

The air around Brookfell was heavy. Even within the further outskirts of the city, where folks hadn't yet decided to evacuate, the mood was dark. No one knew quite how fast The Nothing was traveling, but considering it had been capable of breaking through the light beacons everyone had worked hard to make functional...

The beacons. When he thought back to it, Benny felt...he didn't want to admit it, especially not to himself, even: but he felt shame. He remembered the large, protective Vaporaptor trying to fight him off from ruining everyone's hard work. And most importantly, how the Pokemon had protected him and Cookie from an angry wild Pokemon. Even though Benny would've deserved a good beating, the Pokemon had helped them. He remembered. He remembered very vividly.

When professor Blackthorn issued the urgent request for help, Benny had been surprised by his willingness to try and help. Not by sabotaging the spikes — those tools the professor wanted them to use to measure the progression of The Nothing — but by actually *helping*, for once. By going to one of the cities being attacked by the fog, and trying to place those spikes to help with readings.

Was it guilt? Was it a base instinct of him wanting to pay back the Vaporaptor? Was it that he couldn't *stand* the idea that he owed someone?

Regardless of the reason, he told himself that wasn't all that. He'd been stuck in Rivertide for *months*. With The Nothing raging outside the cities, it was impossible to hop on trains and other transportations like he used to. Sure, he had come across a trainer in town who had generously offered her apartment to him, giving him shelter and even food. Despite that, his longing to move, to travel, to see more: it was eating him up.

But here he was, now, in this dark, gloomy town of bright neons and daily theft. Even as he reached the area closest to The Nothing, where the massive wall edged the borders of Brookfell, the atmosphere wasn't really any better. People looked tense, nervous, at being so close to something that could swallow them up in the blink of an eye. Masks had been provided to all the trainers who had agreed to help the professor with the task. Benny had wondered why he would need such a thing, but the closer he got to The Nothing, the more he understood. He could feel his throat itching, giving him the urge to cough or clear his throat, and the air felt thick and dry. At that point, he figured there was no point risking it. He put on the mask and immediately noticed a difference. With this, he would be able to breathe fine. He already had to worry about the ominous purple fog, and that was plenty.

He tried to look for a good place to put down the spikes. Trainers were scattered about along the wall, some in groups, some alone. There seemed to be an even divide. The only consistent thing was that everyone had Pokemon with them that worked hard to help place the spikes. His own Pokemon were here too, tagging along with him: he had Cookie in his arms, of course; he had Piri-Piri walking beside him; and he had a new little addition to his team, a strange Torchic fusion that seemed to be mixed with a Shroomish; he had affectionately named him Bop. He was following the group too, but he was excited, running this way and that.

As they got close, Benny stopped. There were a number of trainers here, and he didn't really want to interact with anyone. He felt...out of place, here. He felt out of place, doing something...doing something good. Doing something according to the rules.

Of course he would.

"Well, okay." If he spoke, if he started focusing on the task at hand, maybe his brain would give him a break. "We gotta...put this stuff down somewhere. Somewhere empty I guess? So like..."

He was brainstorming out loud when he heard a loud, excited chirp from Bop, a little ways away. Benny snapped around right away; although the cry hadn't sounded alarmed, this Torchic was a troublesome Pokemon that wandered off to dangerous places, completely oblivious to danger.

A familiar Vaporaptor stood over Bop, looking curiously — almost affectionately? — at the other bird Pokemon. Bop was talking to him, chirping and cooing and bouncing as the Vaporaptor watched and listened. "It's you!"

As Benny spoke, the Vaporaptor looked up, and his expression changed to something sour. Ah! "Hey, uh, wait." Surely he was assuming that Benny was here to cause trouble, just as he had done before with the beacons. And why wouldn't he assume that? "I'm here to...I-I'm here to help." He lifted up the spike, and he was wearing the mask, too. Surely, the Pokemon would understand?

But the Vaporaptor seemed unconvinced. His eyes were narrowed suspiciously, a frown on his face. They stood in silence like this for a few moments until another voice spoke out nearby. "Calder!"

The Vaporaptor perked up immediately towards the voice. Benny's breath caught in his throat as he noticed a familiar man walking towards them. He stared like a Deerling in headlights as the man approached.

Professor Blackthorn stopped beside his Pokemon, petting the fusion gently. "Is everything all right?" He turned to Benny, and seeing the mask and the spike, he smiled, his face — looking worried and exhausted — beaming. "Oh, you must be one of the trainers who agreed to help!" he deduced, and he nodded. "Thank you so much for volunteering. I hate putting all of you in this situation, but I'm out of options." He shook his head and turned to look at the thick, menacing wall. Instinctively, Benny turned around to look at it, too. "The activity worries me. We need to figure out what's causing this..." His voice trailed off as he turned back to Calder, giving the Pokemon a small scratch under his cheek.

Benny's words caught in his throat. He had to say something, right? It was an honour to meet the professor of the region so casually like this. *Think of something!* "Y-yes," he gasped for an answer. "I-I volunteered for...for this." He raised the spike again. "I, uh, I was looking for...for a good spot."

Blackthorn turned his attention back to Benny. "Yes, of course. Thanks again! If I recall correctly, we could use some more readings along that area," he suggested as he pointed towards a spot where, in fact, very few spikes had been placed so far. "Would you?"

Benny awkwardly nodded. "Y-yes, I can go there." That worked out for him, anyway. The less people he met, the better.

"I'll leave you to it," the professor added. "Be careful when you get close. Others have mentioned getting bad breathing problems from getting too close: that's why I told you all to wear these masks." He shook his head again, and Benny figured the professor was only reminded of the threat The Nothing was to the region.

"Come on, Calder," Blackthorn said as he patted the Vaporaptor. "Let's go see if anyone else needs our help." Turning one last time to address Benny, he said, "Good luck!" before walking away, Calder hesitantly following his trainer.

"Right," Benny said quietly as he watched the professor walk away. The meeting seemed surreal, somehow. He had seen the professor on the wide web, in news articles and in direct messages from the professor to the region. But he had never seen the man in person. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him that he might, coming out here.

Right. He ought to get back to the work at hand, if he wanted to get out of here and be done with it. He headed towards the area Blackthorn had mentioned, his Pokemon following along, he and his whole little group getting more and more uncomfortable as they approached The Nothing. *The sooner I put this thing down, the sooner we can leave.*

Finally, he got to put down the spike. The machine turned on, and Benny figured that was all he had to do with it. With this device now working, it would send readings back to Blackthorn as The Nothing edged closer. It would help the professor figure out what was happening with it, and how he could find a way to fight it. The beacons hadn't been enough, but with these readings, the professor would find something else, Benny figured.

He sat by the spike, watching it mindlessly as it worked. It had locked itself into the ground, so it's not like he could move it elsewhere to get different readings, for example. He looked up. He noticed trainers and Pokemon in the distance working hard together. They had a few spikes between them, and they worked in teams.

Meanwhile, Benny had placed...one. One was better than nothing, but it was still rather insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Maybe he should go get more spikes, help more.

But his brain reminded him that it wouldn't matter. That he didn't want to do this anyway. What was the point? Would these little machine things really do anything to protect them against The Nothing?

His eyes turned towards the fog almost instinctively. He stared at it, watching the purple swirls dance on top of each other, overlapping. It was...the first word his brain thought of was "soothing". Immediately, he asked himself *why*: there was nothing *soothing* about...well... *The Nothing*. People could get swallowed up by that fog, presumably getting killed in the process. No one had managed to return from being eaten up by this thing. What was in it? Was it *something*, or was it just the fumes? Did it just choke someone to death? Did it burn them alive? What was it that happened inside that fog?

He wondered. He felt Cookie in his arms, settling down on his lap as Benny continued to be distracted by The Nothing. In that moment, he didn't know where Piri-Piri and Bop were; probably nearby, wrestling or causing a little bit of mayhem for other trainers. He couldn't get his mind to focus on that, though. It was completely taken in by The Nothing.

What if he...what would happen if he tried to go inside the fog? He had the mask on, so if it was the fumes, he would be fine, right? Would it be possible for him to get in there for just a fraction of a second? Get in and get out, and then be able to live to tell the tale?

Wouldn't that be so much better to everyone else than just putting down those machines? What if he could bring back valuable information about The Nothing? What if it allowed the professor to finally find answers to his questions about it?

But what if he...couldn't go in there and then come back out? What if the fog kept pulling him in? Kept pulling him in until he couldn't find his way out anymore? What would happen then? ...

He would die. Right? If The Nothing didn't let him go, he would die. Just like all those other victims that had disappeared and never returned. All those people who were missed by their loved ones.

Benny...didn't have any loved ones, though. If he got swallowed up by The Nothing, no one would miss him. No one would even know he was gone. No one would send a search party for him. No one would hold a vigil for him.

No one would care.

Maybe he ought to try and do it. He had nothing to lose either way. But if he *could* go in and then come back out with some sort of information, his luck could turn around. People might start knowing his name. People would recognize him on the streets.

People would like him. They would think he's not just some stupid hooligan. People would think he's a hero.

He got up. Cookie seemed startled by the movement, but Benny barely noticed him. He took slow steps towards the fog. The smoke continued to billow and swirl in a mesmerizing way. Maybe he could just start small. What did the fog even feel like? Was it just...smoke? Or was it more tangible? Was it more like thick clouds? What if he just...

What if he just stuck his hand in?

He came closer. Closer. Closer. Closer...

He outstretched his arm. His hand came inches away from the wall. Closer...

And then something made his blood turn to ice. He froze in place. Something was moving in the fog; he thought it was just the smoke moving in weird patterns, but no. The way this moved, the movements were...whatever it was, it moved as if it were *alive*.

"What the..."

He stepped back quickly. That *thing* in The Nothing had caught sight of him, because it started moving towards him. Oh, Arceus. What the hell was that?

It emerged from the smoke with enough force to knock Benny down on the ground, knocking the wind out of him. When he looked up at what had come out, he didn't know what to think. A shape seemingly made of pure shadows, but that was still recognizable. But what this was real...did this mean...

Did this mean there were *Pokemon* in The Nothing?!