

## Beautiful

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## Beautiful

by [dontrollthedice](#)

### Summary

“For our visitor all the way from Oreburgh City,” Beef said, his smile shining brighter when the judge chuckled and waved. “Milotic, show Cub an Ice Beam!”

Milotic paused, brought its tail inward, then shot out a beam of ice to the roof.

Etho stared up, and everything froze.

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In which Beef is a contestant in a Master Ranked Beauty Contest, Bdubs wants his stupid friend to relax for once, and Etho severely underestimates what’s coming for him.

### Notes

SINNOH REMAKES OUT WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Etho realized staying up this late was a bad idea a while ago, but he only found it in himself to care when he made eye contact with the figure looming outside the Battle Factory.

Looming. He said that as if the figure wasn’t a good head shorter than him.

Etho fixed a grin beneath his mask, squinted at the sunlight streaming in through the glass doors,

and slid one of the doors open.

“Hi, Bdubs,” Etho drawled, as if he didn’t know what was about to happen.

Now that the door wasn’t between them, Etho could experience Bdubs’s anger in full HD. Bdubs wagged his pointer finger in Etho’s face like a disappointed preschool teacher, except a preschool teacher would be fired immediately if their demeanor was as aggressive as Bdubs’s. “You! You rascal, you gremlin, you—”

Etho shut the door and walked back inside the Battle Factory, Bdubs’s yelling now muffled. That was *that* problem taken care of. Without a keycard, Bdubs couldn’t—

The glass doors slid open.

Sometimes, Etho forgot he had given Bdubs a key.

Etho took off running down the hall, Bdubs’s footsteps and shouts following close behind.

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Etho was the Battle Factory’s Frontier Brain.

That meant a lot of things. His main responsibility was battling challengers, of course, but he also acted as the lead researcher of the Battle Factory. That entailed late nights organizing the data the Factory had collected over the day, putting them in context with the previous data collected, and getting one step closer towards unlocking the mysteries behind trainers using random, unfamiliar pokemon.

Outside of his work life, Bdubs had been his first friend in the Sinnoh region. After a single conversation Bdubs had had with a jet-lagged Etho right outside Canalave City’s ferry, Bdubs had somehow come to the conclusion that Etho was a person worth keeping around and subsequently dragged him on a tour of the city. They had been close friends ever since.

These were two parts of his life that did not mix.

“I can’t *believe* you,” Bdubs grumbled as Etho picked at a berry he had given him. “You close the Battle Factory at midnight and open it at nine in the morning. Why were you there the whole night? Who does that? *Who* does that?”

“Literally everyone else,” was Etho’s answer and apparently the incorrect one if Bdubs’s glare had anything to say about it.

But it was true. Doc’s disaster of a sleep schedule rivaled his own. Tango’s close times were inconsistent at best when he got carried away (and he got carried away almost every day, being the Arcade Star). Scar and Wels were a bit more stable, but Etho could easily recall just last week, they had stayed up training their pokemon. Why wasn’t Bdubs getting on *their* backs about it?

Etho said as such. This definitely elongated the lecture he was about to get, but he had pride to defend, damn it.

Instead of listing off his reasoning like Etho expected, Bdubs scoffed. “You think this is about sleep?”

Etho stared.

“... Okay, it’s a little bit about sleep. But it’s more about relaxation! Doc comes to the Resort Area all the time. We all know Tango’s high-energy enough to not need as much relaxation as the normal person. Scar and Wels do contests with me, so I know they’re getting some relaxing time. But you? You’re all tensed up all the time! What do you do to relax?”

“I—” He had to think quickly. He couldn’t let Bdubs win this one. “I hang out with my pokemon.”

“That doesn’t count, idiot. Everyone hangs out with their pokemon.”

“Are you gatekeeping my relaxation methods? Wow. And here I thought Mister B Double O of the esteemed Ribbon Syndicate would—”

“Cut that out,” Bdubs sighed.

Etho fell silent.

Bdubs was serious. As much as Etho loved giving him shit, Bdubs always had good reason to be serious.

