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Author: Matthias aka MysticMew (Solarsenshi@gmx.de)
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Pre Note

Sorry about the poll not being up as promised. It was my first time making one on this infernal site (yes, I am still rather mad), I didn't realize I had to include it into my profile to be seen... Now, it's up, so please vote. The outcome really doesn't matter too much, I can deal with it either way (otherwise I wouldn't put up a poll for it).

However, what does matter... is your feedback. Where is everyone who always reviewed? I know a lot of people did read (or at least clicked on the story) and I know a lot of new favorites etc. were added. But there wasn't a single review for the first prologue. I don't think I ever had a single chapter without a review in this story. So, please let me know what you think, okay?

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(Narrator)

"After we had a look at Ash, Dawn's and in extension May's past months, today we will look at two other people whose paths are about to cross and intervene in ways they cannot suspect right now... mmphhhhywha?"

Okay, okay, I get it! You don't have to gag me! Geez, that was a perfectly normal teaser, you just made it more suspicious than it sounded!

"Ahem. First let us see how our other finalist has been doing. Now where is our beautiful, young Master... Ah!" I spot Leaf among the wreckage of a large building. Several people in what on closer inspection looks like Team Rocket uniforms are scattered all over the place in various states of distress. Arrayed around Leaf are her Umbreon, Houndoom and Tyranitar, the latter just casually swiping two heavy Golem with his tail and sending them crashing through a still standing wall...

"Oh my, looks like there has been quite some action going on here."

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(Leaf)

"I-I don't know anything, you monster!"

Unimpressed, I knelt down next to the man. Beaten and bruised as he was, there was no danger of retaliation and I knew the grunt was just trying to cover his fear with false bravado. After only three of my Pokémon had practically torn his and those of his colleagues to shreds, I wasn't too surprised at being compared to some inhuman creature.

Really didn't they watch the tournament? Everyone else was talking about it after all, so what were they expecting? Of course, criminals tended to have this delusion of superiority, the belief that they were better than anyone. In their twisted minds they probably thought my match with Ash had greatly exaggerated our abilities in some ways.

Well... They knew better now.

"Really now? Perhaps you want to think a little harder." I waved with one hand and Shadow trotted to my side. Directing glowing eyes at the Rocket grunt, her intimidating gaze made the man swallow but this obviously wasn't enough. "I hear Toxic works much faster on the human body," I said sinisterly, certainly managing to make the fear spill over into terror. Oh, not like I would do that. There was no need to stoop down to their level. A good old threat could go a long way though.

When Shadow opened her mouth menacingly, the grunt slid back hastily, waving his hands in a warding gesture. "Okay, okay! Please, don't kill me!" I waited patiently and Shadow took a step forward. "All I know is that the higher ups are going to do something big soon. We've all been on alert and getting drilled for some kind of big raid but they don't tell us grunts much. Please... I'm just in this for the money!"

Sighing internally, I let the disappointment wash over me. Although expecting as much, I had hoped that this one would give us something more substantial. None of those here probably knew anything that we didn't already and those higher up the

ladder within Team Rocket were almost impossible to find, much less to catch these days.

"You should think of a new line of work." Nodding to Shadow, my first Pokémon knocked the grunt out with a quick hypnosis and I stood up to observe the battlefield. There wasn't much left of the base. Not because we had done so much carnage. They had blown up their own base before we could even set foot in it. And this hadn't been the first time this happened. Obviously there was a standing order from the leaders of Team Rocket and it made our investigation only that much harder.

Pulling out my Pokégear, I called in to Headquarters. "Black here. Base is secured. Same result as last time."

Siegfried's face appeared on screen a moment later. His was as disappointed as I felt. "Another dead end then?"

"Nothing we don't already know. This really worries me. They might just all have been grunts but we've taken down a lot of minor hideouts and arrested a lot of them. Even Team Rocket cannot afford to lose that much manpower, especially if they are going to do something big." It was left unspoken what we both thought. That this was precisely what it seemed like. That they had some kind of secret weapon which made sacrificing smaller, unimportant bases along with a lot of lower-level members not matter in the long run. Just thinking of the possibilities of what could be giving them such confidence, had me only more on edge.

Siegfried sighed in defeat. "It can't be helped. Good work out there. A team will be by shortly to take in the prisoners." There was a pause. "After that, take a break. You've already been working harder than what is healthy."

I chuckled slightly. "Is that an order?" Honestly, it wasn't like this had been much of an effort. Fighting Ash in the finals had taken more out of me than taking out a Team Rocket base full of rookies and lowly grunts. Ash could have done it with some help even before his training. But both Siegfried and Cynthia, two of the few that knew the extent of the kind of crisis our world was inevitable moving towards, had more than once voiced their concerns in how I was pushing myself to resolve this.

"We are just worried, Leaf. You've barely done anything but hunting down leads and Rockets. I know you don't like sitting around but you will burn yourself out at this rate even before the shit hits the fan." And that was precisely the point. I didn't want it to come this. I didn't want the worst outcome. The little bit Zoroark had been able to tell me was bad enough and while I still lacked a lot of information, I could not just sit back and let everything happen. If there was some chance to prevent this crisis – or at the very least some of it –, I would take it.

I breathed in and out deeply to calm my frustrations. "Alright, alright. I have some personal matters to attend to anyway. I promise, it won't be anything to straining." But it was important and high time I confirmed my deductions in this particular area. I was pretty much certain about all the others, this one was the last I needed to confirm.

Siegfried looked skeptical but relented with a sigh. "Alright. Just don't push yourself too much. You are not alone in this, got it?" I nodded quietly before the image disappeared from the Pokégear.

No, I wasn't alone and I was seriously glad for that. However, there were some things only I and some others could do. If worst came to worst, having Them prepared was even more important. Figuring out the other Chosen's identities hadn't been that hard. There was a single connection that bound all of them together and that narrowed the possible candidates down to a bare minimum. I had figured most of this out during the tournament already and at the end was quite sure about three of them, four myself included. The fifth was quickly confirmed after a short visit to a certain Coordinator in Sinnoh, along with setting her on a path that would ensure she was prepared when the time came.

That only left one more candidate to scout out. I was as sure about this one as I could be with any of the others without a proper confirmation by the Legendaries but I wanted... no, I needed to see for myself.

"Are we going to visit the last one?" Zoroark had quietly appeared by my side, Zorua riding atop his head as usual. I looked back down at the map I had called up and the displayed location. Cerulean City.

"Yes, it's about time. I've put this off long enough, perhaps too long. Siegfried might be right and I have to see reality for what it is. Perhaps there really is nothing I can do to stop this."

Zoroark tilted his head slightly and after a short silence eventually spoke. "I don't think it is wrong to try. At the very least your actions will ensure that everyone is much better prepared."

Touched by the encouragement, I patted the Fox Pokémon gently. "Thanks. Let us just hope it is enough."

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Prologue 2: Interweaving Roads! An Unexpected Encounter!

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(Misty)

"I'm home!"

There was no response when I strode into the Cerulean City Gym. I didn't expect one considering the doors had been locked and no signs of activity could be seen from outside. Not even my secretary who usually took care of managing challengers and appointments wasn't there.

"Great. They couldn't even wait for me, could they?" Well, I had no real right to be upset. At the very least my sisters had started to take their duties a little bit more serious and had agreed to handle the Gym for short periods of time so that I could have some time for myself. Sure, it had taken quite a big argument and a temper explosion after a hectic and stressful month, further compromised by fans from my sisters interrupting business... Needless to say, it hadn't been pretty, yet the end result had been satisfying.

Arriving at the pool, I took out my Pokémon and released them for a much needed swim, my freshly caught Wailmer made a big splash, upsetting some of the others. I really had to find a solution for him. In this form Wailmer was barely adequate for the pool, if he evolved that would make things a lot more difficult.

At least Vaporeon seemed to have fun with the new addition, immediately scrambling onto the larger Pokémon's back. Seeing how meek she often was, especially around new people or Pokémon, I couldn't help a smile at the sight and the rest of my Pokémon also ceased their protests and watched the quickly bonding pair.

Just this one scene was enough to convince me that my last trip was a success after all. Sure, all I really had caught was Wailmer but aside from what was happening right now, I could safely say that the extra training had paid off.

With a satisfied grin I fished the small box out of my pocket and took out the two badges and one ribbon. Obtaining them hadn't been an easy task, especially since I had asked the other Gym Leaders to not hold back in order to see how far I had gotten over the last year. Picking both Celadon and Vermilion City Gyms meant going not only against a clear type advantage but Erika and Lt. Surge were also experienced Gym Leaders who had been doing this for quite some time.

Well Surge had certainly been surprised to have Raichu shown up by a Starmie. Electricity really wasn't much of a problem for it anymore though. I had to thank Rudy for giving me the idea all these years ago. What had started as a pet project on the side during our journey that I had almost given up on, we had taken up during our first training trip again. A lot of resistance training and element control later, Starmie had managed to spin counter Electric attacks in ways even Rudy's Starmie probably never could hope to achieve.

Gyarados had pulled a lot of weight against Erika. It had been the easier fight of the two, especially after tackling Vermilion first. Yet, no less, Erika had proven why she had been in this business for awhile now and made me sweat quite a bit. Everyone else had also given their best and I was very proud of them.

And the Contest in Celadon had been a whole different experience. A lot of fun and definitely something that I might do more often if I ever found the time. Really, I was almost sad Contests hadn't been around when I had still been travelling with Ash and Brock. It had been a truly exhilarating experience and young Vaporeon had gained quite a bit of confidence from her performance, that much was obvious.

Yes, this trip had been successful. All my Pokémon had been training hard with me and sometimes I had doubts if I wasn't pushing them too hard. But they wouldn't have any of it and I was really glad for their motivation and perseverance.

Watching Ash perform in last year's Sinnoh League had been an eye opener. Seeing my old and probably best friend getting so far ahead of me, my self-confidence had seriously taken a damper. I had resolved then to get stronger but it hadn't been until convincing my sisters to make some time for me to take smaller trips that I could leave the Gym behind... at least for shorter periods of time. Anything more and our reputation would plummet back right through the floor.

I really need an assistant, I mused, a professional one. This hadn't been the first time I thought about it. Even if they had agreed, my sisters were still horrid when it came to battling. I could take them in a 3-1 these days – that means really three of their Pokémon against one of mine – and still clean the floor with them. If I didn't leave some of my more well-trained Pokémon behind every time I went out, they could just go back to handing out badges without a fight again.

Being Gym Leader really wasn't an easy job, more like a full-time occupation. I was beginning to understand why so many famous ones all over the regions had some sort of secondary occupation, even going so far as closing down their Gyms from time to time. Doing this all year without break could really tear at your resolve otherwise. Unfortunately I didn't quite have that option yet. Those last years had been a lot of work in bringing up the Cerulean City Gym's reputation but I didn't quite have

the longstanding credit yet. Even as much as I wished for some longer-term break and perhaps some good old travelling with Ash and the others again.

I had to chuckle at the thought. Certainly it wasn't easy to be Ash these days either. From growing up with my famous sisters I had some experience with media hypes and even if it was slowly dying down, these last months must have been tough on him.

He and Dawn had passed through here briefly, unfortunately they had been as much pressed for time as I had been busy then and so all it had amounted to was a brief talk. I wished I could have gotten to know Dawn a little better. While I had no lingering attachment in any romantic way to Ash, I still cared and would have liked to get to know the girl that apparently made him very happy. The little impression I got simply wasn't enough for a real opinion.

Of course, thinking about Ash had me thinking about her. I didn't quite know why, since we had never personally met, but somehow Leaf had made an even greater impression on me during the Sinnoh League final. While Ash's growth had shown me how far I was behind, it had been the young Master's example that showed me that being a girl and being an Elite Trainer wasn't necessarily excluding one another, even at a young age. I had found myself researching quite a bit on her history and without really noticing she became a kind of inspiration for myself.

Geez, listen to me. It's like I'm a kid with a hero worship. I grinned wryly and shook of the reminiscent thoughts. They wouldn't get me anywhere. From here on out, all I could do was walk forward and do the best I could. After all, I did love this Gym and my work here. I wanted to make the Cerulean Gym famous and wouldn't stop until... no, even if I succeeded. Growing up as the "ugly one" out of four sisters, with three older ones already quite famous in their own way, this was my path to step out of their shadow and be recognized for my own efforts and talents.

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(Leaf)

It has been awhile since I've been here, I mused. Celadon City hadn't changed very much. In fact, much of Kanto wasn't very susceptible to change. Not sure if this was a good or bad thing but I never had a problem with it. Sometimes staying traditional was perfectly fine.

I took another corner on my way to my destination and stopped cold. There were certain things I wished would change after all. It was hardly the ice café's fault but I could do without the brief pang in my heart. Shaking my head violently, I made a sharp turn and took an alley to the side, deciding to take a detour.

Only after a full two minutes of walking in silence, did I start to reprimand myself for acting like that. I really thought I had been over it. At least not to get worked up about such reminders. But perhaps I really had just buried my feelings deep enough not to think of them. Was that why I had put off doing this for longer than necessary? Because this place had been where we had our first date and the city would remind me of that?

"Mou, Leaf. Get a grip. You don't have time to mope."

Without even realizing it, I had actually ended up in front of my destination. Blinking in surprise and noticing I had been longer and deeper in thought than I realized, I forcefully stomped down on my jumbled thoughts and emotions. That had been a long time ago and it had been long over. Why the hell was I getting nostalgic over something like this now? There really were more important matters to attend to.

Now here was something that HAD changed. The Cerulean City Gym definitely didn't look like a performance hall ready for a famous play anymore. Okay, maybe it hadn't been that bad but one had certainly been able to see the reflection of its Gym Leaders as famous water show performers back then. Too bad they absolutely had had no talent in battle whatsoever.

Gone was all the flourish, all the small details that showed some manner of extravagance and definitely not a single promotion poster for an upcoming show. Just from what little I could see from out here, the Gym had definitely changed for the better.

Stepping through the doors, I found my first impression only further confirmed. Everything screamed professional, all the way to a nicely arranged front desk with a secretary. The young woman looked up briefly. "I'm sorry. The Gym Leader just came back yesterday and won't be free until afternoon."

I was disappointed for a moment but then reminded myself that I was here on official purpose and actually had the authority to prove it. While I had certainly found myself making use of my new status as a Master more often than I wished over the last months, it was these small normal things where I sometimes forgot about my new privileges.

"While I don't mind waiting a bit, I'm sure the Gym Leader will make time for a Master, right?"

The secretary's head snapped back up as I flashed my badge at her. This time she took a better look and realization seemed to dawn on her. Well, at least it seemed that the people that mattered still remembered my face. "Ah! Master Leaf, what an honor. I mean, I didn't... I wasn't..."

Chuckling at the woman's panic, I made a placating gesture. "Don't worry about it. If you could just announce me, that would be perfectly fine. I do have all day but this could take a little longer."

The secretary nodded frantically and reached for her phone... then stopped. "Um... What should I tell Miss Misty why you wish to see her?"

I smiled. "I'm afraid my information are only for her and me to know. But why don't you tell her I would like to have a little match with her while I'm here."

While the secretary was still gaping, I grinned to myself. Yes, that would do nicely. A match would lift my mood, make me focus and at the same time get me my confirmation all in one.

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Less than 20 minutes later – faster than I expected – I was walking into the large pool area that doubled as the arena field. That was as much as I expected and for a moment I felt myself reminded of the battle with Ash, some of the heaviest fights having taken place on a similar field.

Then I spotted the Gym Leader and momentarily froze.

I had not met Misty when I came and collected my badge all these years ago, neither had I bothered to go through the files prior to coming here. Thus I only had an old picture Ash sent me once during his journey to go by. That didn't quite match with the present and hardly did her justice. With her hair undone, falling in a long wave over her shoulders all the way down to her back, a physique that spoke of regular training keeping her in shape at the very least, a one-piece, stylish bathing suit in a deep blue bringing out her matured features quite nicely...

Two emotions were playing havoc inside myself. First of all was the somewhat superficial but still uncanny resemblance to Rebecca. I might have shrugged it off. Really, it was mostly the long hair and the same eyes... But this was the second thing that reminded me of her today and so I couldn't help but wonder if fate just liked to play cruel tricks on me.

The other emotion though was perhaps even stronger and allowed me to push the resemblance aside for the shocking realization that I had been instantly smitten. That hadn't happened since Rebecca and seeing those eyes – so similar to hers – turn to me in confusion, I realized that I was staring... and probably salivating a bit, too.

"Good morning. Thank you for making time for me. I realize my visit is unannounced but I just had to see this talented and beautiful uprising Gym Leader of

Cerulean City for myself." Oh yes, I could still do it. The furious blush when the words fully registered was definitely worth all the depressing reminders of a past relationship today.

The embarrassment didn't hold long though. "Ex-Excuse me?! What is that supposed to mean? I'm not sure I like these kinds of jokes." Well, she certainly seemed as passionate and easy to rile up as Rebecca... Okay, enough of the comparisons. Building a new relationship on similarities to an old one was only bound to end in despair... And why was I thinking about a relationship already?

That didn't stop me from keeping up the effort though. "Ah, now why would I be joking about the truth?" Slowly I walked around to the other side of the pool, letting her process my flirting a bit longer, before turning around, expression more serious. I took out a Pokéball. "For now though... Shall we?"

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(Misty)

I wasn't quite sure what surprised me more. The fact that the girl I had come to admire lately showing up at my Gym and challenging me to a fight or that she wasn't quite what I had expected. What was it that I had expected anyway? She was barely older than me, in fact I believe that we were about the same age. Did I really expect some super cool, composed Trainer, the very image of professionalism? Whatever it was, it hadn't been quite... this.

"Aren't you going to tell me first why you are really here?" I asked suspiciously, stomping down on my temper and the undeniable feeling of being quite flattered by her comments. After a childhood of being the black sheep of the family, I was rather susceptible to getting complimented about my looks. That, however, also meant that I was naturally quite suspicious about such comments and couldn't just gracefully accept them. Really, I was already making more out of this than necessary. She was obviously just teasing and I should take it good-naturedly.

Leaf smiled and I couldn't help the flutter in my heart again as much as I tried not to. "There is something I have to see first. Let's say I'd like to see how strong you are. What I have to discuss with you, depends on your performance."

That really didn't tell me much but then again, it wasn't like I was adverse to the idea of such a challenge. I held no illusion over whether or not I was ready to fight at her level after what I saw at the Sinnoh League final. However, the chance to see how far I could measure up against a talented, young Master like her was certainly appealing to me. "Fine by me. But don't think it's going to be easy. My Pokémon are in top form. We had quite a few successes on our last trip, so you won't find us an easy match."

Leaf laughed. "That's the spirit. Why don't we make it a little more interesting? If I win, you take me out to something nice." Damn it, what was it with her and all the flirting? Was she actually serious?!? While I was still trying to fight down the renewed blush, the other girl just had to make it only harder. "And if you win, it's my treat." That just amounted to the same thing! Where was the choice in that?!?

As sudden as the flirting had started, her expression became serious again. I just couldn't quite get a grip on this girl's character and it started to intrig... err, annoy me! "Two on two. You can change during battle. Alright?" she suggested.

Gripping one of my Pokéballs tight enough that it hurt my fingers, I shoved the irritating thoughts and feelings aside. Mess with me in my own Gym, would she? Fine with me, I'd give her a fight she wouldn't forget. "Let's do this."

I didn't quite realize that by never acknowledging her "conditions", I had more or less agreed to it... and that this didn't bother me as much as it should.

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(Leaf)

"As I thought, I'm still no good against someone like you," Misty sipped on her drink with a slightly sour expression, although not quite that disappointed as one might expect. The match had gone as expected, of course. Even employing a light limiter – anything more would have been insulting and defying the purpose of the test –, I had won both matches. However, it had been far more challenging than I had dared to even hope.

"Don't sell yourself short. In fact, I would almost say you have about caught up with Ash before the Sinnoh League Conference. And all that on your own. I am surprised, really. What kind of training did you do for such good results?"

When she told me, I was a little shocked. Okay, personally I think that anyone could come up with the basic ideas for my training regiment and perhaps more people thought about it... However, very few had the courage and persistence to fully go through with it, not to mention the kind of bond, the trust necessary to achieve the highest results from such grueling methods. Misty had, albeit in a toned-down version, more or less recreated my own training program. In fact her method was so similar to what I had started out with during my journey, it was downright scary. The redhead certainly had managed to erase even the slightest doubt that she was a part of the six.

"Well, that certainly saves me some time. I suppose part of my reason for coming here has already been taken care of," I admitted and took a bite from my

tuna. The restaurant was certainly a nice place and I was enjoying myself quite a bit in the pleasant company. I had always been someone who quickly bonded with people through battle and from the brief but intense match, I had only gotten more interested in the other girl.

"Oh?" Misty raised one eyebrow and I could see an amused twinkle in her eyes. "I thought your sole purpose was to flirt with me?" Yes, definitely liked her more and more. Ever since our battle, it seemed like she had caught herself and wasn't so easy to throw off anymore.

"Disappointed that it isn't?"

Misty snorted. "You wish. I'm sure I could do better."

Oh yes, definitely. I liked a girl that could keep up with me. Now she was downright challenging me and I was never one to back down from one. And I certainly had more experience in this kind of battle. Leaning forward slightly, I made sure to hold her gaze and settled on the most mesmerizing stare I could. "Oh? I am sure with your beauty and elegance you would have no problem getting whoever you want."

Score. There was that pretty blush almost matching her face to her hair again. Bringing up her looks was something I quickly learned would always bring out a reaction. A good thing I had learned a few things from Ash about her family situation. I could clearly sympathize with her more and also knew what buttons to push. "But could they really do better?" I added with an all too innocent blink of my eyes.

Misty flushed even more, then suddenly turned away with a cough. I settled back with a satisfied grin, more than happy to leave it at that for now. No need to rush. So far I hadn't gotten any negative signals, no need to push my luck. Besides, I wasn't sure if I really wanted to actively pursue a relationship at this time. Not with what was going to come.

After taking a full minute to compose herself, Misty turned back, but couldn't quite meet my eyes yet. I smiled slightly. "Alright, alright already. So what exactly did you want with me in the first place?"

Yes, I suppose it was about time to get to the heart of the matter. Or at least as much as I dared to tell at the moment.

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(Misty)

"You really have to go already?" I couldn't help keep the disappointment out of my voice. One thing that really got to me about being a Gym Leader was that I had little contact with anyone outside a specific circle, mostly Trainers coming for a badge – fleeting encounters at best – and a few people around the city. Aside from that it could get kind of lonely. While on duty I hardly got to do simple things like today and I had to admit, it had been rather fun.

Leaf looked apologetic. "I still have a lot of work to do. As much as I would like to actually kick back and relax, I promised myself to do everything I can." I certainly could understand that. Even I, as a relatively fresh Gym Leader, had heard enough of the increasing activity of Team Rocket and how much it seemed to have the League troubled. To think something so... far-reaching was behind it. I still had trouble wrapping my mind around it. And that had only been a small portion of what Leaf seemed to know.

I felt rather touched. It seemed I had been the first one she had told as much as she did know, only leaving hints with the others. If that was merely because she felt the time was drawing closer or some other reason, I wasn't sure. However, I couldn't help secretly hoping it was a far more personal motivation.

"Please... come again." I spoke without even realizing it but the words were honest. "I... enjoyed myself today."

Leaf smiled brightly, a sight that I had come to like very much over the course of a single day. "So did I. I'll be back, after all I have to see how much better you've gotten then."

I couldn't help but smile back, taking her offered hand and squeezing a little tighter than necessary. "Ha, next time it won't be so easy."

She squeezed right back. "I know. You have all the foundations for a strong Pokémon Trainer... no, perhaps an Elite, if you keep working on improving yourself. I look forward to the next time."

And that was all that would be said. Leaf turned and walked away from the Gym, just as suddenly disappearing from my life as she had come into it. Yet she left that life in quite a bit of turmoil over the course of just a single day. I wasn't stupid, after all. Unless I was completely mistaken in my initial assessment, Leaf was the kind of person that while playful and teasing, was quite serious about her intentions and would let the other know if she was really just playing around. I hadn't gotten any signals that she was merely playing.

So did that bother me? Not really. First of all, I had had my fair share of comments – both from my sisters and other kids – about being a tomboy as a kid and there certainly had been a few rumors mixed in about me liking girls... Which was

stupid, of course. Not that I was adverse to the idea itself entirely. Merely that I really had no clear opinion on the matter and frankly little interest at the time.

Personally I found the idea of slapping specific labels on people just because of the way they acted rather foolish. Those that did the labeling, hardly knew anything about the person and thus I always tried to have an open mind. A girl liking girls, I could accept and unless I confirmed the opposite wouldn't outright reject the possibility for myself either.

I can't say I expected the first day after my return to take such an interesting twist but I wasn't unhappy about it. Leaf was not quite what I expected and that might actually have been for the best. Just talking with her – and only a small portion of that really revolved around why she had come in the first place – had been rather enjoyable. She was fun and easy to talk with.

Even the short almost fiasco of my suggestion to take her out to the popular ice café, hadn't put a dent in the mood for long. I suppose it said a lot about whether or not I was getting attracted to the other girl that I felt rather bad when I realized I had unintentionally brought up a painful subject but she had just shrugged it off with a, "Just a sad memory" and gracefully accepted my quickly suggested alternative. The subject was quickly forgotten and that actually had made me happy. I liked to see the cheerful Leaf definitely more than the depressed one.

Okay, so yes, I guess I was getting attracted. Not sure what it meant. I had never really been in love. I had been confused for awhile about Ash but these feelings had by now settled and I could safely say, they hadn't been deeply romantic. There had been Rudy, but back then I had still been confused about Ash to even give it serious thought.

I believe the one thing that Leaf had managed almost instantly, that barely anyone ever had managed to do, was making me feel like a girl. A simple, normal girl. Not the tough Gym Leader, the tomboy, the runt of the family. You could barely call the little outing a "date" and she really hadn't done anything special but I admit getting showered with compliments that I knew despite their teasing nature were quite serious, did feel exceptionally good. Her presence somehow had worked right past all my usual barriers and before I knew it, I had started to relax.

That it had to be a girl to make me feel like one myself was kind of funny and the irony wasn't lost on me. Perhaps it was a sign though. For what I wasn't quite sure. At the very least to look forward to meeting her again and see where this attraction could lead to.

Not right now though. There hadn't been a need to say so, not after what I had learned today. I suppose that was the main reason why she had kept it strictly to light flirting and teasing. Too many things would be a deterrent for any kind of stronger

relationship right now. First of all, we both had different duties that kept us busy. I was mostly stuck here, while she was moving around a lot. But even more than that, I got the impression that she didn't want to have such a distraction right now. I could understand that and respected her unspoken wishes.

And yet, a part of me couldn't help but feel sad seeing her leave again. That part of me wanted to pursue what had started today, wanted to see where it would lead, wanted to be there for her... The strength of these feelings, however small that part of me really was right now, were surprising. I wasn't sure that even I wanted a distraction like that right now... regardless how much I had enjoyed myself. I couldn't afford to, if I wanted to get stronger. And I needed to get stronger. More so now than ever before.

Yes, that's right. Perhaps that was the right angle. Maybe by getting stronger, I could show her that I could stand by her side and not be a distraction!

Nodding to myself, only much later realizing how far less uncertain about the direction of my feelings this kind of thought sounded, I turned around and walked back into the Gym, ready to train harder than I had ever before.

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

(Narrator)

"It would seem Leaf's initial reasons for visiting Misty have produced an unexpected extra result. Where exactly will the paths of these two lead and will something more come out of this encounter? I guess you will have to stay tuned for the answer!"

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

Author's Notes

I am... not quite sure if I did this well. There were some parts that worked, but a lot of stuff, especially some of the dialogue didn't really flow... I think part of the problem was that I wanted to keep this short for now, so I had to gloss over a lot of parts which really didn't do developing a first interest between two people that have met for the first time proper respect. I apologize if this feels rushed and bumpy in some parts. There actually have been a few gaps I couldn't really work in that I really wanted and that I now have to relegate to the main portion of this arc. Oh well, more flashbacks.

If anyone is now put off because of the possibility of a femmeslash/shoujo ai/yuri relationship in this story... I did give a fair warning in the first arc, I believe. Besides, Leaf's orientation had been made quite clear from the beginning, so this

shouldn't be a surprise. So I don't want to hear any senseless complaints about it. If you don't like, you don't have to stay. Just don't expect to get around it in this story... or almost any of mine for that matter.

That's it for this prologue. One more to go. That one should actually be on a little bit of a lighter note than the first two.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias