

Birds of a Feather

© Prologue: A New Journey Begins

The echoed sounds of footsteps and dripping water could be heard resonating through the depths of the dark cave, where two brave explorers had been walking in its rocky tunnels for what felt like hours. One of them was a shiny Grovyle named Astor, a seasoned veteran who carried a treasure bag strapped to his left side. He walked ahead, holding a luminous orb high up to illuminate the path.

His partner, a young Torchic followed behind. Her name was Pepper, a chirpy but somewhat cowardly explorer-wannabe who hired her partner to aid her in this exploration. She was bigger and fluffier than the average Torchic. A silky pink scarf adorned her neck, and she kept a small treasure bag of her own, strapped and hidden under her left fluffy wing.

"H-huff...how do we know we haven't been walking in circles? It's been so long-"

Pepper stopped briefly and asked, wiping some sweat off her forehead before being quickly interrupted by her partner.

"We're close."

Astor replied concisely, stopping in his tracks to turn around and look at the Torchic, his expression being stoic and emotionless as always. Without further explanation, he resumed his walking. Pepper gasped and followed him close, almost tripping in her step as she struggled to keep up with him, not wanting to be left behind in the darkness.

"H-how can you be so sure?! It's so dark in here I can barely see my own feet!"

She spoke while looking at him, Astor stared at her through the corner of his eye, a somewhat annoyed expression formed on his face.

"I have a gut feeling...just trust me okay? We'll get to the end of this soon enough, as long as you don't keep interrupting me..."

The Grovyle sighed and replied with a stern tone, growing rather weary of the constant interruptions.

"Look Pepper, I can't really explain it to you, it's just something we explorers feel from time to time, you will eventually understand when you become one yourself, for now let's just keep moving, I'm certain we're not too far away from the end of this tunnel, alright?"

The Torchic gulped and nodded obediently, not wanting to annoy him any further, last thing she wanted would be to have him ditch her in the middle of the exploration. He could be rather cold at times, but so far, Astor had only proven to be a reliable veteran explorer, all her money was on him, literally.

The duo continued to walk onwards through the darkness. The power of the luminous orb was starting to run out with each passing moment, it's shynlight becoming more and more dim over time.

"Tch...cheap thing..."

Astor remarked with a irritated tone as he looked at the orb, shaking it wildly to brighten it up at least a little. Pepper remained close to him in case it completely turned off, but stopped just behind him as she felt something cold down on her feet. After closely examining the ground, she noticed it wasn't dirty soil anymore, but rather it was smooth marble-like flooring.

"H-hey, the ground feels different here, we must be close for real!"

She commented while scratching the ground with her feet-claws, chirping to herself with joy. Astor smiled briefly at her adorable display and pointed forward.

"Indeed, look up ahead!"

He exclaimed and held the luminous orb forward, illuminating a set of old stairs right in front of them, they were all cracked up, some of them were covered in vines and moss, it was clear nobody had passed through here in a long time. Astor gestured Pepper to follow him and they made their way upstairs. At the end of the staircase, the duo stumbled upon what seemed to be a gigantic stone gate, though it differed from the rest of the place, it looked rather clean and even mystical.

"This is it Pepper, we've reached the end of this tunnel, now let me take a look at this..."

The Grovyle spoke with a hint of excitement in his voice, and walked closer to the gate, illuminating it with the faint light of the orb, a soft "Eep" could be heard from behind as Pepper was temporarily left in total darkness. She ran up to Astor and remained close by while he examined the door. It was perfectly crafted, having fancy chiselling markings all over it, the gate depicted 4 strange pokémon at each corner. Astor scratched his chin as he examined the engraved images, but couldn't identify any of the pokémon. His attention was drawn to the center of the gate shortly after, where something seemed to be written in ancient footprint runes. He squinted his eyes as he examined the writing, only for him to walk away and kneel down, placing the orb on the ground to provide his partner with some light once more.

"So...did you discover anything?"

The Torchic asked and looked up at her partner, still trembling a little.

"This indeed is a strange gate I'm afraid...there is something written on it, I've seen that language before, but I cannot comprehend it, nobody has ever deciphered it yet after all..."

Astor replied softly, thinking to himself for a moment as he looked at the gate once more.

"Oh...that sucks, so...we can't get through then?"

The Torchic commented, slightly disappointed at that.

"Hmm, not necessarily, here."

Astor passed the dying orb to his partner, right before effortlessly picking her up, holding the Torchic tightly in a hug-like embrace while he walked away from the gate.

"H-hey what gives?!"

Pepper replied and struggled a little, seemingly confused by her partner's actions.

"Shush, stay still, I'll get us to the other side, just trust me and brace yourself."

Pepper did as told, though she was still somewhat unsure of what her partner had in mind. The Grovyle carried her back to the start of the stairs, looking for a spot with moist soil back on the dirt path.

"Hmm this will do, hold onto me Pepper!"

Astor said before quickly turning around and performing a backflip, eliciting a scaredy squeak from the Torchic as she thought he was going to hit his head, much to her surprise, he easily buried both of them underground, she brought her wings up to cover her eyes, dropping the almost dead luminous orb along the way. Meanwhile the Grovyle felt and dug his way underground, guiding himself with one hand while the other held Pepper tightly. Everything was pure darkness for both of them, but he had no trouble finding his way under the staircase, promptly digging his way past the gate and emerging out with a jump.

Once they were back on the surface, Astor gently placed the Torchic on the ground before beginning to clean the dirt and dust off his body.

Cough cough "Huff...did you really have to do that?"

She complained and began cleaning the dirt away from her body with her wings, preening herself a little while waiting for her partner to do the same. Once done, Astor walked past her and looked over his shoulder with a smile.

"We got through, that's all that matters. Being an explorer means getting your hands dirty sometimes...you'll get used to it.

Astor replied as he clapped his hands to clean some remaining dust away, Pepper let out a soft whimper in response and followed him close by. The tunnel ahead was covered in all sorts of colorful crystals, they peeked out of the ceiling, walls and even out of the floor. Their bright colors illuminated the path ahead for the explorers, who marched forward towards the end of the tunnel.

The duo walked into a spacious room, it seemed to be the end of the crystalline cave. A narrow stone bridge connected the tunnel's end with a small platform that looked like some sort of shrine. Astor walked ahead, keeping Pepper close to him, the latter couldn't resist the curiosity and got closer to the edge to look at the bottomless abyss down below.

"W-woah, we're so high up..."

She stumbled backwards in fear, accidentally bumping into her partner and almost making him lose his balance.

"Hey! Watch it, one false step and we're doomed you know?!"

She looked down and nodded at his response, Astor couldn't help but feel a little bad at being so harsh, he awkwardly scratched the back of his head and cleared his throat.

"Sorry...just be more careful...anyway, look over there, that must be it, the secret of this shrine."

He pointed forward and guided Pepper to cross the rest of the bridge. Once they got closer, they could see the shrine in all its glory. It was made of some smooth stone-like bricks, purple colored and with an appearance reminiscent of marble. On the center of the altar, a Crest could be found, it was cracked and it seemed to have a rather big, oddly-shaped cavity on it.

Astor got closer to the crest and inspected it, shaking his head with a confident smile before turning to his partner

"Hey Pepper, do you still have that strange fragment you showed me earlier? I think it might just fit here..."

The Torchic nodded and rummaged through her little bag, pulling out a broken fragment, it looked like a star-shaped rock with strange markings on the center. She handed it over to Astor, who gently accepted it.

"Heh, this is pretty light for a piece of stone..."

He commented while examining the fragment in his hands, throwing it high up into the air before catching it back. Drawing a surprised but anxious gasp out of the Torchic.

"P-please don't do that!"

She jumped in place and squealed, terrified that it would fall to the ground and shatter, only letting out a relieved sigh after he safely caught it back.

"Heh, chill out, let me have a cool moment every now and then..."

Astor let out a brief chuckle before he inserted the fragment into the crest's cavity. It fit perfectly inside, the cracks on the crest matched that of the stone's, and they all lit up with a pink glow. The explorers took a step back and covered their eyes as the crest let out a blinding burst of light. After uncovering their eyes, they could see the crest had been repaired and restored to its original state, the glowing markings on it looked like a musical symbol, reminiscent of a Sol-key.

"Hmm just as I expected...I've seen this symbol before. This was nothing more and nothing less than a Windspeakers crest."

"A what? What are you talking about Astor?"

He let out a tired sigh and sat down on the ground, crossing his legs and patting the ground next to him, inviting Pepper over. She walked up to him and settled down on his side, looking up to him with curiosity.

"It's quite the long story, there is very little data, but I can tell you this: That symbol on the crest belongs to an ancient civilization, or at least, that's what the people of these lands believe. Not even the most ancient history books have records on who they were, or what they did. Most of the information we have comes from vague rumors, tales, old legends..."

Astor rested his head against one of the Altar's walls, feeling rather tired after walking for so long, exhaustion was finally catching up to him. Pepper snuggled up to him as he spoke, feeling quite beat herself.

"...going to the point, we believe they're called the Windspeakers. Ancient musicians and singers of some kind, nobody knows if they still live or not...like I said, there's very few confirmed facts. Some believe they're otherworldly beings, that they may live hidden amongst the common pokémon...or hidden away in some isolated community, a hidden place either unreachable or invisible to us..."

The Grovyle sighed, his voice having a hint of disappointment in it.

"Everyone's been looking for so long though...the Windspeakers have been a mystery for a long while now, and yet we barely made any progress. Many guilds have sent their best explorers to give it a shot, but most returned empty handed..."

The Torchic thought to herself for a moment then got back up, looking up at the Grovyle with decisive eyes.

"But we can't give up just yet! Not after getting so far, I'm sure we'll get to unravel the mystery of the Windspeakers, we just have to keep looking!"

Astor looked at her with a little smile, reaching out to give her head a comforting pat.

“What makes you believe that they still exist? Sure we have these strange crests...but for what we know, the Windspeakers could have lived here thousands of years ago, they might be extinct by now, with no further trace or other hints about their existence.”

Pepper shook her head at that, while it was a logical line of reasoning, she simply refused to believe it.

“That would be a shame, but no, it cannot be...I can’t really put it into words, but I’m sure the Windspeakers must still live, they must be here, and they must be closer than we think! I’d bet on it.”

Astor nodded at that, slowly getting back up to stretch himself a little, looking down at his partner with a smile.

"Heh... you're starting to sound like a real explorer already. I suppose you're right, it wouldn't be a mystery if it was easy to figure out right? We'll just have to work a little bit harder. Not sure what lies ahead, but it's bound to be a big adventure one way or another. Besides I can't give up on you just yet, you went so far as to even hire me to accompany you today...speaking of which, you never told me where you found that fragment in the first place.”

Pepper looked back at the crest, walking up to it while she thought to herself for a moment.

“Hmm let’s see...I believe I found it a few days ago, yeah I was walking through a forest and I found it floating onto a pond, I thought it looked really neat so I grabbed it and kept it to myself until now. At first I thought it was just a common rock, but then I turned it around to see the strange symbol on the center, that’s when I started to wonder if it was a treasure of some kind, but the local pawn shop owner couldn’t appraise it for me.”

“Is that so? That’s really strange...” Astor replied softly, he then pulled out a map from his treasure bag, unfolding and placing it on the ground for the Torchic to see, it depicted a image of the whole continent, there were some locations on it that had been marked with little purple crosses.

“Look here Pepper, this wonder map practically covers the whole continent as we know it today, these are the places where we have found some Windspeakers crests before...” He explained and tapped some of the crosses, pulling out a purple colored pen to mark down the new location they had just discovered.

“But there’s something that has been bothering me ever since I agreed to go on this exploration with you...”

Pepper got closer to him, looking at her partner with a confused expression. “R-really? What would that be?” She replied to him before turning her attention back to the map.

“You see, this is the second crest I’ve found myself, but I’ve had some influence in finding the others too...the point is, nobody ever mentioned anything about a broken crest before, or any

kind of missing fragments. The very first moment I laid eyes on your relic, I could tell it was part of a crest, what I wonder is...why was it broken?" Astor closed his eyes and crossed his arms, resting his back on one of the altar's walls as he gave the situation some more thought.

"Is that so...? Well that's just another mystery we'll have to solve along the way! Looking at the map, I don't think we can decipher a pattern of any kind, the Windspeaker shrines that have been found seem to be scattered all over the world, in rather unexpected places even, but that makes it more fun don't you think? You never know when a mystery dungeon might have a hidden shrine at the end!"

Pepper spoke with joy while she jumped around and fluttered her wings, trying to cheer up her partner a little. Astor sighed and looked at her with a little grin, walking up to the map to fold and put it away.

"I suppose you're right, you have a really adventurous and energetic spirit, I can respect that. A little too optimistic maybe, but you'll do a fine explorer, that I'm sure of. Now, I think there's nothing else for us to do here, shall we be on our way?"

His words seemed to confuse the Torchic, she rummaged through her bag a little, only to look at him with an expression of disappointment once she was done.

"Umm...Astor, I don't have any more money. Sorry, I gave you all I had when I hired you to accompany me, I can't pay you for any more explorations..."

The Grovyle let out a little chuckle, he kneeled in front of the Torchic and looked at her with understanding eyes.

"Forget about that, our contract is over already. You want to become an explorer, don't you? I can show you the ropes along the way..." He gave her another headpat before continuing talking with a little sigh. "I'm going to be honest with you, travelling alone is really boring, I wouldn't mind having you at my side, you don't have to pay me anything else, I'll gladly train you to be a top notch explorer."

Pepper merely stared at him, being a little overwhelmed by her emotions to say anything in response.

"We can be a great team you and I Pepper, together I'm sure we can unravel the mystery of the Windspeakers before anyone else, but I understand if you don't feel ready y--"

"N-NO!" Pepper yelled and interrupted him before he could even finish his sentence.

"I-I mean...yes, I want to be partners with you, I'd be delighted to join you in this adventure Astor!"

The shiny Grovyle chuckled and got back up, winking at her with crossed arms.

"Very well, welcome aboard Pepper, this will be a long adventure, we'll face fearsome

opponents, bewitching puzzles, traps and challenges of all sorts...but I'm sure we'll get through them together. Now come, let us be on our way!"

Pepper smiled and nodded at him, her eyes tearing up with joy as she followed Astor, the two of them making their way out of the shrine together...

Birds of a Feather

A New Journey Begins

--Prologue End