. Right now I was trying hard not to give in to the anger I felt but it was almost impossible. I knew Janine was only trying to help and I also knew deep down that she had probably hit closer to home than I wanted to admit right now. But knowing that logically wasn't enough to quell the emotions. "Thank you for the training," I pressed out, striding away, needing to distance myself before I did or said something stupid that could ruin my friendship, "but I still have work to do."

Janine didn't stop me but I could feel her penetrating gaze on my back.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 04: Cerulean Passion! Will love bloom between Misty and Leaf?

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Veilstone City, Sinnoh (May)

A couple of years ago, when I first set out on my journey, I had no idea about what I wanted to do with my life, where I would be aiming for. Personally I believe that's a rather normal thing for a child. Hardly anyone questions it because it has become such normality. However, if you really thought about it, letting children our age tour around the world to capture and battle with wild, potentially rather dangerous creatures could be considered irresponsible. And I had not wanted to have anything to do with it either. Until one cheerful boy came along and before I knew it, I had found myself pulled into this sometimes strange but always fascinating world and I began to find my own goals, my own dreams.

I still would have never figured I'd end up here one day, performing kata in a dojo. Not that I have never been fascinated with martial arts. In fact, I had had a fair interest in them as a kid, before my journey, after that it never really came up again. If that was also part of some destiny, then it was an ironic twist. Not an unwelcome one but definitely one I needed to get used to.

Maylene was a good but tough teacher. Over the last week I had learned more than I ever thought possible. All the prior physical exertion I had done alongside my training had left me far more apt to pick up what the young woman was trying to drill into me. Compared to a total beginner, the hard training regiment I had been part of for the better part of the last year had strengthened my body, made me faster and definitely did wonders for my endurance.

Which was a good thing because Maylene hardly gave me a breather. Granted I had asked her to since I wanted to get the most out of my stay here but it was still a very grueling experience. Training from sunrise to sunset, with only brief breaks when she had a Gym match – at least if she didn't have something for me to work alone on – and to give me time to work on some combinations – especially Naru needed the practice if we wanted to present a good show. The regular training exercises were easily worked into my own schedule.

Needless to say I'd fall into bed and sleep like a rock every night. However, it was worth it. I could already tell this even after such a short time. My body – when it wasn't hurting in so many places – felt lighter, stronger, more able than it ever did before. If this was only after roughly a week, I wondered what I could achieve if I kept this up for a few months?

Completing the kata, I came to a halt, breathing deeply but steadily. Kata were actually a rather pleasant thing to do. Not only did they serve their actual purpose of learning and memorizing attack patterns, the more you got into them, the more calming the exercise was. I always felt incredible centered and focused afterwards.

Maylene had left her seat where she had been watching and nodded to me in approval. "Very good. For someone just beginning, your form is flawless." That might be partly because she had quickly realized and settled on a rather simple and straightforward style for me. *You are best suited for a straight offense. Trying to teach you anything else right now would be a wasted effort because it would take far longer.* That had been her reasoning and I found myself agreeing after a few days of practice. The style she had begun to teach me was rather simple to learn. Of course, it would be a long time until I could perfect it to a degree of where I felt comfortable of using it for real.

"Thank you, sensei. You have taught me well."

Maylene shook her head. "Not at all. I have merely showed you a path. You, however, have proven to be a very fast learner and would make an excellent student if you had the time and ambition." I blushed slightly at the praise but couldn't deny that I felt the same. It was different from Pokémon Contests, a far more active practice when just being the one to give the commands. This was much more a challenge of my own physical limits.

"Let's see then how far you have really come." Seeing Maylene get into a fighting position, I instinctively did the same, not able to suppress the slight feeling of nervousness. She looked rather serious, so I didn't think this was going to be a light spar as usual. In fact most of the time she had actually let either her or my Pokémon spar with me for variety and – as she reasoned – it was far more likely I would end up needing to protect myself from a Pokémon than a human in my profession. But now it seemed this would be the first full contact test against my teacher.

Taking a deep breath, I held close to the focus from doing the kata, then banished all feelings of uncertainty, focusing solely on my determination and confidence. *You are like a flame, May. Always in motion, always burning and unpredictable.* That had been Maylene's words when she explained why she had taught me in this particular way. With a battle cry, I charged forward, forcefully pushing off the ground just slightly in order to rush at my opponent. The first punch flashed out fast and flawless, just like practiced. As expected it was easily evaded but the other hand came already up in a palm strike towards Maylene's chest which was slapped aside.

To a casual observer it would seem like I was just rushing in without a thought or care, a clumsy amateur's approach. And while I certainly still considered myself little more than a beginner, I took comfort and confidence in the fact that this was actually part of the style. An overwhelming, relentless offense. Just like Maylene had said. Always in motion and never letting up.

Spinning, I slipped past a counter strike but winced slightly, then it glanced of my side. Ignoring the near hit, I used the momentum from the spin instead to throw out a fast jab that Maylene just barely evaded, falling back a step. There wasn't much finesse behind the attacks, yet, but that was okay. Right now the most important thing was for the execution to be fast enough that it would be hard for any opponent to counterattack.

Pressing the attack for another full two minutes, I never landed a clear hit, nor did I expect to, but I did keep my teacher occupied... even if I was certain she was holding back on me. That was made quite clear when she suddenly exploded into a flurry of motion I had trouble to keep up with. I DID manage to get in a few more attempts but a short time after that Maylene called an end to the match.

After bowing to each other, Maylene smiled at me proudly. "Really, really good. It is a shame that you have to leave so soon. With a little bit more training, you could actually give me some trouble." I seriously doubted that but felt nonetheless warmed at the compliment. I was sweating and breathing hard even after such a short exchange. I certainly still had a long ways to go. However, more and more I felt that I needed this. Ever since that night after the Grand Festival, when I had awoken with this strange, unexplainable feeling, I was certain that something was going to happen. Something that would change the world as I knew it forever. And with that came the strong urge to be ready for it. And that didn't just mean training my Pokémon even harder.

"Perhaps I can spare a few more. As a Top Coordinator it seems I can arrange a flight rather quickly. And right now I feel this is giving me more than any training I could do on my own," I said eventually and was actually relieved and excited that I could continue this new form of training. I just had to make sure that my Coordinator training wouldn't fall short. After all, I still intended to show Ash and Dawn what I could do.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"Starmie, again!"

I clenched my fists tightly, watching the electricity spark across the pool and right into Gyarados. By now I could safely say that my Pokémon could deal with just about any type reasonable well but Electric attacks were still the one big weakness to my almost exclusive focus on Water types to this point. And that had nearly cost me dearly.

In the end I didn't really accomplish anything. Mew would probably have still escaped the way it had, even without my reckless plan and all I had managed was to get Leaf worried. Her control after it was all over was admirable but I could tell that the young Master was torn between being upset and relieved with me.

No I would still make the same decision even now. It had been the only thing I could do in that situation. Not doing anything had been out of the question. What I couldn't forgive myself for was that I hadn't been able to take care of my own problems. She had trusted me by holding off their leader and I hadn't even been able to finish my own battle without her help.

And I might be dead now, if Leaf hadn't shown up, I thought bitterly, watching as Gyarados fought against the electricity. Despite how many times we had done this, there was a point at which all resistance training wouldn't cut it anymore. For Water Pokémon needing water to move this was even more of a problem because of

its conducting nature. Feed electricity into a body of water and it was pretty much impossible to escape from or run dry anytime soon.

And so the rest of my Pokémon in the water got enough of the wild electricity to have their own problems. It wasn't enough yet. Our endurance hadn't been good enough. That much had already become apparent in the matches I had with Leaf but became painfully obvious during the events in the cave. We had to get past this. And right now this was the best I could do on my own, at least.

The one other area was hard to train in without having an adequate opponent. I tried working on my multi battle skills once with help of my sisters but had to quickly give up on it. Even six on three our skill level was simply too far apart to provide me with the challenge I needed. Neither me nor my Pokémon would get anything out of it and the hassle it was to even get them to agree and put some effort into it wasn't worth it.

At least they had agreed to look after the Gym for a few days so that I could focus on some training. Frankly, I was loath to do so and hoped our reputation wouldn't take too much of a dive but I really didn't have an alternative. Over the last weeks I had scouted a few promising local Trainers who had good skills but didn't have the desire to travel much or far from Cerulean, but the search for a proper assistant and hopefully fill-in in the long run wouldn't yield results from one day to the other.

