

As Pepe finally staggered into Sandgem Town, he was surprised to see that it was Dawn, not Pearl, waiting for him. The boy nervously adjusted his scarf, and started to blush as she approached, and his internal commentary went crazy. Dawn knew nothing of what went through his mind, but seeing how he fidgeted made her giggle. "Pearl told us you were coming, but you sure took your time, huh?"

Pepe just nodded silently as he tried to think of the words. He pointed back at the fields behind him, "Are you... aware... there's sp-sp-spiders that..."

The girl quickly took him by the arm and gave a light, comforting pat on his hand, "And that's why you don't go in the grass without a Pokemon. You two sure are lucky we found you."

"Miss Johanna s-said that too. I'm fine, I just... d-don't like sp-sp-spiders."

"Aww, there's no need to be like that. The Spinarak around here are practically harmless, they just sound scarier than they are. Maybe after you finish your business with the professor, I can show you how to catch one." He paused as he gazed up at the large facade of the lab and managed to take his arm back from her. Strange girl, he thought, but he figured she'd have to be to take up a job like this. "Is something wrong?"

For a moment, he wondered if she had guessed his thoughts, but shook it off. Dawn was right though, he was here on business and he was late. "Ah, it's just sm-smaller than I imagined, is all."

"Oh yes, it's very small compared to some of the others, but Professor Rowan said he likes it tha-" Dawn let out a squeak as the door flew open and a familiar blond blur came rushing out. As she tried to quickly step out of the way, Pearl caught the end of her shoe and practically flew into his friend instead. Pepe didn't get bowled over as Dawn had feared, but instinctively caught Pearl with such ease it appeared they'd somehow practiced this.

Pearl just beamed as he set himself more firmly on the ground. "Hey! You made it! Great news, buddy, Rowan may have scared us both before, but he's actually a really cool guy. He's not just nice, but totally out there! I told him about what was going on, and he was even nice enough to call my mom to let her know I could keep my Seedot."

"So...?" Pepe just stared at him as he sensed there had to be more to it.

"I gotta get back home." Pearl gave a playful slap on his friend's shoulder as he stepped past him. "You should go talk to Rowan, I'll be fine getting back on my own now."

"Okay, but, Pearl-?"

"SEE YA!~" Pearl took off down the road before either of them could ask what exactly happened. Pepe just gazed after him as he left with an air of confusion.

Dawn came up beside as she watched the grass rustle in the distance before he disappeared altogether. "Your friend seems to be really impatient."

Pepe just shook his head, "He's... not though." He turned back to head into the lab, though he shot one last glance back at the fields with concern. "Something doesn't feel right."

“Ah, you finally arrive.”

“I got t-turned around a few times.” Pepe admitted sheepishly, even if that was only partially true. “I sh-should have just st-stuck w-with Pearl.”

Rowan appeared to smile beneath that stern countenance of his, and held out a hand to greet him. “But you made it here nonetheless. Would you mind if I take a look at the Turtwig I gave you?”

Pepe’s eyes went wide as he wasn’t sure what to tell the man. Rowan had *said* it was a Turtwig when he picked it, and he didn’t want to accuse him of being a liar, but the truth of the matter remained. “Y-you didn’t give me a Turtwig, i-it w-was a B-bidoof. R-remember?”

Rowan glanced at his assistant with some concern as he took the Poke Ball from the boy. Letting it out, injured as it was, Pepe was obviously right. Dawn just stared at the little brown puffball a moment as he curled up on the cool tile floor to rest, and tried to give Pepe a smile. “I guess it evolved?”

Pepe gave a bit of a huff, “I may not know a l-lot about Pokemon, but I know enough to t-tell you that T-turtwig and Bidoof aren’t related!”

“And you would be right.” The professor knelt down to get a better look at the Pokemon in question, and noted the soft flicker of flames and smoke that gentle glowed with each contented breath. “It does seem you had quite a time getting here together. Regardless, would you say that this Bidoof has worked well for you?”

“Again, I... I w-wouldn’t know i-if it didn’t. He seems to be easy to t-take care of at least. Not th-that I’m very good at that either.” Rowan gave him a pleased smile to hear it either way. Pepe began to fidget as he wasn’t sure how to change the subject without being direct. “P-Professor... I didn’t come here to talk about my Pokemon. D-did Pearl mention...?”

“Indeed he did. Come now, boy, you should speak up too. I wanted to ask you about your Pokemon because we’ve some pressing matters to discuss.” Rowan turned to lead the two children toward the back of the lab.

Pepe nervously trotted to where he could walk beside the man instead of behind him. “Wh-what does that have to do w-with Cyrus though?”

Rowan didn’t look at him. He stared up at the numerous news articles, some more faded than others, that lined the back of the wall as a few colored strings of twine hung taut between them. “Do you know where he went after he left you?”

“No...” Pepe admitted softly, but he remembered how the old gentleman had got onto him and tried to speak clearly. “B-but he made it sound like he p-planned to come back.”

“By then it might be too late.”

Dawn tried to see what her mentor saw in the mess of strange headlines they’d been gathering since his return, but it made the remark make even less sense. She stepped forward to tug on his sleeve, “Professor, do you know this man?”

He looked down at her in surprise, “Not personally, but we were warned such a threat would come. I’m not sure if we should trust these so-called prophets, but it wouldn’t hurt to prepare ourselves if it’s true.”

“P-prophets?” Pepe grew wide-eyed at the prospect as he’d only heard of such fantastical beings while with the church. “And wh-what did they say?”

“It doesn’t matter if we’re to assume it cannot be helped. For all we know, those strange men might claim it as foretold when really they want us to panic. If we were to be so foolish to believe everything is inevitable, Cyrus will find no obstacles, and appear to have been unstoppable should he succeed. The best thing any of us could do right now is to prepare ourselves.” Rowan moved closer to the wall and took up a pointing stick as he turned to the children. “Now then-”

“W-why?” Pepe squeaked out, “You don’t r-really expect me to f-fight that guy, do you? I don’t know h-how to fight!”

Dawn just giggled at how his voice cracked, and tried to reassure him. “That’s why you have to learn. Don’t worry, I can teach you all you need to know. I could be your mentor~!”

Rowan seemed to approve of her proposal. “If Cyrus should return, you leave him to me. However, I am afraid we have bigger matters to attend to right now. Pepe, I know you said you don’t like Pokemon, and I had my doubts after seeing such recklessness, but I would like you to keep that Bidoof. You will need to learn to defend yourself.” He took the pointer and slowly hovered it around wall. “Have you seen these before?”

The two children gazed over the bizarre titles; detailing about disturbances in the mines, flying cave fish, a little girl in tears after her adorable Pokemon partner turned into a man-eating plant before her eyes. Pepe blinked up at the professor, as Pearl had warned him the man was more than a little “out there.” Still, he hazard a guess to what was being implied. “Time ripping spiders? Dawn s-said that w-was normal.”

“I did not!” She quickly blurted out, “I just said that’s why you need a Pokemon for protection.”

Rowan held up a hand to show her it was fine either way. “Perhaps it is now, but it wasn’t always. You both are young, very new to being trainers, and the world is large and wild enough as it is. You learn as you discover things, and so what is strange to us, might appear as normal to you the more you come across it. That is why I would like to enlist the help of both of you to aid me in a very daring task. Sinnoh has undergone a disturbing transformation while I was away, and my assistants and I have been swarmed by people seeking answers. Answers I do not have. That’s why, Dawn, I asked your father about you leaving Sandgem to expand our knowledge on the situation with our latest Pokedex.”

“All by myself?” She frowned and took a second glance at the news articles for what lay on the road ahead.

“Of course not, Dawn. I’ll still be keeping up with you, and the other assistants as well when we get the chance.” He gave a nod to Pepe, “I had hoped that our new found friend would lend you a hand.” The boy gave a bit of a squeak as he pointed to himself. “Only if you feel up for the challenge. We are desperately short handed for the massive investigation underway, and you seem to be a curious lad. Would you like to take this Pokedex and help us?”

Pepe thought long and hard as he didn't really want to become a trainer. He didn't feel like he had much of a choice either as the Voices that had been bothering him lately decided to remind him how he had nothing else going for him. He had no idea what to do with himself, and as it seemed like Pearl had already been enlisted in this, there was little reason to stay behind. The boy tried to shake off the internal chatter and smiled at the man. "I st-still don't know wh-what's going on, b-but I'd like to volunteer?"

The man seemed to soften in his usual stern expression, as a warm smile returned to his face like before. "That's wonderful then, we'll be glad to have you on board. I'll be sure to speak with your mother, of course, but I wanted to ask you first."

"I don't have p-parents, sir. You'd have to t-talk to Miss Johanna." He cleared his throat and tried to straighten up like the young man he was trying to be, "S-she should be fine though since w-we've already talked about my st-stay in Twinleaf is supposed to be t-temporary. Might even be a bit of r-relief to know I'll be taken care of."

"Awesome!" Dawn's excitement caught the other two off guard as she hurried to grab a Pokedex off the nearby desk. "You're going to like working here. But you better be nice to the Pokemon, or I might just have to-"

Rowan gave a loud cough to catch her attention. "Dawn?"

She glanced up at him with a frown, "I might... just... give him a lesson?" Pepe simply shrugged it off in confusion as he didn't know what else she could possibly mean. Surely she wouldn't hurt him for it, despite the alarming sensation that rang through his mind. These people were nice, they were trying to help, he had no need to second guess that when they were all just on edge if Rowan was telling the truth. Dawn even flashed an encouraging smile as she went to hand him his first field device. "We could do one now, if you like. I'll show you how to catch your first Pokemon."

Pepe still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling building up inside of him, but he could only hope that picking up a new hobby just might help to keep his mind off of the Voices. It had worked a bit with Pearl, so staying with Dawn might work as well. "Um... M-maybe after I rest up. My B-bidoof is probably too tired to learn a-anything new right now, a-and I didn't sleep at all last night."

Dawn gazed up at the professor, silently asking his permission to leave if they were finished, and brightened at his approval. "I'll just show you around town then." She took him by the wrist and started to lead the way with a bit of gusto until they realized they were leaving the Bidoof behind. A quick return, and the two were off as Rowan could only shake his head at the pair. Dawn continued on in her excitement to lead for once, even as they made their way out the door. "If your Pokemon ever get hurt or tired, you should take them to a Pokemon Center. It's much faster, and totally free..."

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Johanna had been enjoying the quiet, curled up on the couch as she could enjoy the chilly afternoon wrapped up in a blanket, when she found herself disturbed by the phone. She rarely received phone calls in their tiny community, and her mind immediately went to wondering if the boys were alright. Surely Ms. Jules was just in a mood, and nothing had happened; but after the scare they both had over the day before, it was hard to just brush it off. After a moment, she managed to feign cheerfulness as she pulled it off the hook. "Hello, this is Johanna speaking! ... Professor Rowan? This is a surprise. Is everything alright?"

“Everything is fine for the moment, but I just had a meeting with your son.”

Johanna nervously began to twist the cord around her finger as she tried to play herself off calmly. “You mean yesterday? I’m sure the boys meant no harm in-”

“No, I mean he just left the lab a few moments ago with my youngest assistant. I noticed a few things today that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Your lab? What in creation’s name was he doing all the way out there?” She readjusted in her seat as she felt there was quite a tale she needed to brace herself for. The response struck her with more force than she could have imagined.

“I should ask what he’s doing all the way out there. You panicked, didn’t you?”

“I, I don’t know what you mean.” She held the phone tightly in both hands, and listened to the hiss of static that hung between them. Even without him there, she could practically feel the disappointed glare she would have received if Rowan had been there in person. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“No, but that is not my place. He seems to be quite settled in, so I can only assume he’s been in Twinleaf for quite some time. All that time, and you never told him?”

Johanna let out a sigh as she started to untwist the cord again, “I know, it’s terrible, but it’s just... It’s better for everyone this way. He’s happy, isn’t he?”

“Hmmm... Perhaps. I wouldn’t know considering the circumstances, but I can see that he is bright, curious, and very lost right now. He’s going to find out eventually.”

“I know. That’s why it’s better this way.” She pulled up a pillow to rest her arm on, and switched the phone over to speaker. “So tell me then, what *did* you two talk about today?”