

A Very Confused Pokémon Adventure

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Chapter 23 – Gym Debut

The four days after they ran the Pewter Gauntlet had passed 2B and Zoey by quickly. Zoey, having refrained from using Purugly in the Gauntlet, hadn't managed to secure a full pass, her already-tired Ponyta being taken down by a Breeder's Association Graveler. She'd still come out with a decent prize of a few super potions for getting through her first three matches. For her own full victory, 2B herself had picked out the single-use TM, Calm Mind. A TM that she'd proceeded to use with Jigglypuff both for its own utility and as a perspective on Psychic-type Energy that could only be useful later.

After they'd spent the rest of that day reviewing how they'd done with each of their pokémon, the next three had seen a return to training. For the first time, they'd *combined* that training, in order to give their pokémon more diverse opponents, focusing primarily on tightening up the tactics they'd worked out for the Gym. Despite this resulting in Zoey firmly declaring that 2B and her pokémon were pure and utter Tauros shit in how quickly they developed new moves, both of them had been satisfied with the results. Zoey's far greater experience had allowed her pokémon to at least handle Chinchou and Scyther, though Vulpix had only lost to Purugly.

Not even Purugly wanted to fight Jigglypuff.

Even if he technically *could*, unlike any of the others.

Frankly, Zoey didn't blame him, and neither did any of the other pokémon on either team. That Jigglypuff was an absolute *menace* after over a year of time spent with 2B before technically becoming her pokémon. The only thing that prepared Zoey for its existence was having encountered Ketchum's equally ridiculous Pickachu. Seriously, what the fuck was with Kanto trainers and turning mid-stage, adorable pokémon into absolutely unholy terrors in a fight?!

Still, training had been productive overall, and the day before their Gym battles had been another that they'd taken off to let their pokémon rest...as well as to arm 2B for her

debut! Zoey only felt *slightly* guilty this time at getting an entire parade of more 2B fanservice, as she was performing a needed function! After all, if 2B was going to cause chaos with whatever utter, reality shattering nonsense she'd inevitably pull against Flint or Forrest, she damn well better look good doing it! Making an impression mattered, even if this wasn't a Contest and 2B didn't really *need* sponsors.

Thankfully, Daisy Oak and that Coordinator friend of hers had equipped 2B's wardrobe with plenty of clothing suitable to make an impression. Honestly, any of a number of such outfits would have worked, but Zoey might, just possibly, have wanted a chance to play Dress Up with 2B. Who didn't seem to mind the attention. She still didn't know why the pair had equipped 2B with a Sexy Catgirl Costume, but Zoey gave it two thumbs up and considered sending both of them something nice.

Maybe a Fruit Basket?

Well, future gift to certain people needed or not, Zoey was happy with the result. Even if she'd ended up going a little *extra* by calling in her Gallade from the pokémon retrieval system. Gallade had taken up an interest in costuming and learned to modify clothing after their first Grand Festival win. Something she was glade of, as it kept him entertained when not with her...and he'd come in clutch with some mild modifications to the outfit she'd put together for 2B.

Zoey was sure it would make an impression!

... ..

Between the two back-to-back challenge slots they'd taken, Zoey had ended up with the first slot between the two of them. It had, frankly, been entirely accidental when they'd signed up, neither of them having really thought that far ahead. In retrospect, however, she was grateful it had worked out that way. 2B was, after all, going to be a *hell* of a tough act to follow. Win or lose, better to get her own challenge out of the way first, so she could properly enjoy the chaos that her friend was entirely too likely to unleash on the world.

Honestly, Zoey was rapidly coming around toward acceptance of the same schadenfreude Daisy Oak apparently experienced whenever 2B unleashed her version of reality/logic on *someone else*. She hadn't quite understood it when she first talked to the older girl, but a bit more time around 2B had shown Zoey the light. After all, if *she* had to deal with having her world view shattered regularly, everyone else could handle a bit of it from time to time. That was only fair, right?

For now, though, it was time to put those thoughts out of her mind as she too the handful of steps up into the Challenger's Box across from Forrest. Flint, they had learned

when they peeked in on other fights the day before, was still dealing with the fallout of the ExoDrill Mining disaster. As something of a geologist alongside his expertise in rock pokémon, the man had been sucked into attempting to find solutions. The Mining company *had* legitimately purchased rights to mine the area from Kanto's League, after all. So an alternative site or alternative mining solution needed to be settled if the League didn't want a lawsuit on their hands after putting a stop to operations.

Frankly, Zoey was glad she wasn't dealing with Flint. He had a *reputation* of being extra rough on first badgers to 'toughen them up.' With her team not exactly being perfectly suited to taking on Rock and Ground types, she was relieved not to be dealing with that. Though it *probably* would have been extra funny to watch 2B rip him apart with zero effort. Still better to deal with Forrest, though, who...proved he had the usual bombast of a Gym Leader by abruptly appearing from the floor in the Gym Leader's raised box with an explosion of dirt and fanfare of music. Had they built his platform entirely out of packed Earth just so he could have a pokémon do that for him with every challenger?

The fanfare, a steady roll of bass drums, ended as the debris cloud faded, showing a well-muscled, tall seventeen-year-old wearing an open, sleeveless vest that showed off those muscles. Nice. Absolutely nothing on the delight of 2B's curves, but Zoey could appreciate the eye candy anyway. Even as she was doing so, the Gym Trainer acting as Ref announced the match.

"Here for a First Badge challenge with Forrest of the Pewter City Gym...Top Coordinator Zoey of Snowpoint City!"

Blinking and internally cursing at forgetting to request they leave out her title, as it wasn't what she was focusing here in Kanto, she nevertheless pulled out her usual smile and wave on reflex. The small crowd of spectators noticeably sharpened in their attention, as that *was* an official title. While Top Coordinators didn't have legal status or authority in the same way that Ace Trainers did, the title was one that did *officially* exist to denote someone who had won at least one Grand Festival.

While battling might not be *the* focus of Contests, it was still a major component, and no one who could win a Grand Festival could be a complete slouch when it came to that aspect of things. Since the title wasn't legally required to be put forward like Ace Trainers status was though, Zoey had intended to have the officials knock off any announcing of it. She hadn't really wanted the extra attention. She was here to refine her battle tactics from the ground up, not to lean into her Contest experience to get through. Well, too late now. The damage was done. Her sponsors would be happy, at least,

assuming she did well. She *had* been worried a few of them might bail on her with her focus on battles this season.

“This will be a standard 2 vs 2, with one switch allowed for the challenger. Gym Leader, please send out your Pokémon.”

Forrest nodded, Zoey trying hard not to snort as the younger man attempted a grave look that didn't quite fit his features. He went for physically tossing out his pokéball, which wasn't a surprise as it was the more dramatic move. The glow of energy quickly formed into...the completely underwhelming form of a Geodude. Right. This was a First Badge challenge. She could expect this to be an *extremely* well trained Geodude, given they knew about her Top Coordinator status, but there was a hard cap on the level of power Gym Leaders were allowed to use for each Badge Level. One that escalated steadily with each additional badge you gained.

Making a snap decision, she sent out Teddiursa first, as Ponyta was a better answer if Forrest went for an Onix as his second pokémon. She tossed out the ball with her own usual flare, though *without* the usual special effects applied to it that she would have had set up a Contest. She'd stripped that sort of thing away, just as she'd refused to go with her usual elaborate outfits.

Given that she'd made 2B dress to leave an impression, she *had* made a bit of an effort, just not to the same degree she would have for the Contest circuit. Despite it still being summer, it was fairly cool in Pewter due to the altitude. So she'd thrown on a nice-looking leather jacket over a top that showed off her chest a bit, did up her hair, added some jewelry and basic makeup, then called it good.

“Geodude versus Teddiursa! Begin!”

Forrest was quick off the mark, but so was Zoey, their orders coming out almost on top of one another.

“Rock Polish!”

“Fury-Break!”

Zoey mentally scowled at Forrest's opening move, which eliminated any speed weakness the Geodude might have suffered. Given Teddiursa wasn't the fastest, that could be a problem. Thankfully, at this level, the Rock Polish at least took her opponent enough time for Teddi to close with his foe and unleash the combination move they'd worked the hardest on. It combined Furry Swipes with the Fighting Type energy of Brick Break, making a series of faster moves that didn't quite hit with the power of Brick Break, but were far harder to dodge out of.

The tactic paid off now as, despite its newly enhanced speed, the Geodude couldn't get out of the attack pattern completely. It only took two hits from the four swipes Teddi made, but both were super effective hits that caused the Rock Type to visibly quail. Yet, it showed that it *was* well-trained by riding the second hit and rolling away.

"Geodude, Rollout!"

Zoey grinned viciously at *that* order.

"Counter!"

The speed form Rock Polish, combined with Roll Out, *should* have been a nasty combination. But Teddiursa had been training *almost exclusively* with pokémon faster than himself. Ponyta and Purugly, Jigglypuff, Scyther, and Vulpix. The only member of *either* her or 2B's teams that was slower than Teddi was Chinchou, and even Chinchou cheated with Water Pulse to move around the battlefield far faster than he should be able to.

Teddi had gotten *very* good at using Counter on opponents faster than him.

It was something that was made readily apparent as Geodude attempted to rush him down with its high-speed Rollout, only for Teddi to shift at *just the right instant* to grab the other pokémon. Rock Polish had also made Geodude hard to hold onto, but Teddi got *just enough* of a grip to brutally redirect Geodude's momentum and slam him into one of the larger boulders laying around the ground as terrain. With Geodude disrupted and momentarily stunned, Zoey called out a straight attack instead of a combo.

"Brick Break!"

The Geodude, showing its excellent training again, *almost* managed to recover and throw itself aside. But only almost. Instead, it took ninety plus percent of the hit from Brick Break, which slammed it back into and *through* the boulder. Teddi rushed to follow up, but...

"Geodude has been rendered unconscious! Gym Leader, you have thirty seconds to replace your pokémon!"

A beam of light reached out to return Geodude almost at the same moment the Ref spoke, and Forrest pursed his lips for a moment. Nodding, he passed over the second pokéball on his belt and pulled out the third, tossing it out. The light coalesced into the form of...

"Rhyhorn, Mud Shot!"

Damn, instead of trying to close the distance and risk Teddi's Fighting Type moves, Forrest had opted to engage at range.

"Dodge and Eyes!"

Teddi couldn't completely get free of the attack, but managed to pull a half decent Baby-Doll Eyes even while moving, causing Rhyhorn to not fully commit. The mud it had formed out of the ground with Earth Type energy still hit, but didn't do much damage. It did, unfortunately, slow Teddi down farther.

"Rock Blast!"

Zoey grimaced, already seeing where this was going to go. Without hesitating long enough to let Teddi get hit, she withdrew him. The Ref made the call immediately, of course.

"Challenger Zoey has used her Swap! Send out your second pokémon!"

It being a Swap, instead of an outright Withdraw, meant she could technically send Teddi back in, but hopefully that wouldn't be needed.

"Go Ponyta! You know the plan! Show them your speed!"

They'd covered a few plans, in point of fact. But that specific cue was one that, combined with being sent mid-battle, had Ponyta *immediately* activating Agility after he hit the field. He was at a major disadvantage with nearly any pokémon the Gym fielded, so every plan they'd worked on for the last ten days had centered around the same idea.

Speed. Speed. Speed.

Coming out mid-battle like this, where you were allowed to segue instantly into moves, was actually their best-case scenario in a lot of ways. In any situation *other* than a Swap, whether the Swap be by choice or previous defeat, it was required that the Ref call the restart. Mid-battle like this, however, you could segue instantly into action. Ponyta did so now, concentrating on Agility even as Forrest, sounding mildly startled, rushed a command for another Mud Shot. Rhyhorn wasn't fast enough. By the time the Mud Shot arrived, Ponyta was already moving.

"Flame and Turn!"

Ponyta shifted into a Flame Charge, and just barely *lept* over a hasty Bulldoze. The charge wasn't actually aimed at Rhyhorn, which seemed to throw both pokémon and Trainer off...only for the 'Turn' part of the command to produce a flawless Double Kick to the Rhyhorn's rear end after the Flame Charge landed the Pony pokémon *behind* his target.

"Rrrrryyhorn!"

Their opponent's cry of distress at it was flung forward by a literal ass-kicking, despite its weight, was almost funny enough to cause Zoey to get distracted. Thankfully, she was no newbie, and her lips merely twitched as she shouted what was hopefully the last command she would need.

"Pinball!"

Ponyta were fast. A Ponyta mainlining Agility was *fast*. A Ponyta mainlining Agility while also using Flame Charge? *That* Ponyta was fast enough to *outpace* the flying Rhyhorn. It wouldn't have worked with a Rhydon, let alone an Onix, but Rhyhorn were still *just* light weight enough that Ponyta could *keep it in the air*. Effectively pinballing around ahead of it to deliver another Double Kick. A different pokémon type would have still had plenty of options. Even a Rhyhorn that had been pumped full of TMs like Icy Wind or Sandstorm could have disrupted the attack pattern.

This Rhyhorn was a First Badge challenge and didn't have anything of the sort. The Gym Leader, after seeing the maneuver was actually *working*, facepalmed...and hit his pokémon with a return beam before the situation could get any more ridiculous. For just an instant, seeing his expression, Zoey wondered if maybe 2B was a bad influence on her. Then, just as quickly, she dismissed the thought as nonsense, ignoring the disbelief in the Ref's voice as he announced the conclusion.

"Rhyhorn has been withdrawn! Challenger Zoey wins! Challenger, you may enter the field to collect your badge."

Beaming widely, Zoey hopped down and rushed over to where Ponyta was prancing happily. She'd collect her badge after giving her good boi some snuggles and praise first!

... ..

Her own battle with Forrest had gone quickly enough that there had been a nearly fifteen-minute gap between her and 2B. Something which Zoey was grateful for as it meant she'd been able to get up into the stands, fend off a few Contest fans that had recognized her after the official had announced her, and settled in for the show. It was almost a pity that she expected 2B to somewhat steamroll Forrest at this level, since it might minimize 2B's effect. There was at least a *decent* chance of it being otherwise, though, as she suspected Forrest would push the allowed limits for a First Badge challenge for a Lab Trainer. Doubly so for one of *Oak's* who was also a research assistant. His Trainers generally had a bit of a reputation for excellence, even if there were occasional duds among them.

Of course, there was also the fact that Zoey knew 2B intended to give Vulpix a chance to fight, despite her being the absolute worst matchup from 2B's team. If her friend

were almost anyone else, she'd have attempted to talk 2B out of it. As it was, even with the massive type disadvantage, she suspected it was only going to give whatever Forrest used parity with Vulpix, instead of the advantage if *should* give.

Ah, there went Forrest's entrance again. He could do with some variety, though the drums were admittedly a nice touch, at least.

"Here for a First Badge challenge with Forrest of the Pewter City Gym...Trainer 2B of Pallet Town!"

Following Zoey's advice, even if Zoey herself hadn't, 2B had held back stepping up onto the platform until the announcement. She'd already been present at the base of the challenger's box stairs, but no one had really bothered to take notice until that moment, when she stepped out of the shadow of the box and up into the afternoon sunlight. The moment she did, however, several people perked up and a few whispers began. Zoey couldn't help but quirk her lips as she caught the edges of the expected chatter.

In part, Zoey liked to think, that was due to her own efforts. The last year spent in Johto had exposed her to new styles, and she'd been dying just a little inside to see 2B in one or two of them. Thankfully, one of the people who'd done her wardrobe had clearly thought the same, and Zoey had found a black-and-orange kimono-like garment mixed into the lot. Some quick modifications, courtesy of Gallade's expert touch, and the outfit practically screamed 'Exotic Sword Waifu.'

The fact it exposed considerable amounts of 2B's cleavage and thighs had *nothing* to do with it being Zoey's ultimate choice for her friend, of course. No, it simply *fit* 2B! Particularly with that katana of hers openly carried at her side! All other accusations otherwise will, of course, be rightfully ignored. As they should be.

Of course, while 2B's beauty drew the eye like a lodestone, and Zoey's work had done a lot to emphasize that beauty, it wasn't what ultimately drew the gasps and murmurs. Zoey's lips twitched as she heard more than one confused person ask exactly what she'd expected.

'Is she blind?'

2B was, of course, wearing her 'tactical visor.' Which still, equally of course, looked exactly like a blindfold. She was going to have to make sure that 2B took it off after the battle, just so there were no accusations of her attempting to fake being blind. For now, though, the reactions were admittedly humorous to her. After all, she was aware of the truth, that 2B's visor was a horribly useful piece of equipment that could do enough mid-battle analysis that the League might well ban it from competition...if they knew it existed.

Not that Zoey really thought it would matter for 2B. After all, she could sense just about everything with Aura that her visor could tell her, and you couldn't ban *Aura*. According to carefully phrased questions Zoey had asked, *everyone* had it, with Aura playing a major part in the mysterious 'bond' between Trainers and their pokémon. It was just that very few humans ever learned to consciously reach for it.

"This will be a standard 2 vs 2, with one switch allowed for the challenger. Gym Leader, please send out your Pokémon."

Ah, the Ref must have been caught off guard along with the spectators, he'd delayed for several long seconds, then canceled his mike to ask 2B a question. Likely about her ability to see, since that *could* be a liability in knowing when to stop for matches like this. There *were* the occasional individuals who, via various means, managed to become trainers despite such problems. It was rare, though, and stopping to assess if 2B was going to be dangerous to herself or others was only sensible.