And time is something I really don't have right now. Sure, Leaf had told me about our supposed role in the future, as much as she had learned at least, but the seriousness of the situation had only really set in now. Along with the realization that I wasn't ready yet, not by a long shot. If I had trouble with something as small as this, I wouldn't be of much help to the others.

Where would that leave me? The odd one out again? I didn't think so. I had had enough of that in my childhood and was just now establishing a measure of independence. I couldn't afford to be the weakest link again and I wouldn't. The next time it mattered, I would be ready.

A sharp roar and several cries drew my attention back to my Pokémon and their current peril. With shock and dawning horror I realized that in my brief lapse of concentration, I had missed the point of overdoing it. "Starmie, stop!" I cried out, wondering why my oldest partner hadn't done so by itself... Then again, I should know that everyone would always try their best and trusted me not to abuse that trust... which I nearly had in my frustration and single-minded focus.

"I'm so sorry, guys," I choked back a sob, trying to compose myself. It seemed even in training I was a failure. Leaf had said I had been doing good on my own but I wondered if that was really true. What kind of Trainer was I, if I ended up hurting my

Pokémon in the process of practice? Gyarados was worst off. Despite his ever fearsome look, I could tell he was in a lot of pain. The others had slight burns and other signs from the intense shocks that had been sent through the water.

"Training's over, everyone get some rest." Turning away in disgust with myself, I shut my eyes in frustration and equal part resignation. Was that it? Was that the limit of my strength? I didn't doubt my Pokémon could go beyond this stage but could I truly bring it out? Definitely not like this, by hurting them to a point of abuse. I knew I was letting my emotions get the better of me. How could I be someone with the responsibility to save the world? Destiny really sucked, if it thought I could pull it off...

"Va!" Startled, I turned back around and cried out more in surprise than anything else when I got a Water Gun in my face from my youngest Pokémon. Shaking my head to clear my vision I saw all my Pokémon had gathered at the edge of the water, wearing expressions that made me choke when I realized what they meant. There was anger. But not because of my actions, but more so because I was standing here feeling sorry for myself. And there was determination, determination to keep going despite the damage inflicted, despite the exhaustion that had to be there. Because they wanted to get stronger.

"You... You still want to go on?" Everyone gave nods or cries of consent and I felt both ashamed that apparently I hadn't trusted their willingness to grow stronger with me as much as they did trust me and immensely grateful to have such great friends to rely on. "You guys are the best," I said quietly but was sure everyone heard.

"Alright. But that's enough resistance training for now. We'll do something different."

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Outskirts of Blackthorn City, Johto (Mew)

I was... amazed. That didn't happen very often. Surprised, yes. Shocked as well. But amazed? In all the time I had experienced, amazement was something that happened so rarely I could recall every instance, even from centuries ago. It's hard to get amazed if you saw everything the world had to offer, both in ancient times and the present... and thanks to my wayward brother I had even seen some "wonders" of the future a few times.

Human will and emotion, the drive they could develop when focusing on a single goal, however, was usually the most common cause for all these moments of amazement. Every generation had a few of these individuals that had the ability to affect everything and everyone around them, yet only a few ever reached such a state that they would be forever remembered as legends. I had pretty much met them all and had always been amazed anew at what human will could achieve.

It was these moments that I had to bitterly ask myself if this, that ever present and rapidly accelerated drive to achieve... yes, to evolve beyond what they were right now, was what had separated us from them before the change. That this was the reason why it seemed like we became little more than prey for humanity. We hadn't been able to accept or even acknowledge that fact. What foolish pride...

"Remember, you have to find the right balance. Harnessing the power of Light requires equal part an inner serenity and vibrancy," I continued to coach my charge. Not that it was necessary at this point. She had already mastered this step. In no time at all. The small sphere of white light formed between her hands was the proof that underestimating humans like many of my brethren still tended to do was a foolish, long outdated notion.

Dawn had picked up the basic principles of elemental manipulation incredibly fast. I would have attributed it to her prior psychic training but even that had only been short and basic. That girl simply was a quick learner and I was quite glad for it. There wouldn't be much more practical stuff I could teach her before the seal was released but it would be helpful nonetheless.

"Natural Resonance Energy is not really a tangible power," I explained, both for Dawn's sake but also for Ash and the other Pokémon here. While they couldn't do much in practical terms right now, theory was something they would benefit from in the long run. "I would rather say it is... potential. A measurement for the potential you have to connect to natural energy which manifests in many different ways. These can be divided roughly into these categories. Elemental Manipulation, Physical or Mental Ability and Empathy. Elemental manipulation is the source of a Chosen's power and what binds them to their Legendary counterpart. Unlike a person with simply strong NRE that has developed some skill in elemental manipulation, much of the Chosen's power lies dormant and needs to be awakened. For that the Chosen must pass a trial by the guardian of their corresponding element and be deemed worthy."

"You said Dawn's psychic powers were just the beginning of her abilities. How do they fit in?" Ash asked curiously, "Are psychic abilities an elemental power as well?" I did expect the question, of course. And I suppose it was something to easily get confused about. The borders between individual powers granted through a high degree of NRE weren't that simple to determine. And even if researchers in the old days had divided them into categories like this, a lot about the power we wielded was still a great mystery. Most of the time even we, who had the most practical experience did things more on an instinctual than conscious level.

"Not quite. You already said it. They are Abilities. In this case primarily Mental Abilities. Manifestation of physical and mental abilities are about the most common result of a greater NRE potential in most humans and psychics are about the most well-known. However, very few, in fact mostly those Chosen like you, will ever be

able to develop more than one ability. For you physical or mental abilities can – but don't have to – manifest early and for a Chosen are usually in direct relation to their elemental alignment. Well they would be for anyone but seeing as others wouldn't be able to fully master their corresponding element, it would do them no good to even know about it. As your elemental mastery grows, however, so do these abilities. Dawn's psychic powers are something she has because she was to become the Chosen of Light. They began to slowly manifest over the last year."

At this point the strain was becoming too much for Dawn and the sphere slowly faded out. It was already far better than in the beginning where it would just wink out instantly. The control she could administer already at such an early stage truly was amazing.

Of course, what she could and would eventually do with it was up to her. Personality-wise and what I could sense from her emotions, I didn't think she would ever be an outright offensive type. But Light didn't need to be about offense. That was the good thing about our higher element. It wasn't just one thing or another. Whereas Fire for example would always be a primarily offensive element or Earth a primarily defensive one, Light was defined mostly by Purity and Vibrancy. Just what you did with it was up to whoever was using the power. If I had to make a guess I wouldn't be surprised if Dawn would develop some kind of healing ability along the way.

"But what about Empathy then? You explained the other two but what exactly does Empathy do?" my charge asked and I couldn't help but smile at them. It was kind of fitting that they asked since out of all of the Chosen I believed those two actually possessed the most of it.

"Empathy," I began solemnly, "is the true mark of a Chosen. It is not so much a power since it cannot be TAUGHT. It merely is. However, a Chosen that has come into their full ability will be able to make a much more conscious and precious use of Empathy to understand and communicate with nature. This will greatly benefit not only your abilities but even more so the understanding between you and Pokémon."

And it was because of that, that they would make a difference and in the long run hopefully would achieve a true peace and balance between our races. Because without being able to emphasize with each other, any effort would always remain a superficial one. That had been our leader's hope.

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Two days later (Dawn)

Normality. I think that's what it was. After all the events lately, after Mew's revelations and with that more and more shocking new information that seemed to

feel far too unreal, too out of touch with the way things should be, simple training was actually an act of normality that felt rather calming.

"No, not like that. I know it's hard to undo reflexes but your new form can stand this level of attack much better now. And if you can endure it, you can counter better." There was no annoyance or frustration. Instead Prinplup got back into position for another try. He had too much discipline to get worked up by the slow process. Well, I suppose he was as much aware as all of us that a sudden evolution like this needed time to adjust.

Piplup had always been adamant about not evolving or that's what I had thought it was. Perhaps now I begun to understand that he really didn't feel like it was the right time. He had been ready for it physically but not mentally. Regardless of knowing or not knowing, we had taken into account that he would stay in this form when making the outline for his training. While the evolution line was mostly a natural progression – by far not an excessive sturdiness-for-speed exchange like with Turtwig after he begun evolving – there were quite a few things that had to be retrained.

Prinplup was bigger and sturdier, but that also meant that his timing had to be redone. A lot of my evasion training consisted of reaction. Very close reaction. With the new size, an attack avoided by a hairsbreadth by Piplup, would hit Prinplup simply because of the greater size. That didn't mean he couldn't evade an attack like that anymore but the timing to do so had to be almost completely relearned. He'd get it down, of course. And fast. I had no doubt about that. Pi... Prinplup was a hard worker and I had not even the shred of a doubt that he would be ready in time for the first qualification round of the Harmony Cup.

"Alright, let's do this again. Lopunny, Ice Beam!" One might think that considering what was happening between them, it wasn't a good idea to pair them off for training. However, it had never been a problem before. Lopunny and Pikachu would go full contact in sparring matches as well. They knew that it was necessary. Better to cause some minor damage to the other here than having them more severely injured in a real battle. Besides, all of our Pokémon were too professional and too determined to get sidetracked by individual feelings. A battle was a battle.

This time Prinplup did not try to twist away. It wasn't the purpose of today's training. While evasion training needed to be redone for the stated reasons, being able to take more attacks like this with almost no effort now gave rise to a whole new level of possibilities. Lopunny didn't hold back either and yet Prinplup stood firmly against the rather powerful Ice Beam. I expected him to deflect it to the side or upwards any moment now and as such was rather surprised by what was actually happening.

Slowly drawing the wings he had crossed over each other in a guard position apart and back to the sides, the beam wasn't flung to the side. Instead the energy seemed to slowly fizzle out. And by the time Lopunny stopped her attack, Prinplup's wings were encased by a thick layer of ice but in a way where he was clearly still able to move them.

Inwardly I smiled. I shouldn't have expected anything less. Piplup had always been somewhat envious of Buizel's Ice Aqua Jet. But his body had proven not to be able to handle ice absorption that easily and he didn't want to learn Aqua Jet merely for that purpose. It didn't fit with his style. As Prinplup it seemed absorption did come a lot easier. Not quite without some strain, I noticed, but considering he had pulled it off flawlessly at the first attempt. I couldn't be more proud.

Of course, that hadn't be the purpose behind the training. Sending a mental command towards Espeon, she hurled a psychic blast at Prinplup from a position where he wouldn't be able to see it and with a speed that would leave him little time to react... Enough obviously to turn and bat it away with one of the ice-encased wings.

Putting my hands on my hips at the smug look on Prinplup's face, I made sure to appear properly annoyed. He didn't budge for a moment, then sheepishly shuffled his feet. "Someone is getting a little ahead of himself," I chastened. Not that I really meant it, but I couldn't let the new evolution get to Prinplup's head. While I wasn't worried about it happening with him, Mamoswine had been enough of a bad example. "Get rid of that ice and we'll do it again. This time the right way." After waiting a few seconds in which nothing happened, I was starting to get really annoyed, then realized Prinplup's embarrassment and groaned. He didn't know how.

Before I could do anything about it, two small but precise streaks of fire flashed past me. Prinplup yelped as they struck his frozen wings with pinpoint accuracy and moments later he was hopping around a little at the heat. I glanced towards the origin of the "attack" and found Mew floating there, looking quite amused. At my pointed look, she feigned innocence. "What?"

I sighed. Sometimes I had to wonder if she was really taking anything serious. Oh, I knew it was a mask or perhaps a well-honed honest behavior pattern to deal with the burdens she was carrying, but the small Legendary could pull it off so naturally, one who had never heard her talk seriously would be completely fooled. I decided to play along. "Since you feel like participating, why not do it for real?"

Mew blinked, then cocked her head, thinking for a moment, before her face brightened. "Sure."

Now it was my turn again to be surprised. I hadn't actually expected her to agree! Of course, the more I started to think about it, the more I had to ask myself:

Why not? Since she was tagging along for now and we were supposed to be "partners" or something like that, we should start training together.

I didn't have time to really ponder this further since my attention was drawn to where Ash was doing his own training. Frankly his refusal for more than light spars in the last days had me worried. We never had had a problem going full contact in training. It was the only way our Pokémon and we as their Trainers could actually get a challenge out of it. Something was bothering him greatly and it wasn't just Mew's story and its implications. I had a good idea about the real reason, of course, but had so far been unable to find some good way to address it. Mostly because I really could understand why it was eating him up and didn't quite know what to say.

But that wasn't what drew my attention now. I had felt a moment of great surprise. Not in an alarmed manner but it was strong enough that I could even pick it up over our bond with my concentration completely on something different.

"What is it?" I asked as he came over. There was a mixture between excitement, apprehension and surprise I could pick up right away and it reflected clearly in his face.

"I just got a call from Koga... He's challenging me to a battle."

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Leaf)

Maybe someone is telling me something?

After my visit with Janine I had tried very hard not to think about what my friend had said. I knew it hadn't been fair to get this mad and that I should apologize but I feared that trying to do so right now would only make it worse. She'd understand. Janine wasn't the type to let a small temper outburst get to her.

So, instead of confronting her words and my feelings, I had thrown myself back into work. There had been one thing that had bothered me since the near fiasco at Cerulean Cave. From what Koga and Bruno reported, the attack on them was too well-coordinated, not to mention that apparently Team Rocket must have known that Lance was in Johto at the time. That mission though was top secret with only a select few knowing that he was even there.

Which meant there was the high possibility of a leak somewhere far up the command chain. My first investigation led me to Fuchsia City – which prompted my visit to my old friend in the first place – and I had kept following for some time now. Unfortunately it seemed the trail had run dry here. Yes, here of all places. Right in Cerulean City.

Yes, someone is definitely telling me something, I concluded sourly, staring ahead of me. Without even realizing it, my aimless wanderings while I had contemplated my next step had led me straight here. Just down the street would be the Cerulean City Gym and that should be the last place for me to be right now.

I had not wanted to think about this but now even Janine's last words came back unbidden after doing such a good job in suppressing these kinds of thoughts and the harsh truth in them. Yes, I probably was scared. Afraid for Misty mostly. I knew I couldn't really shield her from reality much longer at this point, probably not even for a short time anymore after all that happened. However, the other girl had become special to me. I had no problem admitting that to myself – if I did I might not have such a problem deluding myself into thinking this was anything less than... love.

A relationship now would not be healthy though. Not just because of the timing but also because of what was coming. Not only was the time too short to build something solid but because of that, I also feared that a relationship could get distracting in the middle of a tough decision. I held no illusion that the next months or even longer would be extremely trying for all of us. Emotional attachments, at least such that had no time to settle and firmly cement themselves, could lead to hastened and illogical actions when faced with a choice between the safety of the person you loved and the right thing to do for everyone else – which in the coming conflict might as well translate to the fate of the world itself.

This wasn't an easy burden to begin with. I was all for sharing the weight if no other way to prevent it was possible but there were limits to how far I wanted to allow this kind of sharing to go.

And yet, here I was, standing right in front of the place I had frequented fairly constantly over the last months, always drawn back. I should have kept this professional from the start, limited my visits to the bare minimum. However, the beautiful redhead I had met there had always drawn me back, enchanted me before I even realized it. For awhile I had been able to delude myself into thinking I could just keep it at a level of flirting... Love never was quite that simple.

With a start I realized I had my small pocket mirror out and was checking my appearance. With a small grimace and a long suffering sigh, I put the mirror away. "I guess there's no point. Might as well jump straight into the fire." I didn't want to. Logically I knew the outcome if I pushed forward now. Yet, this wasn't exactly the best state of things either. The longer I was dragging this along, the worse and the more distracting it would get.

You've never shied away from a confrontation anyway, I reasoned with myself, stepping forward and waiting for the doors of the Gym to slide open. *And if I am about to lose to my own heart, I might as well do it properly.*

The secretary briefly looked up from her place and upon seeing who it was, gave me a bright, knowing smile. "Misty's in the back," was all she said and I could have sworn she could see right through me. I had tried to look professional, really. I guess though that the young woman had not only become quite used to my visits but also suspected my true intentions by now.

Nodding to her, barely suppressing a wince at the fact that other people had already caught on so easily, I navigated through the hallways without thought. There didn't seem to be any challengers today. In fact, Janine had also said that there was a distinctive lull in Trainers coming to battle her lately. It was like everything and everyone was slowing down, holding their breath in expectation. And in most cases they didn't even know why...