“Listen,” Bdubs started, “you know I’m worried about you. You know *everyone’s* worried about you. The reason I’m here is because Doc called me in, actually. Said he hadn’t seen you in a week. Have you left the Factory at all?”

Etho deflated. So he hadn’t. He had gotten too caught up in battles and research to notice, and his pokemon just happened to be the worst enablers. That was what made them a good team, but Doc’s worry was justified.

Bdubs gave him a moment to answer but continued after his silence. “That’s answer enough. You need to be better about this. Can’t you find a hobby? Like, a hobby outside training?”

“Are you calling me lame?”

“Yes, but that’s besides the point. I’m saying...” There was a new spark in Bdubs’s eyes, one that was too familiar. “Come to a supercontest with me. One of my friends is in a Master Ranked Beauty Contest this weekend. We can get Doc to watch over the Factory for you. Come watch it with me.”

Supercontests? Etho certainly respected the artform, but just the idea of sitting in an audience for hours on end made him feel antsy.

Bdubs must’ve judged his hesitation for something else. “Oh, come on! I’m not even asking you to do one with me this time. Scar bailed on me already; I don’t need you doing that to me, too.”

“So I’m basically your backup plan?”

“I was gonna invite you anyway, but yeah, you could say that.”

“I don’t want to.”

Bdubs glared in a way that left no room for argument. Etho’s debate died in his throat.

He had no choice. That much was clear.

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The flight to Hearthome City was a quick one with Honchkrow in tow, but that still didn't mean Etho was happy about this.

“Jeez, why're you so mad?” Bdubs said as they walked into the auditorium. “You'd think I dragged you here or something.”

Etho stared.

Bdubs stared back as if he hadn't spent a solid hour that morning dragging Etho out of the Factory.

That being said, Hearthome City was hardly the worst place he could've been. There were enough people on the streets that Etho knew he wouldn't stand out. On top of that, pokémon were out and about everywhere, from a Pichu walking in Amity Square to a Steelix competing in the gym. This was the perfect environment for trainers, coordinators, and anyone who adored pokémon.

He could've been keeping an eye on his data, though. Did Doc know how to keep it all organized? Was he taking care of the rental pokémon properly? Surely he was. He was Etho's oldest friend after all; Etho knew they both loved pokémon more than anything.

Still, he should text Doc just in case—

Bdubs slapped his hand away from his poketch with a glare.

Right. He should've expected that.

“Doc's the Tower Tycoon, idiot. Big man. Big guy. You know he can handle it,” Bdubs said. “Now, stay still for more than two seconds, or I'll drag you to another one tomorrow.”

Etho settled into his seat with a sigh and took a moment to scan his surroundings.

The colour theme was more pastel than anything Etho had ever seen. Colourful lights were strung all along the ceiling. The floor was mostly composed of a deep blue and darker yellow. In the audience's section, however, the seats and floor were all painted a deep shade of pink. People of all ages and appearances sat around them.

Then the house lights dimmed, and everything fell silent. The curtains drew back, revealing five people onstage. A familiar face stood at the forefront with a microphone and comically large hat.

“That's where I usually stand,” Bdubs whispered, pointing at the man onstage introducing everyone. “Scar's the master of ceremonies for this one, though.”

Etho raised an eyebrow. “I thought he bailed on you.”

“Yeah. He bailed on me to judge the same contest I'm watching. I hate him. Anyway...” Bdubs pointed at the last man on the right with a grin. “That's my friend! I hate him, too!”

Before Etho could ask, Scar spoke into the microphone.

“And last but certainly not least, give it up for our very own Beef and Milotic!”

The bearded man dressed in a tan suit grinned and waved to the audience as they cheered. Milotic dipped its head, almost as if it was bowing.

Huh. So Bdubs *did* have friends outside the Battle Zone (Etho said as such to Bdubs. Bdubs elbowed him and told him to shut up). Etho couldn't recall ever seeing Beef or Milotic, and he liked to think he had gotten to know the region decently well.

The thought passed quickly once Scar began explaining the first event and the humour of watching the Battle Hall Matron put on his usual showman act set in.

“What a loser,” Bdubs snickered once Scar tipped his hat and leapt offstage.

That, Etho agreed with wholeheartedly.

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Etho was deeply familiar with the mechanics of battle already: physical versus special damage, attack and defense stats, counters, luck, type matchups. Battles had been his entire life after all, from the moment he met Greninja as a Froakie to the day he signed on to become Factory Head. Battles had almost become boring before his time at the Factory. Although some of his coworkers found their fun in supercontests, the impromptu coordinating he saw during his visits to the Resort Area had never impressed him.

This was something different.

The visual contest had been nothing special. Even within the limited number of years Etho had been alive, he had hiked through Mount Coronet, trudged through the neverending snow on his way to Snowpoint City, flown across the oceans of the world. Pokemon dressed up in shiny powders and barrettes were amusing but nothing out of the ordinary.

(Maybe Etho would've been more impressed had he not had a master-ranked coordinator best friend who was always quick to show off his dolled-up Bellossom and Snorlax. He would blame Bdubs for anything he could.)

“So beautiful,” Bdubs had whispered at one point, his eyes shimmering. Then again, maybe Etho just didn't have as much of an artistic eye as Bdubs. Not in beauty anyway.

The dance competition was more exciting, if only for the fact that some of the pokemon and their trainers stumbled over their own feet. Some of the more adventurous members of the audience had gotten up from their seats to dance themselves, which was how Etho found himself shrinking back while Bdubs waltzed with some kid next to him.

Then came the acting competition.

“Oh, you're gonna wanna wake up for this one,” Bdubs said with a smile. “This is the most exciting part!”

At this point, Etho wasn't particularly inclined to believe him, but what else did he have to lose? He sat up higher in his seat and crossed his arms. If he pretended like he was paying attention, maybe Bdubs wouldn't drag him to another one. He had a factory to maintain, after all.

“Ooh, Beef is up first,” Bdubs said, as if Scar hadn't just said that himself. The master of ceremonies side of him was poking out.

Before Etho could poke fun at him for that, Beef stepped to the front with Milotic by his side and

waved to the judges' booth.

“Hey, pay attention to this one, Scar,” he called out. “Milotic, Hail!”

The cold hit him sooner than he processed the bits of hail falling out of the sky like stars. Judging by all the coats the people around him were now putting on (and Bdubs pulling the hood of his moss hoodie over his head), everyone but him was prepared for this.

That was okay. A childhood spent in Snowbelle City had prepared him for this long ago.

Etho rolled down his sleeves and crossed his arms again.

Bdubs took the moment between contestants to tug his mouth into a smirk. “Comfortable there, huh?”

Etho hummed an agreement and sat back, thankful his mask hid his grin.

The cycle of contestants repeated again, Bdubs narrating and explaining the significance of each move to him as though he were a child. And despite it all, Etho found himself committing all his attention to the stage in front of him. The master rank was something else entirely, if he was noticing all the strength behind each pokemon from his seat in the audience.

“Beef’s up again!” Bdubs whisper-cheered. “Look, everyone’s getting excited. They know what he’s about to do.”

Etho raised an eyebrow. Predictability in battles was a detriment. Hearing it phrased as an advantage in supercontests was jarring.

“For our visitor all the way from Oreburgh City,” Beef said, his smile shining brighter when the judge chuckled and waved. “Milotic, show Cub an Ice Beam!”

Milotic paused, brought its tail inward, then shot out a beam of ice to the roof.

Etho stared up, and everything froze.

Upon contact with the roof, the ice shattered into a billion powdery fragments, falling carefully, gently, kindly. The space in front of them glittered with the brilliance of a diamond. And with the stage lights gleaming through the hail, the ceiling became a starry night.

A starry night in Snowbelle City. One of those nights Etho couldn’t get himself to sleep. One of those nights he would climb on top of his roof with Greninja—a Frookie then—and watch the snow pitter down, the wind whistling tunes and the stars being their only company.

Beautiful. It had been so beautiful back then.

The audience’s applause was dulled by the rushing blood in his ears, and Etho found himself breathless.

Bdubs clapped along as the judges doled out points. “Ah, that guy. Always a charmer. What’d you think?”

Silence.

“Etho? Buddy?”

“It was nice,” Etho croaked.

But that barely scratched the surface. *The mastery behind a routine executed so perfectly*, he wanted to say. The strength behind that Ice Beam, the energy behind Milotic's movements, the precision of everything, the usage of the stage to its full potential. But most of all, the kind of art that locks eyes and connects to the deepest parts of the soul. Art at its most vulnerable.

Bdubs almost certainly knew better than to take Etho's words at face value, but instead of puffing his chest out and teasing him, he offered him a gentle smile. "Yeah. You know he grew up in Snowpoint City? Amazing." He nudged his shoulder. "But hey, we've still got two more rounds to go, so don't go falling asleep on me!"

Etho sat up, his heart still racing.

And as the competition developed, Etho clapped along with the audience, everything so much more genuine.

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"So," Bdubs said as they stepped into the lobby, "did you like it?"

That had to be a trick question. If Etho knew him like he thought he did, that was the closest Bdubs would come to asking permission to drag him to another supercontest.

God. He'd regret this later.

"It went better than I thought it would," Etho said carefully, to which Bdubs whooped and shook him by the shoulders.

"See? What did I tell you? Isn't it all so beautiful? Beautiful enough to take your attention and steal your breath?"

Before Etho could remark on how morbid the implication of life being numbing enough to need a distraction was, another voice entered their conversation.

"Mister B Double O, master of supercontests? Is that you?"

They turned, only to see Beef standing a little ways from them.

Instead of greeting him in the same coy way he had, Bdubs lunged at him and wrapped him in a tight hug. "Beef! You won! That was so beautiful!"

Beef grunted at the sudden force but wormed enough space between them to match his hug. "Thanks! I mean, it was a beauty contest, so I'd hope so."

"Don't be smart with me."

"Most of it goes over your head anyway."

As Bdubs separated himself and rambled in that jokingly argumentative way he did, Etho could see that Beef was taller than he appeared onstage, coming up to around the same height as him. His suit veered closer to white than tan, presumably from the lights change between the stage and the lobby. And when Bdubs said something about introducing him to a "workaholic friend", he turned to Etho and—

His eyes glimmered as beautifully as the ice. Oh, god, his eyes glimmered as beautifully as the ice.

“Hi!” Beef said, shooting Etho a hopelessly kind smile. “I’m Beef, one of the regulars. Bdubs tells me you’ve never been to one of these before. How’d you like your first time here?”

Luckily, his brain was still firing at full speed. Etho stuffed his hands into his pockets in an attempt to look more nonchalant than whatever was happening inside his chest at the moment. “It was really impressive, actually. You guys do good stuff around here.”

“Thanks! And you are...?”

For a split second, Etho swore his own name slipped his mind. “Etho. I’m a trainer in the Battle Zone.”

“He’s Factory Head,” Bdubs interjected like a proud parent, and Etho never wanted to smack him more. He *knew* Etho never introduced himself as such. If his millisecond smirk towards Etho was anything to go by, he was fully aware of it.

“Factory Head.” Beef repeated. “That’s so cool! Then... why’re you hanging out with Bdubs?”

Bdubs pouted. “Hey! You’re hanging out with me, too, you know!”

“Ugh, you’re right. Guess I should go catch up with some of the others.” Beef’s gaze moved back to Etho. “Nice meeting you, Etho! Hope to see you around soon. And I’ll see *you* next week, Bdubs. Unless you wanna visit Hearthome sooner. I’ll buy you lunch if you train with me.”

“Deal.”

“Great, see you!”

And with that, Beef disappeared into the crowd, Etho’s eyes following him as far as they could.

“*Beautiful enough to take your attention and steal your breath,*” Bdubs had told him. And it was true. Just not in the way Bdubs might have intended.

“That guy, I swear,” Bdubs muttered, shaking his head. “I love him like a brother, and he does *that* to me. Also like a brother, but still!”

But Etho’s head was somewhere above the clouds.

“You said that was a beauty contest, right?” Etho breathed.

Bdubs shrugged. “Yeah, why?”

“No reason,” Etho said. He ducked his head and shoveled his hands deeper into his pockets, all too aware of the growing heat on his face. “No reason.”

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