Still, the match was properly starting now, with Forrest throwing out a pokéball again. Zoey was virtually certain her assessment regarding his willingness to push boundaries against a Lab Trainer was accurate when she saw what formed...

"Is that a *Shieldon*?"

The incredulous question slipped out, Zoey only even *recognizing* the pokémon because of her and 2B's little not-a-date to the Pewter Museum. Of course, a moment later, just before someone answered, she realized the very reason she recognized it was why it was here. Something that a jolly local confirmed for her a moment later.

"It is! Rare to see Forrest or Flint use one of them in a First Badge challenge! But with the Pewter Museum being one of the few places in the world where you can get fossils revived, they have a small but steady supply of Lileep, Anorith, Omanyte and Shieldon! It's really spiced things up with some variety these last few years!"

Yeah, that was what Zoey had abruptly realized might be the case, though she appreciated the confirmation and whispered a quiet thanks to the man. 2B's face hadn't shown any surprise at the pokémon, but then she was from Kanto and likely knew that such pokémon had joined the Pewter Gym lineup. Of course, despite it being an unexpected dual type, it didn't actually help 2B that much. Vulpix was still just as vulnerable to a Steel type as Rock or Ground, which made Zoey suspect 2B wouldn't use her just yet.

It was something that proved true when, without the showy fanfare of Forrest or Zoey, 2B simply pointed a pokéball at the arena and calmly released her choice as a beam. Zoey grinned as Jigglypuff appeared. Clearly, even if her friend was willing to give Vulpix a

chance, she was still going to stack the deck to make sure she walked away with a victory. Zoey was all for it. Mostly because she *really* wanted to see a larger group of people's reactions to some of the shit *this* Jigglypuff pulled regularly.

"Shieldon vs Jigglypuff! Begin!"

Forrest was on the ball immediately. Yet, despite getting his order off first, the difference in complexity was stark.

"Iron Head!"

"Water Evade into Pulse Machinegun."

If Iron Head had possessed even the most slim of chances to actually hit, it would have been the right call. Fairy Types like Jigglypuff were weak to Steel Type energy, after all. Yet, trying to hit *this* Jigglypuff when she had been ordered to evade was nightmare fuel. Sure enough, in a repeat of a pattern Zoey had seen several times, Jigglypuff jetted up and over the Arena. Shieldon passed right below it, even as Jigglypuff leaned into her species' ability to float for hangtime, swallow more air-

No, wait, not air.

Type Energy.

Zoey leaned forward eagerly. This move wasn't quite as refined as Fairy Gatling, still needing that minor bit of setup. Yet, Zoey suspected they were on the cusp of being able to pull it off without that, which would make it *yet another* original move. For now, it didn't matter, Shieldon was too out of place and...

"Protect!"

Fuck! The translucent barrier that formed in response to Forrest's call was *just* fast enough to interdict the half dozen rapidly-fired Water Pulses. Each one was, in truth, shaped more like a bullet of water at this point, with the Type Energy Jigglypuff had swallowed serving to buff each 'bullet' of water into something nearly as powerful as a full Water Pulse. The six fired in a stream like the Machinegun the move was named for, but four were interdicted by Protect before it broke. The final two got through, the Protect not having managed to form at full strength. They were enough to stagger the Shieldon...but it was a *tough* Pokémon and shrugged it off.

"Metal Sound into Rock Blast!"

"Dazzling Dodge. Wave Breaker."

The horrible noise of Metal Sound made Zoey cringe, and Jigglypuff clearly didn't like it either, but she powered through and used Dazzling Gleam not as an *attack*, but as a way to create a blinding light. It caused Sheldon to lose track of Jigglypuff before it could fire Rock Blast, making it miss entirely as Jigglypuff plummeted to the ground and then flashed forward with another Water Pulse.

Amazingly enough, this time the Water Pulse was performed with pure Water manipulation, rather than spitting out a jet of water. Apparently, working so hard on Pulse Machinegun had enhanced Jigglypuff's ability to manipulate Type Energy enough to refine her favorite movement ability. Yet, that was almost a side note as Zoey was the only one who'd managed to close her eyes fast enough to see what 'Wave Breaker' was.

The answer was simple, and just as aggressive as 2B tended to train all of her pokémon to be. It was nothing more or less than a refinement of the Water Pulse + Brick Break maneuver Zoey had seen Jigglypuff pull back in Viridian. Just like then, the pure speed of the Water-Pulse-riding added brutally to Jigglypuff's Brick Break to the Face. Despite Sheldon's head being by far the toughest part of the pokémon, it cried out in pain as it was thrown back several meters by the hit.

"Dig!"

"Pulse and Lullaby"

There wasn't enough time to set up another Pulse Machinegun, but a straightforward Water Pulse was a different matter. Before Sheldon could recover enough to execute the command to use Dig, it ate a Water Pulse to the face that prevented it from doing anything of the sort. That kept it on the surface long enough for Zoey to blink in astonishment at a move 2B had never shown before.

Jigglypuff *Sang* a pair of notes, but instead of continuing and triggering Sing like normal, she concentrated the power of those notes in her fist and...*smashed Sheldon between the eyes with her fist*. The move was whole unexpected and incongruous with the action until now. Yet, contrary to sanity, it seemed to work. Sheldon just *collapsed*, out like a light as Jigglypuff pulled away.

"Fairy Buster Sword."

Who to the what now? Zoey started in disbelief as Jigglypuff started pulling together a *sword made of Fairy Type Energy*. A Sword that was *five times her own size*. It clearly was a charge-up style move, like Solar Beam...but Sheldon was asleep. Forrest clearly read the writing on the wall and a beam lanced out from Sheldon's pokéball, returning him. The

Gym Leader looked a little pole-axed, and to Zoey's blissful amusement, even the Ref took unprofessionally long seconds to come out of his shock.

"S-shieldon has been withdrawn! Gym Leader, you have thirty seconds to send out your second pokémon!"

More like forty seconds, given the delay the Ref had accidentally added via his own surprise. Still, Zoey was sanguine about that. She had a pretty good idea what 2B was about to do, and Forrest having extra time to think wouldn't help him one bit. She noted the Gym Leader was frowning, hand tapping along his pokéballs, and she narrowed her eyes as it drifted toward the back of his pokébelt.

Strictly speaking it wasn't universal, but *most* Gym Leaders kept their Ace there. A pokémon a badge or two higher than the rest, intended for dealing with those who misrepresented the strength of their pokémon. She could understand why Forrest was considering it, and couldn't even quite be offended on 2B's behalf by it. While Jigglypuff hadn't been an inherited pokémon like the usual exceptions, trained by someone else first, the amount of time she'd spent with 2B had made her similarly higher-level than she really ought to be. Their circumstances and the fact Jigglypuff had been a *baby* pokémon for much of that time mean they technically squeaked by without even bending the rules on that, let alone breaking them.

Something that wouldn't be obvious to an outsider like Forrest, justifying him breaking out the bigger guns.

The problem, of course, is Zoey knew 2B wasn't intending to continue using Jigglypuff.

Zoey could only cringe and hope for the best when Forrest made his decision and pulled his Ace, face stormy as he didn't bother with the theatrics and sent his choice out in a beam of light. When it processed what she was seeing, though, a huge grin split her face.

"Oh! A Tyrunt! Those are far rarer, the Gym only uses them as Aces for at least 2nd and 3rd badges! I wonder why he decided to use it here?"

The local that had been helpful before sounded a mix of excited and puzzled, but Zoey was just *relieved*. Forrest couldn't have known it, not without looking more deeply into 2B's team than he was supposed to be allowed without reason, but he'd just fucked up epically. Tyrunt's Rock Typing might even things out, but it's *Dragon* Typing had just made Vulpix's Ice moves neutral hits, instead of coming in at a disadvantage. She also understood now why Forrest had hesitated. It would, after all, be neutral to Jigglypuff's Fairy

Typing too. He'd obviously decided that it being his Ace, the most capable pokémon he'd allowed himself to bring, was more important.

"Tyrunt vs Jigglypuff! Begin!"

The instant the Ref spoke, Forrest called out a move.

"Rock Blast!"

...Only for that Move to hit empty air as 2B did *exactly* what Zoey was expecting and withdrew Jigglypuff. The Ref was visibly confused, but powered through.

"Challenger 2B had used her Swap! Challenger, you have thirty seconds to release your second pokémon!"

Zoey was riding the edge of her seat as she watched 2B's lips finally switch from a level deadpan, twitching up just slightly at the corners, as she raised a Luxury Ball and spoke calmly and clearly as she deployed Vulpix.

"Barrage Start."

Poor Forrest and the Spectators were both left with whiplash as, between one heartbeat and the next, Vulpix wrenched the Type Energy that would normally surge out for Snow Warning and forced it into the Charge Up for Ice Burst Barrage. *Five* of her Ice Burst modified Ice Shards formed instantly on and between Vulpix's tails, and those tails whipped forward before Forrest could even process what pokémon he was facing.

By the time he could react, the barrage of grenade-like ice shells broke on contact with the ground all around Tyrunt, viciously stabbing the pokémon from every direction with Type-infused shards of ice. Tyrunt cried out in pain, completely unprepared for the move that battered and sliced at it from all sides.

"Disarming Voice."

Forrest snapped out of his surprise and reflexively shouted his own command.

"Rock Slide and keep it up!"

It was a good move, as Vulpix didn't have the same insane maneuverability as Jigglypuff. Yet the Disarming Voice hit first, disrupting Tyrunt's concentration enough that Vulpix was able to doge most of the damage with a Quick Attack used on her own initiative.

"Disable and Barrage."

Zoey blinked as Vulpix's eyes flashed and Tyrunt cried out in frustration. She'd forgotten that Vulpix even *knew* Disable. Yet, it was a good move. Vulpix wasn't a tank and

would struggle with Area attacks like Rock Slide. It also disrupted the flow as Forrest had to switch orders, letting Vulpix build a three-shard Ice Burst Barrage.

“Damnit. Close and Bite!”

Clearly, Forrest was hoping that closing with Vulpix would prevent her from using any additional Ice Bursts, and he’d been correct in thinking so. Tyrunt didn’t look very happy after tanking all three of the current Barrage, but its charge had closed the distance.

“Hypnosis.”

Except that there was apparently a reason that 2B hadn’t bothered to order a dodge. Another move from Vulpix’s pool that Zoey had forgotten about was all the more effective with Tyrunt having charged Vulpix down with angry eye-contact. It slowed, sleep taking it just a step or two before reaching Vulpix, who dodged back and started building another Barrage without orders.

A beam of light shot out and Tyrunt vanished. Apparently, Forrest had seen enough.

“Tyrunt has been withdrawn! Challenger 2B wins! Challenger, you may enter the field to collect your badge.”

The Ref seemed to be operating on autopilot at this point, looking nearly as stunned as the crowd, who’d gone wide-eyed and silent, unsure what the hell they’d just watched. Grinning at that thought, Zoey lept the railing and dashed for 2B. Hopefully, Forrest wasn’t as annoyed as he’d looked when he settled on Tyrunt...

Chapter 24 – Celebration

Thankfully, Zoey needn’t have worried. Forrest had been more *chagrined* than he had been angry. Apparently, the Gym had been warned by the Oaks that one of the Lab Trainers may be displaying new moves. It was, in fact, why he’d opened with a stronger pokémon than usual and pushed through with Tyrunt as well. His reaction there, he’d admitted freely, had been borderline enough that 2B would have almost certainly received her badge even if she’d lost.

With another Trainer, that might not have been the case, those ‘Ace’ pokémon that were a few levels higher were kept on call for a reason. There were *always* some people that tried to cheat the system by using transferred pokémon trained by a professional to coast through the early badges. With Professor Oak, of all people, being able to verify that such wasn’t the case with 2B, using that ‘Ace’ pokémon was a little over the line. The fact that 2B

had won *anyway* had, in fact, caused Forrest to give out one of the rare TMs they saved for particularly promising battlers.

Zoey had earned one too, as it happened, which was something she was immensely proud of.

Apparently, at least at the Pewter Gym, each Gym Leader chose a favorite move to give out that way. Brock's had been Bide, Flint's had been Rock Tomb, but Forrest's? It was *Dig*. Which was such an immensely useful TM that it was honestly often hard to come by, and Zoey and 2B had both been quite pleased to receive copies. They were single-use versions, sadly. But it was still a nice extra, and getting them at all was a satisfying recognition that went beyond just their first Kanto Badges.

They had also, as Zoey predicted, needed to fend off a few dozen questions from the crowd. By sheer luck, there hadn't been any pokédexes, even the consumer model, in the crowd. Though, that was perhaps only *half* luck. With the sheer deluge of First Badge challenges in Pewter at this time of year, the crowds weren't dense for any specific match. Not unless the match was for a local who had plenty of friends and family to fill in the stands.

Despite that, there *had* been enough knowledgeable people in the crowd to want to quiz 2B on the moves she'd used, and Zoey was virtually certain 2B's challenge would break the usual mold and show up on Battlecast, despite only being a First Badge challenge. It would after *that* aired, with the professional commentators on the Battlecast stream unable to identify some of the moves, that the real hubbub had the potential to spring up. Something which would take at least a day or two, even once Forrest put the video up on the Gym's own 'interesting highlights' page. Which he'd said wouldn't be updated until tomorrow morning.

Hopefully, that meant they had at least two to three days to get out of town.

Of course, now, as their pokémon all indulged in well-earned premium food and Pewter Crunchies, Zoey needed to fulfil a promise to herself. One which, as a once-more casually dressed 2B adorably sipped a milkshake, Zoey was working up her nerve to do. It wasn't something that she normally needed to do, working up her nerve that was. No one had ever accused her of a lack of boldness. Yet, 2B was so...unpredictable, that she'd found she needed an unusual amount of effort to get the words out. For that matter, she'd needed an embarrassingly long time to figure out *which* words.

Ultimately, reviewing her limited understanding of 2B, she'd decided blunt honesty was the way to go.

“So, I waited until after the challenge so this wouldn’t be a distraction for either of us, but I would very much like to go on a date with you, 2B. If you’re interested, that it?”

Whew. She’d gotten it out without stuttering! So what if her palms were sweaty and she could barely taste her spaghetti. No one needed to know that! 2B, instead of answering immediately, cocked her head in that cute way she did when confused. Before Zoey could worry about that, she asked a question that threw Zoey for a loop.

“Have we not already done that? You are attracted to me, and we went to the Pewter Museum together. Relationships are confusing. Is there something else we need to do, to make it a date?”

Zoey blinked, mind stuttering in confusion for a moment as she tried to figure out how to answer that. Yes, she’d had a similar thought, in that she’d considered the museum visit something of a pseudo-date. Yet, there was context missing, and she abruptly realized that it was exactly the sort of Common Sense context that 2B was bad at. Pursing her lips, she scrambled to find a way to contextualize it for her friend...hopefully to soon be a little bit more than just a friend.

“...Many activities that can be done by friends, are also done as dates. That much is true. I guess, the main difference is in *intent*? That and formal recognition of that intent. In admitting that you’re both attracted to each other, the intent changes, and simply getting to know a friend becomes getting to know a possible lover? Though, for a first date, it’s really only exploring compatibility, I guess?”

Seeing 2B was still confused, Zoey struggled to find a comparison 2B would be familiar with. Eventually, she mentally stumbled upon one that might work, though hopefully 2B didn’t dig into it too deeply. It was a bit of a problematic comparison if you took it too far.

“Consider it like the difference between playing with a wild pokémon and caring for your own. Both can be fun, but the *bond* you’re attempting to build with your companion is meant to be *deeper*. It doesn’t always work out, just as a pokémon and Trainer sometimes find they have different life priorities and part ways amicably. But it’s an exploration in attempting to find out if that deeper compatibility *exists*. To see if someone might become a permanent companion instead of a passing friend.”

The explanation was imperfect, Zoey knew. Only when trying to explain it from the outside did she properly realize just how much social and cultural context was tied up in the idea of dating or courtship. With 2B somehow *not having* a lot of the same context that everyone took for granted, it must be hard to sort out the blurry line. Still, she could see when 2B’s eyes, thankfully not covered by her visor at the moment, gained the light of at

least partial understanding. Her heart thrummed painfully in her chest as 2B hummed and nodded.

“I think I get it. Yes, I would like to try ‘dating’ with you. I find you highly attractive and have noticed you certainly find me the same. I believe we might have that compatibility.”

Zoey’s heart soared, even as 2B’s blunt statement caused a small blush to form on her face. It wasn’t exactly poetic prose declaring her beauty, but the simple matter-of-fact way 2B said she found her ‘highly attractive’ was so ridiculously blunt that it couldn’t be anything but honest. It was refreshing, in a way, compared to the flowery ways that many of her fellow Coordinators regularly complimented her. Often without there being any actual *substance* behind the empty statements.

“U-um, good! Yes! Ah, I was thinking we could hike up to the local Observatory? According to a pamphlet I snagged from the Museum, they have an amateur viewing night once a week, and it happens to be tonight. We just need to bring a blanket and any food we want, and they provide decent telescopes and someone who can recommend interesting things to see in the night sky...”

2B perked up, much to Zoey’s satisfaction. She hadn’t been entirely sure on what the other girl was interested in other than pokémon, but she *had* shown a decent amount of interest in the Kanto space program at the museum. She’d hope that it meant 2B was at least casually interested in space. Which seemed, in fact, to be correct.

“I would like that. I’ve been quite interested in observing the differences in the cosmos as seen from here rather than my home.”

Zoey blinked. There was something a little odd about that comment, but she couldn’t quite put her mental finger on it. Oh well, for now it meant she’d picked a good ‘First Date’ activity. A small picnic of sorts, under the stars, with something the girl she was interested in was, herself, interested in. The fact Zoey herself had always enjoyed stargazing, though not for any focused reason like 2B seemed to have, was only the cherry on top.

“Excellent! It’s a date, then...”

... ..

Zoey was happy, snuggled into 2B’s side for warmth as the other girl panned the telescope they’d been assigned with a controller. Much to both of their delight, the Pewter Observatory was much more high-tech than she’d expected. The ‘provided telescopes’ weren’t the truly amateur setups, where you had to lean over and stare into a tiny scope. Instead, they were thick, mounted cylinders that streamed to a screen, which acted as

both viewer and controller. Apparently, high end models sometimes had a Rotom in them to help manage focusing and guide you to where to look, though these weren't quite *that* nice.

2B liked it, as it was a far more *precise* way to scan the night sky. Being able to punch in exact movements for the telescope, based on the guide's advice, meant a lot less time staring at fuzzy blurs and trying to make out if it was what you were supposed to be looking at or not. Zoey liked it because it meant 2B was content to rest on the blanket with her, leaned against a giant poof that 2B had pulled from what Zoey was already thinking of as The Storage Bracer of Infinite Possibilities. Due, it had to be said, to how many weird things 2B had thought to pack in it.

It made for the perfect position for cuddles, and she had been delighted to discover that 2B was in no way adverse to said cuddles. Still, conversation had to be made as well, now that the guide had largely left everyone to their own devices and 2B was idly investigating random stellar objects.

"Hmmm 2B, do you think there are other worlds with pokémon out there? Or are they something unique to our world?"

2B stirred, shifting more attention to Zoey as her lips quirked.

"It is almost certain there are. After all, there are several species here on the planet that we either know for sure, or otherwise suspect, have extra-terrestrial origins. It is not overly common knowledge, but it *is* why virtually every region that can afford such has a space program. It is thought that there may be *many* more types of pokémon out there. Either on other worlds, or that reside within the void of space itself somehow."

Zoey blinked, doing a double take.

"Wait. What? There are *confirmed* alien pokémon?!"

2B nodded calmly, though there was a fascinated quality to her voice as she explained.

"Yes. Lunatone and Solrock are known to have come from a crashed meteorite originally, about 40 years ago. Those and Ultra Beasts, which are extra-dimensional rather than extra-terrestrial, are the only ones truly confirmed. A number of others are strongly suspected within scientific communities, however. The Cleffa-Clefable line are *only* found around meteor impact sights. The Staryu-Starmie line broadcast radio frequencies toward space for unknown reasons. Gothorita arrange pebbles into the shape of constellations by instinct, though that one is less informative. Elgyem and Beheeyem are also believed to come from a UFO crash site, though that one is unconfirmed."

Zoey stared at 2B in shock. Not only was that *far* more words than 2B normally strung together, but the topic was...a bit mind-blowing. Sure, she'd heard the rumors about the Clefairy line. Who hadn't? But rumors and legends were a *long* way from confirmation, which apparently existed for at least two species?!

"Um, so Clefairy really come from the *moon*, then?"

2B's lips quirked into a smile as she glanced away from the telescope output to focus on Zoey.

"Possibly! Logically, that shouldn't be possible. There shouldn't be air up there, and Clefairy need to breathe. Yet, their association with 'moonstone,' which is really meteorite rock of a specific type, is undeniable. Part of the reason many regions want to reach space is a burning curiosity about the *how*, if they are from there. Not to mention how many pokémon have effects that seem related to the moon and its cycles. Getting up there to study it seems to be the only way to get proper answers!"

A bit blown away, but enjoying how animated 2B was about the discussion, Zoey decided that snuggling deeper into 2B's side was the only logical thing to do. She could puzzle over existential questions later.

"Actually, I have a bit of a theory that humans may not be native to this planet either. Of all the species on it, we are perhaps the most out of place. Though, it's just as likely that humans *are* native, along with the many non-pokémon animals, and the pokémon invaded in some fashion, long in the past. I am very curious as to know which it is!"

Yep. Putting those existential questions *firmly* out of her mind for now. Just bask in 2B's delight, and count this as a successful date idea, Zoey. That's the way to go...

... ..

2B hummed to herself as she lay in the comfortable bed of her hotel suite, the quiet noise a behavior that had become less and less strange to her since her first arrival in this world. It *shouldn't* do anything, yet somehow she felt it helped her think, to focus. Daisy had claimed a lot of people had little quirks like that. Some humans had to be constantly in motion to think properly, for example, with a foot tapping away for fingers drumming on some surface or another. Others needed to verbalize their thought process, talking to themselves, a pokémon, or even just a stuffed animal they kept for that purpose. Daisy claimed to know a programmer who swore by talking to a rubber Psyduck, though 2B wasn't entirely sure she believed her.

In 2B's case, serious thought seemed to bring an instinctive half-tuneless hum she'd taken an embarrassingly long time to realize matched the modulation of the YoRHa carrier

signal she used to be constantly connected to. Its absence was, she supposed, still alien enough to her that she unconsciously mimicked it at times she might have called on the YoRHa servers for extra processing power in the past.

She'd certainly like having that extra processing power now, as she tried very hard to sort through her feelings after her 'first date' with Zoey. It had been...pleasant. That was too weak a word, really. Yet 2B was all too aware that she lacked the experience or context to properly label everything she had felt. Zoey's warmth tucked into 2B's side had been almost addictive, their conversation stimulating but not really even needed. Just being in the other girl's presence had been very nice, different somehow from how they were around each other at other times. Even at the museum. Though 2B couldn't define at all what the difference had been.

She would need to think on this a great deal more, as well as test additional dates to try sorting her emotions out better from the tangle. One way or another, she rather thought she liked 'dating,' so far, even if she didn't fully understand it yet...

Chapter 25 – On the Road to Mount Moon

Thankfully, neither Zoey nor 2B had possessed any desire to linger in Pewter City after they'd both gotten their Boulder Badges and had their date. This meant that they managed to escape the city, heading for Mt. Moon and the Route through it that led to Cerulean City, before Battlecast had picked up on 2B's match. It was a full day journey, even if you set a brisk pace, and they weren't in any particular hurry. Thus, they'd stopped for some light training before lunch and were now having a bit of rest while they ate said lunch.

Tentatively, Zoey decided it was a good time to bring up something else she'd wanted to ask about for a while. Part of her wanted to wait, so that 2B didn't think she was dating her just to get what she wanted, but she honestly didn't think her companion was likely to leap to that conclusion. Nor did Zoey have even the slightest intention of pressing the issue if the answer was in any way negative.

"Hey, do you mind if I ask you a bit about Aura? Ash didn't really, you know, *know* anything. Other than some super basics. It seems so useful that it's a little odd to me it isn't more well known, actually."

2B blinked, looking away from where she'd been pampering Vulpix by brushing her coat out. The little fox had been downright smug since its victory, rightfully so given that the Tyrunt she'd faced had been well beyond the level any First Badge fight should have

featured. Though if the self-satisfied smugness and heightened ego didn't wear off in a few more days, Zoey might have to caution 2B not to let it get to her starter's head. Given that Jigglypuff *existed*, and Vulpix looked up to Jigglypuff greatly, it probably wouldn't come to that.

"I don't mind. Part of why Daisy is studying aura is that she agrees. Spreading carefully curated and correct knowledge of aura could help in many ways."

A mild amount of relief flooded Zoey at that response. She hadn't really considered that the reason Daisy Oak might be studying aura in the first place was to potentially *spread awareness*, but it made a sort of sense. Her grandfather was famous the world over for his study into the Bonds between pokémon and Trainer, and from a few things 2B had said before, at least some of how that Bond worked was likely aura related. If Zoey remembered correctly, proving that was the case had been one focus of Daisy's research.

"Right, well...I suppose the big question is about who can learn it? I don't really care about being able to punch out a raging Gyarados or something, but the much clearer communication you have with pokémon would be really nice."

That comment got another nod and a small smile from 2B, farther relieving Zoey. There was a long pause as 2B seemed to be working out how to answer. Something that Zoey was more than willing to wait out.

"Everyone has aura. Everyone can learn. Not easily, but possible. I think most serious Trainers would have an easier time, as most of them have likely felt Aura Links with their companions and just not known what was happening."

Zoey blinked at that, echoing the phrase as a question.

"Aura links?"

2B nodded, seeming to think it was obvious, but she also seemed to at least understand that Zoey was confused and looking for more information.

"Moments where you and your pokémon were perfectly in synch. Mega-evolution requires it, as do some pokémon evolutions. Those evolutions that are frequently called 'Friendship' based almost certainly actually require a frequent and stable Aura Link, where the pokémon and human's aura are freely mixing."

Huh. That...actually made sense out of the idea of 'Friendship/Happiness Evolutions,' at least if she was grasping this concept correctly. She'd always wondered how they heck that worked, even if it was proven to work. For that matter, she sort of thought she understood the state that 2B was describing. Almost all truly high-level Coordinators

relied on a state like that, where they and their pokémon could practically read each others' minds. It was something a lot of Coordinators had little rituals to help them with, to get in the right mindset. When she said as much, absentmindedly, to 2B, her companion perked up.

"Would you like to try? To see if it's the same state?"

Zoey's mind skipped for a second at that offer.

"Er, what do you mean, exactly? That I should try with Purugly so you can see...?"

2B shook her head in the negative.

"No. Humans can link Auras too. Daisy and I did so frequently when testing various concepts. If I establish an Aura Link with you, you'll be able to feel what one is like, then compare it to what you feel with Purugly."

Okay that...hadn't been a possibility that had occurred to her. Zoey had been thinking of aura as a way to communicate with *pokémon*. Somehow, it had never occurred to her that it would work to connect *people*, as well. She supposed it made sense she hadn't considered it before. After all, you could just *talk* to a person, whereas most wild pokémon didn't understand the spoken word. It generally took years of being around Trainers for them to pick structured language up. Simple words or name association came quickly, just as it did for normal animals. Being able to understand complex sentences took a *lot* longer, for those pokémon that managed it at all.

Well, except for Psychic Types, who were cheating cheaters who cheated.

"Um, sure? What do we need to do? It won't hurt, will it?"

2B shook her head, then shifted Vulpix off her lap. The little fox pokémon huffed at that, but didn't protest. Indeed, it looked a little interested. Did Vulpix understand enough to be curious? Possibly. She'd been raised around humans to some extent, and born to two Trainer pokémon, so it was probable Vulpix had a decent grasp of language. Even if it was practically unnecessary with her Trainer, since 2B was at natural at using aura to communicate.

They'd stopped in one of the semi-cleared fields along the edge of the route, but not one with any benches or other manmade *anything*. As such, they were both already seated on the ground, not really an issue or even something to think too hard on when they were both wearing the sort of made-for-Trainers clothing that scoffed at grass stains.

Probably in a Scottish accent.

Regardless of which accent their clothes spoke in the dark of the night, their current positioning on the ground made it quite easy for 2B to simply scoot around to face Zoey. In doing so, she shifted to sit cross-legged and held her hands out, palms up. Curious, but getting the idea easily enough, Zoey shifted to a similar position, but placed her hands palm down in each of 2B's.

"What do we do no-"

Abruptly, as 2B's hands began to lightly glow, Zoey's eyes shot wide open. The sensation of her and 2B's aura slowly intermingling was impossible to describe, but equally impossible to *miss*. It was the same feeling she got when she was the most 'in synch' with Purugly, but that was a *fait echo* of this. She was *aware* of the connection between her and 2B in a way that she'd never even imagined possible, able to *feel* the other girl's calming presence and happiness at getting to share something.

Wait. She could feel 2B's presence and get a general idea of what she was feeling? Did that mean 2B was getting the same thing *from her*? Only maybe *more* since 2B knew what she doing?! Abruptly, Zoey tried *not* to think about 2B's gorgeous eyes, amazingly perky tits for their size, and the ass you just wanted to spend the whole day walking behind. Predictably, to literally anyone in the history of man or pokémon kind, trying *not* to think of something immediately brought it to mind.

Face immediately flushing red, even as she felt an *amused* reciprocation and the idea that 2B found both Zoey's hair and breasts aesthetically pleasing return from the link, Zoey yelped and instinctively pulled her hands away. The connection broke and she immediately felt *lesser* for it, for just a few moments, before normalcy returned and she merely found herself sitting across from a slightly-smiling 2B. Zoey's face absolutely refused to return to normal from its blush as 2B spoke in an entirely-too-level voice.

"Hmm, perhaps I failed to account for the fact Daisy already knew how to control her personal Aura and the emotions she fed into it? We can try some meditative exercises first, next time, if I didn't frighten you off."

Frighten her off?! No, all it did was leave her more than a little flushed, and possibly with slightly damp panties. Who knew that handholding could be so *lewd*?!

"Uh-um, no. No, that didn't scare me off. It was, um...just a bit much? It was interesting, but those meditation exercises might be a good idea..."

2B nodded with a happy twitch upwards of her smile, becoming one of the most expressive that Zoey had ever seen out of the other girl. Damn it, now was *not* the time to be tempted to kiss her!

Of course, Zoey forgot that 2B still read aura to an extent, even when not connected so directly, and a moment later her mind blanked completely as 2B leaned in to peck her on the lips...

... ..

After the slight embarrassment of Zoey's first close encounter with Aura Linking, they'd gathered up their things and moved on. There weren't a lot of pokémon locally that either 2B or Zoey were interested in specifically looking for, with the only truly interesting ones tending to be rare enough that they'd jointly decided it wasn't worth looking for them. Shinx and Baltoy had *very rarely* been spotted in the area, for example. Yet neither were native to Kanto, had likely descended from released pokémon, and were extremely small in numbers as a result. While Zoey would have personally loved a Shinx for the upcoming Water Type gym, it wasn't a strong enough desire to drive her to spend days looking for one. Not even if 2B's aura abilities might have made it easier.

As a result, they'd pushed on and managed to reach the foot of Mt. Moon, or at least the point which the locals considered such, just as night fell.

Mt. Moon had its own dedicated pokémon center, for the very good reason that people coming *out* of the mountain after passing through it from Cerulean City were generally exhausted. Heading *to* Cerulean didn't have the same issue, as the City was right up against the mountain. Pewter, on the other hand, was a full day's walk from their side of the mountain, necessitating a place to rest and treat pokémon and Trainers alike that made it through the caves. The center wasn't terribly large, however, and the issues with the logjam of Trainers milling around Pewter were only just starting to clear up. Neither of them had been surprised, as a result, to find that there had only been a single room left. Honestly, they'd been more surprised there were *any* rooms left, rather than that there was only the one.

Zoey had been a *little* concerned that 2B would take issue with sharing, even if it was thankfully a two-bed room, now that they were dating. Thankfully, 2B seemed completely oblivious to there being any difference and hadn't hesitated to take the room at all. Of course, that *did* mean that Zoey's hormones were once again subjected to the sight of 2B's version of nightwear. As the teddy that was 'good for when sleeping with others' reappeared, she somehow found she didn't have any problem with that...

... ..

2B was as careful and quiet as she could be when she sat up, having waited until several minutes after Zoey's breathing evened out. She only really needed roughly four hours of sleep a night, at most, but had discovered quickly that others grew concerned

about that fact if she didn't conceal it. Even Daisy had been that way until a thorough round of testing had proven that 2B legitimately just *didn't need* as much sleep as a baseline human. Others, such as one of the older and kinder research assistants that Professor Oak kept on staff, had been harder to convince.

It was easier just to pretend she needed as much sleep as her new companion did.

Doubly so as she didn't want Zoey to grow concerned she was slowing 2B down.

Traveling with a human was, after all, a far better way to learn about humans than traveling without one. That she was also rapidly coming to like Zoey, and thought that 'dating' her was enjoyable so far, only made her desire not to leave her behind stronger. Besides, there were a great many things she could do with her visor, the pokédex and pokégear it was linked too, and the spare hours of time.

Such as looking on the local, primitive version of the internet to attempt to see what 'dating' involved. Something she'd decided needed doing after wrestling with her knot of poorly understood feelings after their first date. She wasn't completely ignorant, and she was aware that she was likely to have to filter out a great deal of porn in her attempts to find useful information. But she felt that Zoey deserved her trying to figure it out if she could. Including figuring out if she should offer to connect them again to better understand one another. 2B had found Zoey's feelings of desire toward her quite complimentary, if somewhat expected, given that YoRHa Androids had been designed on idealized human templates.

For some reason, Zoey herself seemed embarrassed by revealing that information though. It was a curious issue and 2B wanted to see if there was a way to help the other girl through her obvious issues with intimacy. Perhaps exposure therapy? She *did* have a few nightwear options that were less concealing, which a blushing Daisy had insisted were only to be worn with a boy or girlfriend around. Zoey *was* her girlfriend now, though, so it might be a good solution.

She would need to try and fact check. As well as check the Common Sense Checklist. At worst, if she couldn't figure it out, she could contact Daisy and ask, she supposed. But she'd really feel better about her progress if she could sort this out herself...

Chapter 26 – Mount Moon (Part 1)

As they did a final check over their gear before heading into Mt. Moon, 2B brought up an important topic. At least, one she felt was important, given they were both Trainers doing the Gym Circuit.

“Are there any pokémon you are interested in, in Mt. Moon? It’s known to be home to quite a few Rock and Ground types, with a scattering of fighting types, bug types, and the Clefairy and Chansey lines.”

2B, herself was considering a Makuhita. There were a few known colonies of them in the mountain, which tended to be off the beaten paths. As Fighting Types, however, there would almost certainly be a few who would respond to her Aura Lure trick if she got close enough. A proper fighting type would certainly fit with the relatively aggressive nature of her team. The unevolved version was rather cute, too, though 2B wasn’t sure why Daisy had counted that as such a major bonus.

As Daisy was very wise, it must be important somehow.

On the flip side of the argument, Makuhita weren’t as speed focused as her team, and she only had two carrying slots left before she’d have to rotate some pokémon back to the Oak ranch. She could trust Daisy in particular to look after any pokémon she sent back there, and many of the Elite pokémon from various Trainers like Ketchum tended to be free with advice. So even a teammate sent to the ranch would hardly be uncared for. At the same time, doing so too quickly after catching one was something 2B felt strongly against, as it wouldn’t give the Trainer enough time to form proper bonds. A sentiment that the Oaks shared and one of their few standing disagreements with Ash Ketchum’s capture policies.

“I wouldn’t say ‘no’ to a Clefairy, honestly, but I know few of them leave the mountain and it honestly wouldn’t fit my current goals well anyway. A Sandshrew, though? That’s a pokémon I have my eyes on. Absol are another option, as I’ve heard there are some here. I’m from a snowy region where they are respected, rather than feared. We know they try to *help* by warning people, rather than causing the dangers themselves. Those two, three technically if you count the unlikely chance of a Clefairy, are all that really interest me, I think.”

2B considered the list. A Sandshrew would almost certainly be easy, and their evolved form really could be formidable ground types. Absol were rarely caught unless they wanted to be, but it wasn’t unheard of around Mt. Moon, and despite being a single-stage pokémon they were extremely versatile. One was more likely to be attracted by a Trainer who thought well of its species, too. Clefairy, of course, was just as unlikely as Zoey had stated. Some of them *did* leave Mt. Moon, but it was *rare*. Typically, no more than one or two a year, and the League tended to quietly check to make sure they’d been caught legitimately when they popped up. 2B herself would likely have better luck, if she tried for one, what with her ability to create Fairy Type Aura and Jigglypuff on her team. Truthfully,

though, she wasn't all that interested in the Clefairy line precisely because she *did* have Jigglypuff.

Finally, she nodded.

"It's a good list. According to the notes on Mt. Moon from the lab, Absol are found almost exclusively in the upper regions of the caves, which you don't strictly need to visit to go through the Route to Cerulean. The only pokémon I'm interested in is found in such places more often as well, so our best bet might be to explore the upper mountain."

Zoey blinked, then frowned.

"Would that count as going off Route?"

2B immediately shook her head in the negative.

"No. Mt. Moon is unusual. Because the traffic between Pewter and Cerulean has been ongoing for centuries, the entire mountain is human-influenced territory. Not truly managed as a 'Route,' but more that the pokémon themselves recognize a sort of territorial claim by the humans. Much as they do with cities."

Zoey looked surprised by that, which wasn't really shocking, to be honest. That level of detail in knowledge was somewhat rare among non-researchers. 2B herself had found it fascinating the way pokémon and humans had reached an equilibrium of sorts like that in places. It was mostly only when something *changed*, like the new mining project that ExoDrill had started on, that the equilibrium was disrupted. Though pokémon without a history of interacting with humans, or who had been given a reason to dislike humans before growing powerful enough, still caused problems. There were even, it had to be said, some pokémon who were just assholes. Those latter causes all being why the Rangers were needed.

"Huh, you learn something new every day, I guess? In that case, I'd say at least giving the upper areas a look is worthwhile. We aren't in a major hurry just yet, after all, and both of us still need to fill out our teams. Me even more so than you."

Zoey finished repacking her gear in the Storage Bracer she'd acquired while in Pewter City. It was not, of course, nearly as massive inside as 2B's custom prototype, but it was still far better than her old backpack. Though she, like 2B, was dressed in study hiking gear that had loops and pockets for a few items it was best to keep on hand. Chemical glowsticks, a loop of sturdy rope, and other such caving basics.

"Well, we've checked our supplies, and Chinchou is providing light for us. So, shall we get moving?"

2B nodded at the suggestion, lifting Chinchou up to rest on her shoulder. His bioluminescence would bother the Zubat and other light-sensitive pokémon less than the harsh light of a flashlight or lantern, which would hopefully reduce the number of times they were attacked by everyone's least favorite flying rats. Not even 2B and Daisy had much good to say about the nuisances, and they both liked nearly all types of pokémon...

... ..

The most well-traveled path between Pewter City and Cerulean City, the path that officially made up the 'Route' through the mountain, actually *was* lit. The 'lighting,' however, only came in the form of environmentally friendly bioluminescent light markers. They were enough to guide someone who was lost, while at the same time having an extremely minimal impact on the ecological cycle of the caves. Like most things in the world of humans and pokémon, a carefully considered and managed balance.

Those markers vanished if you went even a single cross path off the main 'Route.'

Only a genuine idiot could miss the signs of doing so, as the intersections where splits and crossways would lead you to different parts of the mountain were the most well-marked of all. Not just with the bioluminescent markers, but with writing on the walls for those carrying brighter lights that would overwhelm the weak markers. Their own light, provided by Chinchou, wasn't quite strong enough to completely overwhelm those markers. Some Trainers, however, were freaked out by low-light conditions underground and brought brighter lights, risking the ire of the Zubats. 2B had read plenty of stories of those traveling this Route and encountering *endless numbers* of angry Zubats.

Mostly because those idiots had either brought bright lights or used a move like Flash to flood the caves with light. Seriously, if someone came into *your* room while you were sleeping and tossed out a flash grenade or started up a disco ball, you'd be pretty pissed too...

So far, keeping to a gentler light provided by Chinchou had prevented them from needing to deal with those same Zubat swarms, and half an hour in they came to an intersection that had been marked with the more esoteric signs used by Researchers and Rangers. Neither group wanted to let the Average Joe Trainer bumble about in areas with rarer or more powerful pokémon, but they *did* leave markers for those with the right knowledge that would at least point you in general directions. That wasn't true everywhere of course, but Mt. Moon had been studied for a *long* time, so it was true enough here.

All of which meant that 2B, who had been made aware of such signs due to her position with the Oak Lab, was able to direct them into the side passage that, counterintuitively, initially went *down* at a gentle slope, not up. Intentionally or not, this did

a good job of hiding that this new passage would eventually take you *up* into the colder parts of the mountain. A place where Absol, naturally inclined toward colder climates, and Makuhita, who regularly had the Thick Fat ability, would be entirely at home.

They had passed the point where the passage started climbing again, having only been challenged by a few Geodudes and a single Zubat so far, when they heard running feet...and the ground started shaking all around them. As a panicked looking researcher rounded a corner, a horde of various types of pokémon chasing him, Zoey had a single moment to deadpan in 2B's direction before they deployed all their pokémon.

"I just can't take you anywhere without a pokémon rampage, can I?"

2B looked confused and slightly affronted for just a moment before they were both too busy shouting commands...

... ..

Thankfully, whatever had caused the 'rampage' hadn't provoked any truly strong pokémon, and running into 2B and Zoey's fully deployed teams had quickly discouraged those that had been chasing the man in a lab coat. A man that, once the horde had retreated, 2B was immediately able to identify.

"Mr. Kenji! What has set the pokémon here off?"

Seeing the man, despite appearing to be in decent shape, was a bit too out of breath to answer, Zoey directed her own question at 2B.

"You know him?"

2B nodded and pointed to a small symbol on the breast of the man's lab coat. He'd almost caught his breath and straightened up, but was still visibly gathering his wits. Zoey vaguely recognized the symbol from some of 2B's own more 'official' outfits, and belatedly realized it was probably a mark associated with the Oak Lab.

"Yes. This is Mr. Kenji, one of Professor Oak's senior field assistants. He isn't in the lab all that often, since his specialty is long-term study of pokémon habitats and migrations, but I've met him twice when he was visiting to give reports."

The man had, thankfully, fully recovered at this point, and spoke up for himself. Voice somehow soft yet boisterous at the same time.

"Ah, I remember you as well! Young 2B, I believe! I don't remember human names very well, usually, but yours was enough of an oddity it stuck out! As to what is going on, I'm

rather afraid I don't entirely know. I was, in fact, attempting to discover exactly that when the pokémon you saw chasing me took unusual exception to my presence!"

The man patted a trio of pokéballs at his waist as he went on.

"Normally, most pokémon leave myself and Blissey alone as we pass through. The entire Chansey line are welcome almost everywhere, by almost all pokémon, due to their willingness to heal any injured in a territory. She acts as an ambassador between be and unknown pokémon, and we've never had trouble in Mt. Moon before! After all, while still a wild area, the pokémon here are far more used to humans moving through. Why, normally, it's one of the easiest of my long-term habitat-observation stops to safely visit!"

2B was nodding, a frown developing on her face.

"But they attacked this time, and you don't know why?"

The man, who now that Zoey got a proper look at him had to be in his 40s, at least, sighed and raised a hand. He wagged that hand to and fro in a so-so motion before explaining.

"I have *some* ideas, but I wasn't able to confirm what was going on. I take it you both know about the various fossils that have been discovered at Mt. Moon, then revived in Pewter City?"

Both 2B and Zoey nodded their heads. Since she wasn't native to Kanto, Zoey might not have known, if not for that first not-date at the Pewter Museum. But between that and the two ancient pokémon Forrest had used against 2B, she certainly did now.

"Right! Well, in the last year, people have started exploring the *upper* parts of Mt. Moon for potential fossils. Previously, all such fossils had been found fairly deep in the lower levels of the mountain. But the more scientifically-inclined in the community realized that the entire mountain was old enough that it should have fossils throughout. A few official research teams were granted permission to *carefully* investigate the upper mountain to see if it was true, and if the types of fossils might vary! Fascinating research, if not quite in my field!"

That much made sense so far. The question was what it had to do with the current rampage. Zoey took a stab at a guess, hoping to get the conversation moving along to the actual point before something else went wrong.

"So, you think one of the research teams offended the local pokémon? Like what happened recently in Viridian Forest?"

Kenji blinked, looking confused.

“Recently in Viridian? Was there some incident there?”

Zoey gaped at him, but 2B tapped her on the shoulder.

“Mr. Kenji specializes in *long-term* study of habitats. He’s regularly out of touch with normal communication networks. He likely doesn’t know about the ExoDrill incident.”

Oh. That made sense. Their pokégears’ connections had stopped working entirely once they entered Mt. Moon. Part of the reason that the Route pathway was so clearly marked and carefully maintained was that all that rock cut off the ability for anyone inside the mountain to get alerts or makes calls out for help.

It also meant the mapping function inside was much more *limited*. You could access static maps of the mountain, but aside from the main Route and a few of the larger, permanent side paths, they were almost useless. So high a concentration of Rock and Ground Type pokémon residing in the mountain meant that the paths here *changed* semi-frequently. The danger of collapse was *real*, and part of why Zoey and 2B had been glad for the single-use Dig TMs they’d gotten from Forrest. Zoey had taught the move to Teddiursa and 2B had used hers with Vulpix. Should they get stuck, either pokémon would have a good shot at getting them out.

The loss of external communication also meant that, if the scientist had been inside Mt. Moon since before the incident in Viridian Forest, he wouldn’t know about it. Not unless he’d spoken to others who passed through, and Zoey got the distinct impression he spent more time away from people than near them. 2B, it seemed, had already known that to be likely, as she turned back to Kenji and gave a brief update to him.

“The ExoDrill Mining facility west of Pewter started up and disrupted the pokémon there. An Alpha Onix and many of its group caused quite a major issue when they fled into Viridian Forest.”

The older man looked pained by that information.

“Ah...yes, I remember that project. Flint raised red flags about it but, with his...dubious history, he was easily overruled by arguments from the experts ExoDrill brought in. I thought he was probably right, honestly, but I also hoped he wasn’t.”

Shaking himself, the scientist seemed to realize they’d wandered even farther off topic and swung back around.

“I can see why you asked, but no Miss, I don’t think this was a *direct* case of humans causing issues. The teams that were authorized were all veterans, with expert scientists and ecologists that wouldn’t have intentionally caused disruption. I suspect, instead, that

they may have discovered another Grandpa Canyon situation. Or something similar, at least.”

Kenji hesitated, clearly seeing Zoey’s confusion.

2B understood, both what he was getting at *and* the hesitation. Strictly speaking, information about Grandpa Canyon wasn’t actually *classified*. Yet, the League had quietly asked the various researchers that got involved after Ketchum and his friends literally stumbled into the place to keep it quiet. The fact that fossils could be found in the area was now somewhat common knowledge. Knowledge of the *still-living* ancient pokémon in the underground cavern was a different matter entirely. Considering the issue, 2B chose to carefully pick and choose what she said.

“It was one of Ketchum’s incidents, involving some previously thought-extinct pokémon, at a location the League has requested not be divulged.”

Zoey blinked, rolled her eyes at the idea of Ash getting involved in something like that, then nodded.

“Right. I won’t ask. Except whatever details I need to know about the *current* problem.”

Kenji looked relieved, both that 2B had made the call how much to tell her companion, and the Zoey wasn’t put off by the secrecy. Pushing past the awkward moment, he continued explaining.

“Yes, yes, the current issue! You see, I think, from what I saw before I was forced to flee, that one of the research groups might have found some pokémon *on ice* in the upper parts of the mountain. In particular, I’m fairly certain that I saw a rather large Tyrantrum that was fighting with a local Alpha pokémon. It makes sense, in a way, as the teams *have* found some Jaw Fossils. The Pewter Museum has revived a number of them as Tyrunts, since the teams first started looking into the upper mountain.”

2B made an ‘ah-ha’ noise, which caused Zoey to look at her curiously.

“Forrest’s Tyrunt likely came from that source. Gyms almost always prefer to use ‘local’ pokémon where possible. Also, the peak having land pokémon, while Water Types were discovered below, may indicate that only the top of Mt. Moon was above water in ancient times.”

Kenji brightened at that theory, nodding excitedly.

“Yes! That was exactly my thought! I considered that I might be able to write a paper, exploring how that ancient fact may have helped form current pokémon habitats! With

Cerulean and Pewter separated only by Mt. Moon, there's always been theories that...ah, but we need to deal with the current issue first!"

Thankfully, the excited scientist had deflated before launching into a full lecture. Brushing his hand back over his pokéballs, he frowned.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a battler. My Chansey is a diplomat and healer, really. Arcanine and Greavard are normally my protection, when that fails, but neither are well suited to Mt. Moon. Which if, of course, why I fled instead of fought."

Both Zoey and 2B nodded immediately. Arcanine, in particular, was a powerful pokémon. Yet neither it nor a Greavard would be well-suited to taking on the mostly Rock and Ground Types found in Mt. Moon. On the other hand, they themselves had just finished explicitly training their teams to fight exactly those Typings. Something Zoey was quick to point out.

"2B and I just finished with the Boulder Badge and our teams are well-suited for at least the local pokémon, if maybe not a Tyrantrum. We can push on and try to discover what happened to the research teams, while you head out of the mountain and alert the Rangers. You'll be able to tell them better what they need to do, anyway."

Kenji hesitated.

"I'm not sure..."

Zoey flashed her most confident smile, even if she was a little uncertain herself.

"Don't worry, I'm a third year Trainer, not a first, and I have my Starter with me. At the very least, we should be able to retreat if we can't handle it."

It wasn't entirely a bluff, either. While Purugly wasn't truly a battler, Zoey had taught him a *wildly diverse* set of moves for Contests. He was also fairly strong even by battler standards, and really should be able to fight almost anything short of an Alpha at least long enough to run. Add in 2B's particular brand of bullshit and they would *probably* be okay.

More to the point, she wasn't about to leave a bunch of researchers in trouble if there was any way she could help. From 2B's firm expression, that was only more true of her companion. Thankfully, her statement seemed to ease Kenji's worries a bit, his eyes darting over to Purugly, who was still out and keeping watch. Clearly, he'd noted the presence of the more powerful and experienced pokémon, which he now had an explanation for. He nodded gratefully, if still sounding a bit uncertain when he spoke.

"Good, good. Be careful! I'll try to hurry to get help! Here, I'll transfer what I know of the current tunnel layout to both of your pokégears!"

Thankfukky, near-field transfers weren't a problem even with external communications down, and the scientist was quick to do as he said. He marked where the one research team he'd met with had been working before hurrying away, headed toward the main path with a quick farewell. Zoey turned to 2B and smiled.

"Well, I was joking about you attracting rampages, but I think you might just be one of those 'magnet for trouble' Trainers that the troubleshooter back in Viridian Forest mentioned. I certainly never got involved with this sort of thing when I was traveling on my own!"

2B looked worried at that, causing Zoey to laugh and daringly dart in to peck her girlfriend on the lips.

"Relax! It's not a bad thing! I don't mind helping, and I'm learning a lot about battling in the process too. Now come on, those research teams might be in trouble!"

With 2B looking reassured, Zoey took off into the tunnel Mr. Kenji had descended from. Hopefully, they would be in time to prevent anyone from getting hurt...

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