I came to the pool area entirely too fast. Considering I had just acted without really thinking about it, I didn't really have a plan of how to proceed from here. Coherent thoughts were briefly driven from my mind at the sight presented to me anyway. Misty must have just finished a brief swim herself. Sitting at the edge of the pool in nothing but a swimsuit that had my mind briefly wander down an inappropriate path... And the water was still clinging to her body!

I allowed myself a brief moment of admiring the unexpected sight presented to me since she hadn't seen me coming while rubbing off her face and hair with a towel. When she was done and stretched, her long red hair falling down behind her, my smile deepened in affection and I didn't even really think about my hesitation anymore. "I've seen a nymph," I announced my presence loud enough to get her attention.

Misty's head snapped around in surprise, green eyes widening briefly. The blush was adorable but I felt elated seeing her fight off the urge to cover herself in embarrassment. I'd rather much enjoy the view a bit longer. "Leaf!" she exclaimed, a little off-balance but I could hear the profound happiness at seeing me. "Wh-What are you doing here?"

"Oh," I replied, finally moving out of the hallway, a little disappointed when Misty swung the towel around her shoulders, "just work. But since I didn't find what I wanted, I thought I'd pay a visit to my favorite... nymph." This time the blush was stronger and I grinned. Before today I might have been reluctant to come on this strong but now that I had already committed myself, I would at least sink properly. "You wouldn't happen to be free for some time? My treat."

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(Misty)

Delight. That would be the right word for what I felt at the unexpected turn of events today. There were a lot of unexpected events lately and almost all of them involved the other girl sitting across from me in the Ice Cream Parlor. This time was slightly different though.

Before then, despite her heavy flirting, it had all been lighthearted and innocent. None of these "outings" could have been labeled as a proper "date" and I didn't think of them that way. Today was different. Not just in the way she had asked rather directly but the whole atmosphere had shifted to something more... serious. Serious and meaningful. Which made me wonder what had brought about the change since Leaf seemed to have been content with keeping things they were, clearly reluctant to act further.

Not that I was rejecting this sudden change. I had long come to terms with the fact that it was more than strong attraction that I felt for Leaf. So far I had been alright with keeping the slow pace, yet I wouldn't reject the chance to move things further along. In fact, after the events in the cave, I had thought more and more about the other girl which had eventually led to working myself into a fit of lacking self-esteem.

The day so far had been nice. No, that would be disrespectful. It had been fantastic. I hadn't had a single day of real recuperation since the cave incident, bouncing back and forth between intense training and Gym Leader duty. The weather was perfect for an outing. We had spent the day doing some shopping – as it turned out we were both in serious need of some new clothes – and had walked along the small river up north that came flowing in from the sea. Conversation had been light and focused on rather trivial things. None of us had brought up the many heavy topics the last months had brought up.

But now, even if the setting was still rather informal, I felt that our date was entering an important phase. While for the most part Leaf had seemed relaxed and easygoing, there was a certain... edginess. Like part of her really wanted to be here but another part really didn't. She was masking it well and had I not spent more time with her lately, I might not have picked up on it.

The real giveaway was probably the location we were currently occupying. Considering her strong reaction and clear aversion of this place the first time we met, it had really surprised me when Leaf herself had suggested it. She hadn't commented why and I hadn't dared ask until now. Yet, the curiosity was hard to deny. I had a strong feeling that I needed to know the reason if I wanted to have a real chance at elevating the status quo of our "relationship".

So, taking all my courage, I chose to be as direct as Leaf seemed to be about many things today, fully aware that the question could potentially backfire. However, it had been her asking me out and this felt like the best time to get to know this charming girl who had wormed herself into my heart a little better. "So, why did you

decide to come here today?" I gestured at the parlor in a broad gesture to make it clear what I meant.

There was a moment of hesitation and surely an impulse to avoid the topic. I would have understood and probably not pressed. However, Leaf seemed to have come to terms with explaining herself. "I guess I should have expected that... Alright then. I won't bother you with all the details right now, so this is a very condensed version." I leaned forward slightly, attentive and even more curious. I had really wondered what kind of relationship troubles the other girl could have ever had to make her avoiding the topic so much. Leaf was the kind of girl that I had a hard time imagining not being able to bounce back from a roadblock soon.

"Shortly after I first set out on my journey, I met another girl. Her name was Rebecca. Rebecca Meyers and she was the daughter of the president of GigaLore." My eyes widened slightly. GigaLore was the leading company in computer technology and as such, along with Sylph & Co. had a huge impact on any Pokémon-related technology as well. "We hit it off immediately. She was travelling around in order to see more of the world and get away from being pampered by her father all the time and quickly agreed to tag along on my journey." Leaf paused for a moment and I could see the faraway look in her eyes. "We were still kids back then, of course. But at the same time, we were both fairly mature for our age. Perhaps it was a little too early to entertain thoughts about relationship though."

"What happened?" I asked sympathetically, sensing the other girl's swell of emotion.

"Well, we didn't really start dating official until shortly before my second League Championship attempt. I had fallen hard though. But... then came my victory and what should have been a time of celebration, soon after turned into a fiasco." Again she paused, clearly in need to collect herself. I surprised myself with the bold action of reaching out and squeezing her trembling hand. It did seem to calm her down. With a deep sigh she continued. "Rebecca didn't agree with my decision to decline the Master status. I tried to explain my reasoning to her but she wouldn't let up, wouldn't understand why I didn't feel ready for the position yet. Eventually she told me that either I should accept or she would be out of my life."

I winced. A surge of anger at this Rebecca girl welled up inside of me and I was a little shocked at the intensity of my feelings on the matter. Leaf didn't deserve this kind of treatment. Especially not from a spoiled, rich girl! Clamping down on my anger and feeling somewhat sheepish for it, I gave her hand another tight squeeze. "That's terrible. It must have been tough on you. Did it ever make you think about your choice afterwards?"

Leaf smiled humorlessly. "It wasn't easy. But, no, I wouldn't be able to look into the mirror if I doubted my own decisions. At the time I did the right thing. I just didn't

expect the consequences and perhaps the one thing I could have done better was to discuss it with her before announcing it. I think I didn't properly realize what kind of effect my decision would have on her. Yet, when you are in a relationship, every decision somehow affects the partner. That was a painful lesson to learn."

Yes, this had been necessary. Knowing about this part of her past had made me understand something significant. So far I had believed her reluctance to go beyond flirting and showing light interest was because of the crisis we were soon to face. I could understand that and would have found it logically. However, that was only part of it and the real reason seemed to lie within her past experience. She was afraid of making a mistake again, like with Rebecca. Or at least what she perceived as a mistake on her part.

That realization came with another. The realization that I had to do something about this myself. A step I might have otherwise been too hesitant to take, especially at this point already. Gathering my courage, I acted before I could doubt myself.

At the end I wasn't sure who was more surprised by the kiss. Me or her. I doubted it really mattered and I didn't regret it one bit. Any doubt where might have still been left about the direction of my feelings disappeared in that moment and, however brief the moment was, it felt just... right.

When I finally pulled away, heart beating faster than during the most intense battle I had yet fought, I couldn't help but grin at the stupefied look on her face or the way she traced her lips with one finger in wonder. "I don't think you made a mistake. And even if, you don't have to worry about that with me. I'm not the type to question someone's independent decisions."

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Heal Bell Academy, Johto (Brock)

It should mean a little more than it actually does, I thought while looking around at the auditorium. The announcement had been rather sudden, yet that was to be expected with everything that happened starting with the attack. I really should feel a little more solemn and... proud I guess. After all many of those gathered... no, make that almost all of those gathered here had been longer at Heal Bell than I have been. And despite that it was me already getting handed my certificate as a Field Medic.

I definitely do feel somewhat undeserving, regardless of what everyone else says. There hadn't been anyone voicing their disagreement and somehow I didn't think that was because they all were aware that the selection process was not based on how long you had studied. Knowing was one thing, I'm sure it didn't stop the occasional feelings of jealousy or at least envy though.

When I had mentioned that to Ako, she had just smiled and said that everyone regarded me as the savior of Heal Bell Academy for what I had done during Team Rocket's attack. I wanted to refute that but logically knew that my actions really might have been the crucial ones to turn the tide and allow reinforcements to salvage more than just smoking ruins and corpses. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't deny that.

Being regarded as some kind of hero though... It was a rather new experience but even more so a humbling one. This was usually Ash's part and even his action rarely were recognized by a larger number of people in the past, only small groups, an individual person or no one at all would even realize if he did something crazy that potentially had saved them all. I had a much better understanding of what that felt like right now.

The dean was wrapping up his speech as it seemed. "In recognition of your achievements, both in study as well as application, you have been chosen among many to perform the duties we are all training to do one day. Brock Stone, Ako Karada, from this day forward you may call yourself proudly Field Medic. Always remember what we strive for. To preserve life and help those in need with the skills you have acquired."

Reverently I accepted the certificate, along with the badge that would identify our role and rank as Field Medic. It was a simple enough design based on the outlines of a Cherim, colored in red and white with the symbol of the Pokémon League engraved in the center. Holding both things that proved my success at this place in hands, I felt even more... out of touch. I hadn't expected it to end so fast, even if Ako had verified from the very beginning that I already had enough practical skill to be among the top of the senior students. This had seemed like the kind of place that I wanted to spend more time at. It was what I had always been looking for. I hadn't thought it would already be over after roughly a year.

Following the dean to the edge of the stage, I did feel rather proud though at my partner, fellow graduate and most importantly the woman I had fallen in love with so easily it still seemed like a dream, something that had been there forever but wasn't quite tangible. Ako deserved this. Had long deserved this. And I was proud of having been able to contribute something so that she could achieve her own dream.

"It feels like I've been here for ages," Ako began after taking the dean's place at the podium. Everyone had agreed that she should give a short speech after her long stay here. Myself included. I really wouldn't have known what to say. The time was too short for me to really bond with everyone here. This was Ako's honor. "Heal Bell has become like a home for me and I'm sure where are many amongst us who feel the same. However... There is a time when we have to leave home. A time when we have to leave the safe haven we have all come to love and cherish. Otherwise, everything we do here is... meaningless."

There was a low murmur in the crowd and I smiled slightly. There was no hesitation anymore inside her. I could tell. At least she wouldn't allow feelings of unease or uncertainty hinder her in what must be done any longer. The last days of training had seen to that. This Ako was still the gentle, peaceful woman I loved but she had found her resolve.

"Thanks to one special person, I have realized this." She glanced over to me and I suppressed the urge to blush. Wouldn't do to look too emotional right now. Instead I favored her with a polite nod and the hint of a smile. "Our profession isn't an easy one. In fact it will almost always force us to see the worst the world has to offer. Meaningless battle, bloodshed, death... But we must remember. This is the duty we have chosen, this is the goal we all share. To be there for those that need our healing touch, to mend what has been broken. To bring hope where despair reigns. That is why I can leave here with a clear heart, unburdened by sadness or regret. Because I knew we all share the same dream and that means we will all see each other again someday."

Stepping back, Ako bowed as the student body and teaching staff erupted into applause at the passionate speech. I could tell they had all been stunned by such an expressive speech from Ako of all people. I wasn't. I always knew she had it in her and right now I was even more proud to have met her.

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(Ako)

"You got everything?"

I nodded distracted at Brock. The impressions of the "Graduation Ceremony" – if you could call it that in such an unusual, open academic setting – were still fresh on my mind. And now, as we were ready to board the helicopter, my gaze swept back over the place that I had called home for so many years. I had left my home village at twelve. That had been about seven years ago by now. A good third of my life and probably about half of what I actually remembered. Heal Bell had truly been a home to me. Perhaps even more a home than my home village had ever been.

Not that I had forgotten where I came from. Of course Aprico Village had been the driving force behind my stay here. Poor and always ill-favored, whether it be by weather, illness, catastrophes... we had not led an easy life. So when I had received this chance, I had thought that I could perhaps make a difference. Not only to learn to help others with my ability but also to perhaps earn money for the village in the long run, so that everyone else could also lead a more decent life.

When I had come here though, it had been like stepping into a whole new world.

Flashback

So big. It was all so... big.

I gripped the hand of the nice man that had brought me here tighter. This place was overwhelming. And this was supposed to be a school? Already from up in the air – a frightening and thrilling new experience as well – I had seen the whole expanse of this place. The entire area was probably bigger than Aprico Village. Why was it that other people could built huge places like this when we could barely get by?

I guess it was unfair to think like that. After all this place was to help Pokémon, right? And I would never have been able to leave home if this didn't exist.

I wasn't so sure right now if I wanted to be here after all. Back home I had barely ever left the village and if I did, it had only been to go into the surrounding forest to collect what little we knew about herbs or to find what little food could be obtained. Much like the rest of the land, the "forest" wasn't very healthy. There was hardly much food offered by plants and trees and what little was there usually would be of at best mediocre, yet more often rather poor quality.

Here, here everything was rich and green and I bet it was full of all aspects of nature. That was actually cool. I always liked to be outside. Nature had something calming and I enjoyed what little I could find at home. What frightened me more were the many people I could already see milling around. To me they all seemed so... pure. All manner of clothes but all of them clearly in much finer condition than we could have ever obtained. They all looked so lively, too. Not expressions on the verge of resignation or already far beyond. This place was buzzing with energy.

How could someone like me ever fit in here? I barely knew anything about the world outside of my small village.

"We are just beginning here," Lance said with a kind smile. "There aren't so many people here yet. I'm sure you'll fit in quickly."

Shocked I stared at the young man. Not so many? How could this possibly not be many? I was sure I wasn't seeing everyone here. But what I saw was easily half if not more than the entire population of our village. And all these for one school!

I was sure Lance meant to be supportive and encouraging but right now I felt even more scared and out of place.

End Flashback

In the end I had been able to fit in. Everyone here had been nice and welcoming. Perhaps because most of us here had seen others or even experienced being the ones in need themselves. And we all shared our love for Pokémon and the wish to preserve every single life as much as possible. The League had put a lot of effort into the selection as it seemed. All the students of Heal Bell were unified by the same goal, the same dream. The individual shades of ambition might be different but we all shared the same feelings.

I had to smile slightly at the memory that had begun to rise from all these years ago. I had been a small, innocent girl from a backwater village far away from everything and everyone, ignorant to the world. For the me from back then Heal Bell had seemed like a grand palace and I couldn't have even begun to grasp how big the world itself truly was.

Taking one last look, I climbed after Brock into the helicopter that would fly us straight to our new assignment. Brock looked at me a little worried and reached out to squeeze my hand as I sat down. "Don't worry. You are going to be fine." It was sweet of him. But it wasn't necessary anymore. He had already greatly and decisively contributed to my acceptance of that new chapter of my life that was starting right now.

I had come from the small, isolated middle of nowhere to experience something greater than I had known. I believe it was a necessary step, one that had allowed me to grow, to accept that there was more out there, far more than anyone could possibly ever experience in a single lifetime. And through Brock I had fully learned and accepted that it wasn't something to be scared off.

Unlike when I had first come to Heal Bell, unlike before I had met Brock, I felt no trepidation or unease anymore about leaving this place. Sadness, wistfulness, yes. However, it was time now. Time to take that next big step. Out into the world, out into the unknown. That unknown that held many dangers, uncertainties but also new wonders and possibilities.

"Yes, I will be," I said simply in reply, my eyes never leaving the sight of Heal Bell as the helicopter began to rise above it.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

Returning home, I had been in such a happy mood I almost totally forgot that my sisters were still home and I had left them in charge for the day. I suspected some

annoyance for that, of course, but I wasn't quite prepared for just what was waiting for me when Leaf and I got back home.

The rest of the date had gone nicely. With the ice broken – so to say –, Leaf wasn't very shy to show her affections. Not that anything further happened, it actually stayed with that one kiss. But there had been no hesitation at holding hands on our walk back along the river. Or while taking a small rest on a bench, she had put her head on my shoulder without concern for any passer-bys. I decided I rather liked that new development. It gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling, a sense of being appreciated and needed. Something I didn't exactly have too much of in my life.

I had not wanted the day to end. However, I had also not expected it to end like this. "Just what do you mean it wouldn't be a good idea for Leaf to stay the night? And just why exactly should I care what you think?" I asked evenly, but with a hint of suspicion and rising annoyance in my voice.

"Well..." Violet paused and glanced at Leaf who was starting to look a little uncomfortable at the situation and that was the last thing I wanted right now. "Maybe we should, like, talk about this in private?"

The suspicion became more solid and I narrowed my eyes. "I think if you have to say something, you can do it here. Obviously there is a problem here and it concerns my friend, so why don't you just say it?" I was a little surprised that I wasn't more angry. The direction this conversation was heading, I knew I usually would have quickly given in to my temper. The other girl definitely had an effect on me in that regard as well. I definitely didn't want to make her feel even more uncomfortable and giving in to my temper would probably just play into whatever argument my sisters would bring up.

They started to skirt around the subject some more but when I began to impatiently tap my foot, they obviously got the message that I wasn't too generous with patience right now. "Fine," Lily said and this time I could hear the disapproval in her voice quite clearly. "We've just been talking. And it is obvious that girl is distracting you from your duty."

It wasn't exactly direct but it was quite enough to confirm my suspicion. What really got me worked up was that she had to bring up the one thing that they had no right to talk about in such a hypocritical way. Out of all the possibilities this one threatened to end one of my most relaxing and definitely happiest days in the last months – yes, perhaps years – on an extremely sour note. And I would be damned if I let this happen. I wasn't the little runt of the family anymore and it was time my sisters understood that!

"So," I said slowly, clamping down on my anger. I had to stay calm. Throwing a fit would just prove them right. "Let's be frank. You don't like me going out with

another girl." I wasn't surprised they figured out about my feelings for Leaf. They had barely been here, only returning for a short break a little after the cave incident, but I suppose I wasn't very much concerned about hiding my emotional state either. A lot of people in the city had seen us together as well and my secretary might have let something slip. Besides, Leaf had been rather frank this morning when asking me out and even for my sometimes airheaded sisters, the message was quite clear... as much as my quick and enthusiastic acceptance must have been.

"So you admit...!" Violet started, face reddening and glaring towards Leaf.

I cut in quick and sharply. "Yes, I do. What is your point?" I held her gaze, daring a reply. This was quickly getting out of hand and I could tell it was affecting Leaf. Even if I had tried my best to reassure her, the unnecessary but understandable fear of screwing up another relationship wouldn't just go away from one moment to the next. Seeing me arguing with my sisters over her would cut right into that wound.

"But Misty, dear. Don't you think it would be better to find yourself a nice, handsome boy," Lily said and the way she was making it sound so... patronizing, as if she just knew better, threatened the control of my emotions. The clincher though only came a moment later.

"We just want what is best for you, dear. You are still young and I don't think you quite realize all the problems that come with a choice like this." I knew Daisy had wanted to play the calming influence right now but it was having the opposite effect on her. Out of all three of them, I had always thought she understood me best. But right now the kind of motherly attitude, as if I was still a child that needed and could be told what to do, was the last thing I wanted to hear.

Before I could form a reply though, Leaf spoke up, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. "Maybe I should go after all. I have a lot of work to do still and..."

"Yes, go. Someone of your stature should really be more mindful of her responsibilities," Violet cut in sharply which prompted Leaf to jerk back a little guilty. That had cut a little too close to home and I wouldn't stand for it any longer.

"No," I said firmly, surprising her, my sisters and perhaps even myself. "I think... if anyone should leave, it should be my sisters." That got a reaction alright and I was quick to cut into the outrage and protests. "Or did you forget? Since you didn't want to be bothered with the Gym Leader duties anymore and carelessly shoved them onto me, you agreed to cede the Gym and all property rights to me. An agreement that became fully legal on my eighteenth birthday. A birthday you were too busy to come home to, if I recall correctly."

At least they had the good grace to wince and shuffle their feet at that. To be fair we all had been very busy when my birthday came around. My sisters had an important show and I had been swamped in challenges. That didn't mean I wasn't ready to make concessions. Apparently they couldn't. I had shrugged it off as normal but was still rather miffed. It had been my eighteenth birthday after all!

"So if I say she stays, she stays and there isn't a thing you can do about it. If you can't accept that, then I really have to ask You to leave. After all, it's not like you ever spend much time at home anymore."

"That's insane! You can't throw us out!" Violet yelled angrily. I glanced back at Leaf and frowned deeply. It definitely was affecting her. I had not wanted this to deteriorate this much but despite her good intention of trying to diffuse the situation, it had only made it worse. The situation was spinning more and more out of control. Unfortunately, if I made a step back now, nothing would ever change.

"I can. Don't think I want to, however, I won't stand here and have you accusing my girlfriend," both my sisters and Leaf gasped at this bold statement, "of irresponsibility. I am not a kid anymore that you can push around and frankly I have done more for this Gym in these last years than you have ever bothered with in all the time before that. So don't talk to either of us about duty, it makes you sound silly."

No, this really wasn't the kind of end I had imagined for this day. Despite everything I loved my sisters, regardless of how much they could get on my nerves. And I had never expected them to react so strongly. I wouldn't give in though. I couldn't. If I did now, I would never be able to finally assert my independence and place in the family. And I wouldn't be able to face my own heart, if I lost Leaf over this.

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(Leaf)

I bit my lip in concern. This wasn't right. It shouldn't happen like this. Why did every relationship turn out in such a way? Relationship. Yes, I guess there was no denying it anymore and neither was Misty's seriousness about going through with it... all of it. That kiss had been a shock. A pleasant, wonderful shock but nonetheless a shock. I had gone into this with a kind of a desperate intensity, unable to fight my feelings any longer and as such this twist at the end had caught me completely off guard.

Logically I had known, of course, that Misty wasn't like Rebecca. Through her life she knew what it was like, having to work for your respect, that you had to be patient sometimes and that the easy road wasn't always or more like never really the best. Logic and one's heart had little to do with each other, however. Especially when

it came to love. The fear of screwing up another relationship, especially with someone I was getting more and more attached to, was something I didn't want to risk. Janine had been right after all. I was running away.

However, Misty had caught me, caught me thoroughly. And I was glad about that.

"You shouldn't do this." I wouldn't be able to stop her. I wouldn't because she knew exactly what she wanted and that this was about a lot more than us. It was also about her own dreams, her own growth and the respect as a Gym Leader she needed to maintain... no, for once fully earn from her only family. That didn't stop me from feeling guilty, immensely so. This was the wrong setting. She shouldn't put her dream on the line for me.

Misty smiled. It was a small one but full of confidence and resolve. Part of me felt pride and warmth because there wasn't any anger or temperament in it, just purpose. "It's okay. I won't lose." Of course, I knew that. There was never a question about that. It was the mere principle. And that wasn't just a platitude. What was to stop her from doing the same thing against someone that could prove too much of a challenge?

"And this isn't your fault. This was a long time coming." And I realized with a feeling of resignation that nothing I said would make a difference. That was just part of her character that I had fallen in love with. I could worry all I wanted but it wouldn't change anything. Misty was standing up for her ideals, for her independence, for the respect she deserved. The only thing I could do now was support her.

Slowly I smiled back. "Then show them. Show them what you learned. But promise it won't be for me alone." That was my greatest worry when the argument had deteriorated into how it usually would in our profession when we needed a way to settle things. A Pokémon match.

And that was the one thing I hated the most. Pokémon battles should never happen to settle personal matters. It was petty and demeaning of the bonds we had with our Pokémon. And Misty HAD made it unmistakably clear in her answer that she wouldn't fight for the right of whom she could date or not, or to settle the difference between the sisters in general. She would only accept the challenge for the rights to the Gym.

Of course, you could never quite put the personal matters out of such a match, not with emotions as charged up as they were. I could tell though as Misty squared off with her sisters in a 3-1, that all her Pokémon were fully concentrated and committed. They knew what this was about, both officially and on a more personal level. There wasn't any hesitation in them.

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Blackthorn City, the next day, Johto (Ash)

The small stadium was somewhat out of the way. It was mostly empty other than for me, Koga, Dawn and a few League officials, stadium staff and a handful of people that happened to get wind of the match. Since this was such a short notice and Koga understood our need to keep out of the spotlight right now, this was mostly a dark match. Meaning there was not much of an audience and it wouldn't be broadcasted on TV. The arena belonged to Claire as an expansion and recent addition to her Gym, supposed to give her and her challengers more freedom in aerial battles. It also served as a Master League Arena though.

I had to admit the challenge came as a big surprise. Of course, I had played with the idea of doing at least one match in the Master League before the qualification round for the Harmony Cup. It would be good practice at the very least before the shit hit the fan. Right now I wasn't even quite as interested in it just for the challenge. What I told Dawn when we were camping at Cherrygrove City was true. Even more so now after hearing Mew's story. There wasn't really any time to think about such things as normal battles, Championships and ordinary challenges with something so serious looming up ahead.

I was surprised how well Dawn after her initial reaction was dealing with all of this. Especially since I felt quite a bit of unease about the sheer scope of what was expected of us. In that regard I could fully sympathize with my girlfriend's outburst after Mew had told us her story. The encounter back at Seafoam Islands had given me a first glimpse of what to expect and I couldn't say I liked it. This would be completely different from our everyday adventures and I wondered if Dawn could hold up. And even more so if I would be able to protect her.

"This is a challenge from Elite Four Member Koga! Both combatants have agreed on a 3 VS 3 battle, free changing during the match allowed, no time limit! Trainers, are you ready?" I nodded at the referee and shifted my concentration fully on the battle. I might not feel terribly inclined for competition but this would be good training. It had been a long time since I fought Koga and now he had made Elite status. Seeing how I measured up against one would hopefully show me where I still needed to get better.

"Ash Ketchum VS Elite Four Member Koga, begin!"

As challenger Koga sent out his first Pokémon which happened to be a Crobat. Pikachu would have been ideal but I wanted to keep him out of this... for now. Instead I sent out Infernape. I knew I needed to get a good start and as such had only selected my best ones for this match. This was no time and place to experiment.

Infernape really didn't have any troubles fighting Flying-type enemies anyway and my other choice would have his advantage severely limited because of that type. "Mach Punch!" Infernape rushed in quickly, trying to catch his opponent off-guard. It would be best to bring this to an end fast.

Unfortunately the moment that Infernape struck, Crobat's image became hazy and vanished. Surprised Infernape overextended and stumbled a step, which really didn't happen often. I, too, was surprised by what happened. Considering that I caught sight of Crobat several meters up in the air and away from its prior location, it became obvious that the Bat Pokémon had moved so fast that it had left an afterimage... and I hadn't even seen it.

"Crobat, Mean Look." I grimaced, feeling instantly reminded of my match with Leaf. Koga was a Poison Master, so of course I knew what to expect. In fact with Leaf it was just her Umbreon's Toxic to watch out for. Here I would have to deal with the danger of poisoning constantly and Mean Look was an efficient tactic to maximize the peril for an opponent.

Several more attempts for direct attacks made it painfully clear that I wouldn't get very far with this. Crobat's speed was incredible, even for Limit Break standards. Pikachu could have kept up but just barely. And while Infernape was certainly fast, it fell just a little short. And "a little" could make a big difference on this level, especially if the affected aspect was one of the Pokémon's strongest suits.

Crobat in turn seemed to be content with counterattacking. Of course, since with almost every attack there was the danger of poisoning, I couldn't afford to take hits and as such most of the time had to stop pressing an attack meant to try and corner the opponent into a position where it couldn't get away.

What also puzzled me was that there had been at least two opportunities in the next five minutes where a direct hit could have been possible but Infernape had hesitated just that tiny bit long enough for Crobat to get away again. This wasn't like him at all and it didn't take me long to realize that it had been my own hesitation flowing over our bond. Infernape and I were almost as synchronized as I was with Pikachu by now. Most of the time we really didn't need a verbal communication anymore. That also worked against me in these instances since Infernape must have sensed my reluctance to attack.

Why had I hesitated anyway? It must have been because I was worried that I knew a direct hit would have to count. Meaning Infernape would have to be fully committed with enough power behind the strike to either take Crobat clean out or at least hamper it enough to significantly drop its mobility. If the attack had failed for some reason, that would have left Infernape wide open.

However, I wasn't getting anywhere with this cat and mouse game. Ironically enough neither Pokémon had scored a single clear hit yet – not counting the successful Mean Look – and while I had no fear for Infernape's stamina, I wasn't sure how far Crobat could match it and dragging out the match would only up the chances for a successful poisoning.

Changing tactics, I had Infernape Dig underground. He had gotten quite fast at that and knew what I wanted. As expected Koga and Crobat immediately focused on the spot where the ground burst open, spitting a stream of Toxic at it. But Infernape wasn't there, instead bursting out of the ground a fair distance away, right behind Crobat, spinning in a ferocious Flame Wheel at his opponent. Crobat wasn't fast enough to react this time and the Flame Wheel struck directly...

Then Crobat puffed into smoke. "What?!" I jumped forward, gripping the edge of the platform. Substitute? But when? I didn't see it being set up. My mind whirled and it took me a moment to realize the danger Infernape was in. "Watch..."

"Cross Poison!"

Too late. Gritting my teeth I watched Infernape getting slammed into the back by the attack with more force than I had thought Crobat capable of. In fact the hit was so strong that Infernape cried out in pain – and it took a lot for that these days –, crashing into the far wall of the arena as if he was an arrow fired by a crossbow. But Crobat wasn't done. "Venoshock!" Still in mid-motion Crobat used the momentum to fire off the next attack, hammering against my battered Pokémon, pinning it to the wall momentarily. I could clearly feel the pain through the bond and it was becoming distracting.

"Is that all you can do? I expected more from the Sinnoh League Champion," Koga addressed me directly for the first time during the match and I glared angrily at him. Crobat wasn't letting up on the attacks, firing a whole barrage of Venoshocks at Infernape. And I was quite certain by now the Cross Poison had done its job and got Infernape poisoned. "If you want to fight like this against Team Rocket... then you should better stay out of it completely. You lack the will to do what is necessary."

How dare he...!

The anger drained away as realization began to set in. I could feel Dawn's concern but also her understanding and compassion. Compassion for my feelings about... Yes, that had been it. I hadn't hesitated to have Infernape strike before because I feared overextending an attack and I had not refrained from starting with Pikachu out of tactical reason. Koga's straight reprimand left no doubt or room to shun the truth.

The battle to save Mew and what I had to do, what I had Pikachu do, that was what was hindering me today. I was afraid of my actions, afraid of utilizing the full power at my Pokémon's disposal. And I couldn't do anything about it. Every time I knew performing an attack could have lethal or at least seriously damaging consequence, I felt myself hesitating. Every time I would have that image in my mind about Pikachu's Thor's Hammer literally obliterating his opponent. And opponent that looked just like a Rhyperior, regardless of whether or not I knew what it really had been.

"It won't be a game, kid. It's going to be war and an opponent won't give you time to sort out your feelings. Crobat, Air Slash!"

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Cerulean City, Kanto, the next morning (Leaf)

In the end it wasn't really a battle. It was a decimation. The older women were hardly Gym Leader material to begin with – or any kind of serious Trainer material. I believe they had to know that, too, even if their self-image wouldn't allow them to admit to such shortcomings... Self-image.

That might have been the pivotal point of the battle. Misty had begun in a way that suggested she wanted to end this quick and simple. But then Violet had to suggest that they would have to win this battle to "save the image of the Gym". What exactly that meant was quite obvious. It meant this entire situation and their younger sister having a relationship with another girl wouldn't be good on THEIR own image. Even the other two had winced at that comment. Misty hadn't shown an outright reaction but from that point on her team consisting of Starmie, Vaporeon and Corsola shifted tactics.

It was an impressive display of superiority and, while pretty much unchallenged, a great display of teamwork. They had definitely worked hard on that aspect. That much I could say with no small amount of pride, even if I still felt rather bad about the match and the way it had come to be in general.

"You are worth it." I was brought out of my thoughts and turned away from the entrance where I had watched the other three sisters disappear. Misty had reaffirmed her "suggestion" after the match that it would be for the best if they left for now. However, she had also made it quite clear that once they could accept that she had grown up and was making her own decisions, they were always welcome to come back. In fact, I couldn't really detect any bad blood from Misty's direction. There was actually more sadness and disappointment. But perhaps it really was exactly as she said and this had been a long time coming. It had merely needed a trigger, a trigger that had unfortunately been found today, regardless how much I resented it.

"Today was wonderful. All this time we spent together was. I never planned on this but I'm glad that it happened." Misty continued and I felt my own tension and guilt drain away at her heartfelt and honest words. "This is something I never really experienced before and I refuse to let it end before it has even begun."

And neither would I. Looking into her determined green eyes, I felt like I could lose myself in them. It was a wonderful feeling and one I didn't want to miss now that I had experienced it again. No, Misty really wasn't like Rebecca and I shouldn't judge us on the basis of another relationship. I think my heart had come to accept that as well. And with that acceptance an inner peace had come over me. Along with which came a renewed determination to do everything in my power to see that our future would be a bright one. Perhaps I really couldn't prevent the coming conflict, but I could do all in my power to raise our chances of victory.

Finally allowing my own heart to do as demanded, I reached out and this time it was me capturing the other girl's lips in a kiss, basking in the warm feeling of love. Pulling her close, I allowed the intensity of the kiss to become a lot stronger, knowing it might be the last time in quite awhile until I could do this again and needing the reassurance that this was real and... right.

Unfortunately air at some point became an issue and I had to pull away. Yet I held onto the other girl and rested my head on her shoulder, burning this moment in my mind. It would be the fuel to push me forward in the next days and weeks.

"You are going again, right?" Misty asked... or more like stated. There was sadness and longing in her voice but also understanding.

I waited a bit longer before finally pulling free of the embrace. "I have to. Now more so than ever before. I have someone very precious to protect and I'll do whatever it takes for that." Misty's beaming smile made my own heart flutter and returned it with one of my own. I would be leaving, yes. But I would do so with a much lighter heart, regardless of what had transpired last night. And I would depart with the knowledge that I had been wrong. Admitting to my feelings wasn't a bad thing. It had only made me more determined and more focused to succeed.

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Location Unknown, Team Rocket Headquarters (Giovanni)

"You understand, don't you? I will not tolerate any further failure. If you cannot eliminate them before the qualification round of the Harmony Cup takes place, I will have to take different steps. And that will mean you are out. Your usefulness is at an end. Show me that you are true members of Team Rocket or I will have to deal with YOU as well."

I glowered at the monitor and the visages of those pathetic excuses for field agents. Honestly, they had seemed so promising at first and they had been rather successful... until they ran into the Ketchum kid and got obsessed with him. It broke them somehow... although I suppose I could see how getting beaten again and again by a ten year old would have that effect.

Still it was no excuse. Had they acted professional, they would have ignored the kid and got back to regular assignments, preferable far away from such an unpredictable deterrent. Instead they did the exact opposite and after awhile it had turned into an unhealthy obsession and an embarrassing string of one messed up operation after another. I should have gotten rid of them far sooner. All they had been good for recently was tailing the kid. And even that could have easily been done by someone else.

"Sir, we assure you, we already have everything planned..."

"I do not care about your assurances," I cut off Jessie harshly and she shrunk back. Good, at least they still had enough respect to properly fear me, as they should. I would give them that last chance, even if my hopes were so slim a success wasn't even in my plans. Especially not if Mew was really with those children. "Bring me results. You know what's on the line. Next time we talk, it better be to report your success." Without another word I cut off the connection.

Worthless idiots, really. I had had much more hopes for them. Especially Jessie. Her mother had been so promising at one point. Oh well, it wasn't like I really needed them. No, I had everything important already at hand. The Mew capture attempt had ultimately caused a minor setback but honestly not enough that I needed to adjust my plans. The agents that had been given Rage Pokémon and went after Mew had brought them back at full force. There were some casualties from the initial attack and Mewtwo's stand, as well as the platoon that Domino had stationed at Seafoam. But production was running high and the next batch was almost ready, even better than the last.

Being informed of the locations and status of the eites and especially the temporary absence of Lance from Kanto had been the decisive factor. I should really thank my source. I chuckled darkly as I did just that.

A moment later, the line was established and showed a beautiful girl around eighteen with long blonde hair and green eyes hidden behind a set of thin glasses. She looked up startled at the sudden call. "Ah, Sir..."

"Do not let me disturb you from your work. I merely wished to express my gratitude. Your information really came through the other day. I am impressed by your hacking skills. Hopefully you will provide us with more useful information soon." She would better. If she knew what was good for her.

My smirk widened, seeing her squirm uncomfortably. I knew, of course, what she was thinking about. "It seems it was your Ex that attempted to stop us. Too bad she survived, hmm?" A barely visible wince but then again, I knew what I was looking for. And there was nothing she could do about it. "Keep up your good work."

I waited long enough to hear her say a quick "Yes, sir" before cutting the line and leaning back in my chair. Yes, the time, money and effort invested into getting a firm hold inside GigaLore had been paying off. That girl was not only fabulously skilled but she would also provide a nice emotional distraction for at least one of my enemies should it ever come that far.

After all I would have to wonder how Melanie Greenday, commonly known as young Master Leaf, would react if she found out that the "leak" she was looking for was none other than Rebecca Meyers. Her one-time girlfriend.

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Maia's Prophecy

Maia: I see, I see...

MysticMew: I wonder what it will be this time.

Maia: What do you mean? You should already know!

MysticMew: Nope. We've got two more possibilities at this point, I wonder what we'll do first?

Maia: That should be your job! Why do I have to decide that?

MysticMew: You are the muse, I am just writing. *grins* And you are the one who proclaims she can see into the future.

Maia: *grumbles* Fine then! Watch my awesome powers! I see, I see, I see in the future... I see, a detour on the way. I see, *gasp* a kidnapping. I see, Ash learning a lesson...

MysticMew: *nods* Aha, that one. Good, then we'll do the other one first.

Maia: *stares eyes wide open* Yo-You...! You did that on purpose!

MysticMew: Who me? Don't go accuse people of things. Who was it that harped on the "awful fillers" and now look. You were running quite wild on this episode.

Maia: That's because I AM the Muse. It's my job. You wouldn't even get anything done without me. After all you had hardly half an idea about most of the scenes before you started to type. The way I see it, I did most of the work. So I'll get to decide what's next. End of discussion. Next time on TFSTTM Reloaded: Path to the Harmony Cup! Brock, Ako and May's Exciting Detours. Be there. Read. Enjoy! And...

MysticMew: ... see what Ash, Dawn and Pikachu are up to.

Maia: No, no, stop saying things that don't make sense. You agreed earlier that we should do it this way!

MysticMew: Did I?

Maia: Argh!

...

Narrator: Um... where are my lines?

Maia: Shut up! *hurles Fireball at Narrator since MysticMew has already disappeared wisely*

The Narrator is rendered incapable of doing his job and since his scenes haven't been done at this point, they are cancelled for this episode... and maybe even the next.

Narrator: *groans* So cruel...

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Author's Notes

Wai. Done. After Prologue 2 I had been determined but also quite worried if I could do this one better. I personally believe I managed to get Misty and Leaf's interaction far better than before and I am actually quite satisfied. The rest went better than expected as well. A lot of scenes pretty much just popped into my head and developed while I was writing them and often enough those tend to be my best. Often I ended up writing more about one thing than I had planned but it was all necessary. So, in short. I'm quite satisfied with this episode which doesn't happen too often, hard on myself as I usually am.

Now then, there were a lot of interesting developments in this in-between episode – that's why I used the term "filler" rather loosely. Frankly I didn't plan for half of them, probably not even a fourth but they all fitted in well right here. Let's see...

I hope the explanations about the greater plot as given by Mew again weren't too confusing. I'm trying to ease both the characters and the readers into the greater whole instead of just dumping everything on them.

Yes, Ash is going to have a real battle again for the first time in a long while. Before you get excited, don't expect an Arc 1 final-esque experience. This one is really more for Ash to work through his problems. It'll be continued in the next episode and depending how long it gets perhaps towards the beginning of the following... But that will be Ash's party again and I already have a few others things planned for it, so the Ash VS Koga battle will most likely be completed next episode.

As for the main focus of this episode. I already stated that I was far more satisfied with the Leaf/Misty interaction. I hope you enjoyed it as well. As for the fallout between Misty and her sisters... I know it is kind of cliché and you know I usually don't do that. Unfortunately I needed a tension factor at the end and this was the best solution right now.

I have no intention of making this some big family affair, so there'll probably be mending already rather soon. I just couldn't help it. Misty's sisters make such easy targets for this role and I think they had it coming for just pushing Gym duties on her at the end of the Johto arc even though all they ever did was belittle her before that. I think their reaction is rather in tune with what little we see in the Anime of them.

As always, leave your feedback please. Reviews have now been made easier – relatively spoken – by ff . net. Well, I suppose it's debatable if it's easier as far as signed reviews are concerned. If you are still logged in, then it's really a couple of extra clicks less, if you are not, you probably need even longer to log in, then go back to the story chapter... (and really the 7 days log-in is not really 7 days at all). At least none of you can say anymore that they can't be bothered to leave a single line, even unsigned because it's too much effort. The box is right there after you finish reading. Just type a sentence of appreciation or something.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias