

Chapter 1

The Wane

The heart of Serene Village laid splattered with countless exaggerated shadows from the declining sun. Its small cluster of buildings stretched beyond their height and countered the sinking orange light with their dark blue imprints. The water's distant surface worked as a mirror to reflect an unveiled ceiling of stars, which had only just become visible from the far horizon to directly above them. It was still somewhat astonishing how similar this view was to what it had been so many years ago. Panne could hardly spot more than a few differences, most of which were minor at best and retained to the slight expansion of the school and center. Nobody could really explain how this little outpost, however insignificant and out-of-the-way it was, dodged the relentless pursuit of change.

Not that she really minded it had slipped by progress for this long. Rather, it seemed like some strange wonder to be appreciated and preserved instead of improved. There weren't many places left in all the Water Continent that were quite as humble as this. Despite every paragraph of history that transpired less than two days away, and of every little advancement taken place on the same landmass, there was perhaps only a handful of people that had come or gone from the village, and hardly anything different with the houses people lived in. She reveled in that the vista was practically the same as it was when she gazed from it as an aspiring little Fennekin, ready to throw the entire world onto a piece of paper for all to see. Part of her wished to reach across those eight years when the thought had first began to bloom, if only to simply say that she did.

Panne pressed the Servine's head deeper beneath her chin and squeezed a little tighter, leaning more on him than the tree they sat against. It did feel a little strange to be sitting up here without a wandering mind for the future. This hallowed spot was for deep ravines of self-introspection and for finding inspiration in wayward ideas, or at least for a nice view if ever she needed one to cheer up from a bad day. But she stared down now with a bittersweet taste stuck in her mouth, left from what should have been the most fulfilled stretch of time to ever occur in her life. It almost felt as though she were wasting something precious by being up here while so unshakably sour.

Mainly, she wracked her brain trying to figure out why it felt so bad to have finally mapped out the globe's entire surface. With how ecstatic she recalled being when Ampharos finally made the announcement, it could only be compared to a sugar high that had already passed into its lowest point. Panne supposed it was to be expected that completing lifelong goals in less than a decade would throw pretty much anyone for a loop, but the feeling of sheer satisfaction had worn out not even a week after the fact. There was just so much substance to the bone-breaking work she and the Society had put in, everything had merely equalized in perspective once it was all said and done. Even if it meant their names were surely promised in textbooks for generations to come. Most people could hardly muster this kind of relevance as the sum of their entire lives. The question rose to the surface again.

"Hey Val," she whispered closely to the beloved form in her lap. "I know I already asked this, but uh.. What do we do now? Now that we've pretty much ran out of things to do at the Society, I can't think of anything. It's not like we can help Floatzel much in that ocean geography

thing. I can't even hang out at the beach without spending most of my time up in the sand being allergic, let alone dive two miles underwater and somehow record what the landscape looks like."

"I mean, we could technically still help out with that. There's going to be plenty of supplies going back and forth on land, even if we can't take part in the project itself," Vallion's soft voice could be felt rumbling through the both of them as he spoke. "And there's still plenty we could be doing at the Society. It's becoming a university for goodness sake, in a place like Lively City for that matter. Now is likely the most active it's been since Dark Matter had us scrambling while the world was being thrown into the sun. I'm sure Ampharos would appreciate the help, you can't really be a headmaster unless there are people to be master over."

She blew a haughty breath from her nose. "But I don't want to be a professor. Not to sound too difficult or anything, but I don't really care much for every single nook and cranny under every sea, either. It's just that there's so much time to spend now, and I really don't have any clue exactly HOW to. Like hell am I going to retire before I've finished evolving."

"We could at least take it a little easier for now, right? Being dissatisfied with sitting around is one thing, but we've very nearly gotten ourselves killed in countless occasions trying to be as efficient as possible. I'd actually really like to take a nice break from being an adventurer at all, you know? Especially after these grueling final few months, my god. I'm not sure if I stopped hurting or just got used to it."

"Yeah. I'm not talking about right this instant, but a little more down the road where there's nothing. Or really, what road we should be looking at next, since this one sort of ended already." Panne glanced over to countless blades of grass at the base of the hill, watching as the final shadows steadily crept to smother them all. The pause between them brought forth something close to déjà vu that only made more sense the longer she thought on it. Finally was there something that summarized why she had felt empty and frightened at all. "I just don't want to turn out like... like that Serperior did once, back at Poliwrath River. Aren't we kind of in the same boat as they were, just a little earlier on the downward slope?"

A chuckle barely more than a cough rose from his throat. "That's a pretty extreme case to jump to, don't you think? We've barely just accomplished what we set out to do. It took Alexander years upon years after that to start being warped by stagnation. I think we've got plenty of time to avoid that fate." She felt his vines shift an up inch through her coat, hanging loosely still around her waist. "Besides, we're far from the kind of people they were. I personally haven't got much more than a single thread of ambition in me after all that we've been through. I've got no problem with handing off the whole 'revolutionary future' thing to someone else."

"I'm sure they never meant or thought for those things to happen. Not that they were any less to blame, but from what I remember, the actions leading up to what they did weren't unprecedented. And while we are absolutely different personality-wise, a lot can change about a person if something drastic happens and the schedule they've had most of their lives is no longer. Who's to say that we won't eventually end up like they did?"

"I say. And you say. It's just as easy for us to take what we learned from their grave mistakes and try our best not to repeat them. That's the entire point of learning about history, isn't it?" Vallion tightened his backwards hug to emphasize the certainty of his voice, like he was trying to squeeze the stress from her body. "Just trust me, we aren't going to end up anywhere

near as dangerous a path as they tried to walk, but we will keep walking." It was mostly the setting which made that promise more concrete and allowed her to slump just a little closer to relaxing. Almost anything they could say atop this hill couldn't be made any more genuine than if they were being held at death's door.

"Mmm. Maybe not," Panne said, touching the thin patch of fur on her chest where scar tissue had transcended evolution. The slightest bubble of laughter somehow found its way up her own core. "You know, it's kinda funny. It's the days where I wake up and have no responsibilities that I'm scared of the most. Just imagining myself sitting around wasting all my free time by desperately thinking of ways to intelligently use that free time makes me all anxious."

The Servine's breath brushed against her shoulder as he turned his head. "Well we'll just have to figure something out, won't we? This is a pretty huge transitional point in our lives. There's never anything wrong with taking a moment and looking for the next direction you want to go. The worse alternative is rushing ahead and committing to something you didn't even mean to, so just relax a little. Even if it's a little frightening, we've more than earned this little respite, hm?"

Above, the starry darkness began to infect even more of the surrounding sky with twinkling wonder, leaving only a great blanket of shadow to drape over the village and everything else in sight. Heat had already begun to dissipate into the cold purples and abyssal blues, warranting the two to huddle closer and ward away the night. "What is it that you want to do, then? If you're so adamant about it." Panne's muzzle spoke into his sleekness and found its lost grin.

"I would say 'anything you want to do', but I'm not allowed to use that excuse anymore, am I?" he said and hummed, his gears grinding away at the impressive size of the question. It would take a few more silent moments of the other's company before an answer would come to be, and a stuttering one at that. "Um.. Well I don't really know if it's a long term kind of thing, per say. Or, uh, I suppose it technically would be... In any case, it's a secret."

"Hey! That's no fair!" Unfortunately for him, Panne was already in prime position to restrain his movements and scritch a playful claw across his side. The resulting yelp and jerk would bring them both to the ground, their entwined bodies more than willing to be tossed about if it meant that they might not need to separate. A fit of childish laughter overcame the both of them shortly after as the grass rustled beneath, for that was the nature of this place. "You're lucky I'm a kinetic psychic type, or I'd just go in and get it myself."

Despite having been pressed to the ground and teased, Vallion craned his neck to rub cheeks with her. "Oh come now. You wouldn't do that kind of thing even if you could. You'd get all guilty and apologize for days."

"You hush. That wouldn't change the fact that I'd have found out," she snapped quietly back, reciprocating his affectionate advances all the same. Gravity pulled their embrace to tumble over one another, but it had little effect in actually breaking it apart. They rummaged about beside the tree's hardness as little games were invented on the spot that didn't make use of their clinging arms and vines. Impulsive sweet nothings poured from their tongues like the summer's fragrant rains, tapping against the dusty ground with giggles and breathy exclamations of surprise. Soon enough this clumsy dance would reach an incidental point where

they were simply too comfortable to continue, instead finding it mutually preferable to lay facing one another with the hill's slope at their feet, pressing their belly into the other's and weaving together foreign tails.

Panne had to admit, she did feel a lot better after having come up here. It was already difficult to stay tense gazing from this spot while alone, but it was virtually impossible when she was with him also. The radiant feeling her quickened little heart pumped through every vein was one that could convince her of anything. The power this Servine's voice and touch held on her even now-- it would hardly take much of a push to have her kill for him, and she wasn't going to pretend she hadn't accidentally gotten close in the past. "...Is the secret at least cool?" the Braixen cracked their loving silence, feeling the movement of her jaw touch the very tips of their noses together.

He opened his eyes a smidgen and scooted closer so that the ends of their faces were touching completely. "I think it's the coolest thing that's not already you, if that's what you mean."

"Pfft. You're so cheesy." Panne motioned her own snout to slip underneath his, effectively moving an inch closer to his waiting mouth. "But does that mean the secret is cooler than citrus berry smoothies and the aurora borealis?"

"Much cooler."

"But when are you going to tell me about it?"

The distance closed between their mouths as heads twisted to accommodate the other, though it was impossible to tell which leaned in first. Ill-fitting were the maws that lacked lips and had been designed for efficiency, yet it never grew old to feel the corners of their grins come together in the closest locking of their faces. She tasted his familiarity, grazed her tongue over his sharp teeth but didn't feel pain, and chased his own thinner tongue with unabashed expression. There was little exploration involved that wasn't intentionally to bring about a cute noise, for they had already claimed this territory from the other plenty of times in the past. This was neither the first, nor the last kiss they would indulge in on his solemn hill.

Vallion was the one to finally pull away, a satisfied and glazed look in his eyes was the first thing she noticed upon opening her own. "Short answer: soon. More accurately, when the time is right. Kinda like now, but a little more prepared I suppose. You'll definitely at least get kick out of it. But, uh-" His nose turned towards the dark sky. "It's got late really fast. The sun was still going down not long ago, but I can hardly even see it anymore. We should probably head back before we end up missing dinner. Your Pops will have both our heads if we miss his cooking on the very first day we're even back."

Their struggle to stand was brimming with warm reluctance despite the opposing chill that had spread itself across the land and started to bite at their extremities. The only thing that wasn't sluggish about her was the racing heart in her chest, refreshed to have been overcome with such wonderful emotion. Panne glanced out over the twilight village one last time and felt that same sensation bloom more intensely like a well-fed fire. She had come up here under the weight of several gnawing thoughts, and here she left arm-in-arm with a stupid grin on her face and a resisted urge to put a spring in her step. The concentration she used to traverse down the steep grassy slope did little to deter her from that resurgence of joy.

Idle conversation filled their short trek back, simply because they had been set in such a mood that just the sound of their softened voices could send shivers up spines. It helped that

the atmosphere of the cozy town had been rendered completely silent by the evening's ending. Not a pokemon stirred in sight as their hushed walk passed by where warm greetings would usually have been. It seemed most everyone had already retired for the night. Even the energetic youth were pulled swiftly back into their homes, though she couldn't really know how strict their guardians were.

Her introspection halted completely with her feet as they passed by the brightened window of Meowstic's small house. Vallion continued on for a few more feet before realizing there was no one beside him.

"You think she's awake yet?" Panne muttered once the Servine finally twisted wordlessly around to see what was the matter. "We've seen nearly everyone today besides Meowstic, and it just occurred to me that it's gotten underneath my nerves we haven't been able to wish her well. I get that she's sick and probably needs rest and all, but why can't we stop by for just a second to say hello? I mean, the lights are on and everything."

Vallion shrugged as best his serpentine body could manage. "Sure, if she's up for it. I was just going to wait until tomorrow to see if she got any better, but I suppose there isn't much harm in doing it now..." He tapped his chin, having to weigh his thoughts of the likes of a mere brief visit. "We might need to binge on a little more Vitamin C than usual tonight if we do. I don't want us to get sick on the very first day of our vacation."

"Oh, whatever. I don't mind a little cold. It's just for a moment, anyway," she said before starting towards the thick wooden door and winding up to give it three mighty knocks. Even with the considerable force she had mustered, there barely seemed to be any resonance from the impacts, and her fist cried out in bruising from the act afterwards. Maybe Panne should ask her to invest in some of those brass knockers you see on huge gates so that this kind of thing didn't happen. That would probably work better than having to crack your skull on the wood just to make an audible noise.

There was no hasty response. Or at least, there wasn't one anyone else who was unfamiliar with the resident of the home would expect. A gentle presence did make itself somewhat apparent on the fringes of her mind, like they were standing knowingly with a third invisible person this whole time. A voice tickled the insides of her ears but made no sound. 'You'd think that a legendary explorer would have a little more than the girly hands you do. Come on in, guys.'

Unphased by the psychic connection, Panne pushed open the heavy slab of an entrance and immediately caught a powerful whiff of herb and spice, followed by a jarring transition into stuffy heat from the sparse night air. The place had been rearranged since the last time she had seen it, but it seemed candles were still her favored light source. But the changes extended only as much as the time it took to get a decent glance around, where thick books lined the same shelves and a crude sanded table stood in the same place as the room's center. The general cleanliness of it all also hadn't faltered a bit, either. The Braixen could venture to say that Meowstic was the most consistent throughout the years of all others that have lived in the village.

"I had heard you guys were back in town, but I hadn't been able to move more than a few feet at a time. Kinda hard to see for myself if I can't get out my own house," the strange voice came from the farthest right of the door, revealing a corner greatly contrasting from the

rest of the house. Meowstic sat surrounded by mismatched blankets in a cushioned chair at least twice her height. Beside the seat was a tall table positively littered with glasses and mugs of all shapes and sizes, some even looked to have had used two pouches of tea for a single drink. The only one of them all still steaming was what the psychic type held now. Catching onto the worried looks, she continued with that same distorted pitch. "Yeah, the place is a bit of a mess. I've probably already drank an entire garden by now and my throat still feels like a family of Sandslash burrowed into it."

"Holy hell, are you alright?" Vallion exclaimed, likely referring to both the disheveled white fur which stuck in any direction it pleased and how she did indeed sounded like ground types lived in her vocal cords. Now that they were getting a closer look, her eyes were frighteningly tired and bloodshot. The deceptive telepathy she used just moments ago told absolutely nothing of this sorry state.

In a typical fashion, Meowstic shrugged dismissively. "More or less, I suppose. It's certainly no flu, but I'd probably rather be dead regardless." A short surge of coughing split apart her words for a few gruesome moments before her throat could be partly cleared. "How have you two been doing? I haven't seen you two in quite a while, which is pretty significant since not many people actually visit me. Mapping out the entire planet's surface is no small feat, among saving it and everyone that ever existed anyway. Kind of funny how that goes."

"It's been fairly interesting so far. Not at all what I would have expected while still working away at the digital and physical maps," Panne mused as she gave the best smile could manage, which still felt pretty strange when directed towards someone who looked more unconscious than awake. "I did predict that the high would eventually fade away, but it ended up happening months earlier than I thought. I'm not even halfway through my life and I've already accomplished what I set out to do, you know? There was never really meant to be any goals after that."

"Yeah, I can see how that would leave you a little hollow. You two are already global historical figures of some of the highest degrees, so being famous and successful twice probably wouldn't have the same ring to it. Still better to have too much life left to live than the alternative, though." Meowstic took a disproportionately massive gulp of the mug in her hands like she had suddenly started dying of thirst from just talking. After having taken the breathless moment to drain the entire container, she placed it with the others and let loose a disgruntled sigh before softening. "I also see that your relationship is still going strong. That's also pretty great, considering most couples after a few years don't have much of a spark left. You won't see most start spontaneously banging on a hill as you two nearly did."

It took several seconds for Panne to comprehend what was said, very soon feeling entire tides of embarrassment crash into her cheeks and raise the room's temperature ten degrees. The very air had been stolen from her lungs, and that silence would have turned to stammering and stomping had Vallion not already raised attention to himself, very clearly becoming a deep crimson from lack of fur. "Guilty. I'm.. still thinking about it. Sorry."

"Among other things, apparently," the feline continued, a sly grin barely dawning across her face from their reactions. "That does seem like a fairly interesting concept you're stewing up there, Vallion. If a little strange. I've certainly never heard of a ritual quite as superstitious and flashy as that. It's actually pretty adorable you would think that way about her."

Now it was he who couldn't stow the panic that washed across his face, motioning frantically for her to cease the sensitive subject and repeatedly shushing the giggling pokemon to no avail. Panne didn't know about the archaic topic the psychic type had just unearthed, nor did she particularly hear much of it after having raised her own volume. "Alright, everyone just stop it! Knock it off!" She pointed to Meowstic blamingly. "You, quit snooping around in his brain!" Then finally to her shrinking lover. "And you, put away those lewd thoughts right now! I will not have you thinking about that kind of stuff anywhere near my Pops!" They didn't need to peer through her coat to know of the blood that rushed to the tips of her ears.

Meowstic waved her arms in apologies, her laughter quickly transitioning into another nasty bout of coughing that still managed to pierce through their flustered demeanor and pull sympathy from their chests. She continued the notion she had only barely began once her lungs had seen her suffering fit. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! It's just been a good while, there's a lot for me to catch up on and I haven't had any time at all to do it. And not that it really excuses me much, but it's fairly difficult for me to control myself with how little sleep I've gotten despite having tried all day. Telepathy isn't easy to deafen when you yourself can hardly even keep from falling over."

"Ah, is the cold getting to you that badly?" Vallion asked with a sigh of relief at the forefront of his words.

"No, no, not at all. Actually, I'm dead tired because of that and would normally have passed out hours ago if it had been up to me. Except that I've been getting some pretty terrible nightmares to keep that from happening," she motioned to the darkness around her eyes and subsequently slumped deeper into her chair. "They're usually very strange, and intensely vivid as well. The kind that make you suspicious whether or not they're vague predictions of the future or something like that. Ugh, this allergy season is terrible."

Panne tilted her head. "Wait, allergies? I don't think I've ever heard of someone getting nightmares from just allergies before. Fever dreams are one thing, but doesn't hay fever technically have nothing to do with them?"

The feline shrugged, reaching for a mug she had already depleted and finding visible disappointment after having discovered that fact. "I don't know. It comes and goes kind of like allergies, but I don't usually have them so badly that they incapacitate me like this. And weird dreams are associated with them, but again, this instance has been particularly miserable. This might very well just be a combination of both at once, and a little bit of terrible luck." One more fit of coughing sealed her words, followed by a gag, pause, and exasperated groan.

It was in the Braixen's nature to step forth and place the back of her hand onto Meowstic's forehead. While true that she was burning up, that might just as easily have been due to the fact that she was beneath two blankets and had just tanked through an entire serving of freshly-made tea. "Like I said, Val. We're going to have to load up on citrus fruits tonight. There's no need to let this bug spread around on the very first day of our vacation."

"H-Hey, but that's what I said!"

A psychic murmur deafened his complaints in both their ears, transmitting a more perfect rendition of an otherwise ravaged voice. "We should continue this chat later. I've been up for a while just to drink a little bit more fluids, but my body has pretty much given up on me at this point. Say hi to everyone for me and tell them that I'm doing sorta well, they don't really like it when I inject thoughts into their heads for a greeting."

Their departure was quickened, as by the time they had gotten around to delivering their own farewells, Meowstic was already beginning to snore and slip very nearly completely beneath the stolen covers of her bedroom. Even the telepathic link had made more of a sizzling sound than how it was supposed to fade away. Poor girl, she really must have been going through a terrible time while everyone else had been meeting them with distant shouts of surprise and congratulations. Of course, Panne's crossed empathy extended about as far as stepping back into a mild summer's night and feeling her eyes abruptly adjust to the deepened blackness, where she had found surprise rather than holding onto the sorrowful thought. The short minute they had spent in that house caused them to miss the night intensifying twofold.

The door fell back into place with an incredible thud, frightening the Braixen to the point of jumping two feet into the air and yelping as a dauntless legendary explorer would. Either noise could have woken someone up, not that she needed another person in addition to Vallion chuckling uncontrollably. In any case, the growling of his stomach thoroughly pierced her expense and reminded that hunger had taken full residence in their hollow stomachs. Also that they were getting progressively more late. Sucking in a breath of chilled air, Panne snatched up his short hand and tugged with urgency deeper into the village. "Oh man, I thought it was only going to be for a minute! We're definitely going to miss dinner if we don't hurry up! C'mon!"

She felt the temporary hesitance that kept his feet planted melt away as they began to charge up through the town. They passed by houses filled with people they knew, turned corners that had become such muscle memory that this dimness had little effect, and a sudden pang of nostalgia had struck true to her heart. Panne's hurried steps began to slow, turning gradually into a hasty walk until finally making an unwarranted stop just outside the window's light of Carracosta's home, just barely hesitating herself right before their destination. Her breathing became heavier as the love that had tugged her veins beneath the tree resurfaced. Vallion made a murmur of confusion as she faced him and grabbed the both of his hands. Not even the wafting smell of delicious foods could break the spell of her own tender lethargy.

Not a drop of this mood was to be wasted. Once the distance between their mouths closed again, the Servine found the answer as to why they were standing there. Their kiss ended up being much shorter and less interactive than the first, but the following embrace pointing their gazes down and foreheads together did well to portray the eruption of sentimentality that had overcome her. "I love you, too," Vallion whispered without her having to say anything, and the world paused to perpetuate this one instant. Every noteworthy experience she tried to recall of this tiny stretch of town, good or bad, came rushing back in the silence.

"Panne."

She cried out and retreated from Vallion's grasp, for that wasn't his booming rasp. At some point Pops had clamored to the window and peered out at them, his great shadow having gone unnoticed in the moment. "I hate to break your little moment up, but I told you dinner would be ready before dark. You'll have plenty of time later, but I will absolutely not let the food go cold from waiting."

The Carracosta left from view after having delivered his message, and the Braixen found her shoulders slumping once more. In a volume barely audible between the two of them, she turned back to the Servine. "Ooh, thank god he's such a softie. If he had caught us even just walking back instead of that, we'd be hearing it for the next week. That was so close.."

After having picked up her composure off the ground and stored away the sappiness, they finally got around to chasing the drifting savory odor and entered through into the coziness of the home. It was the immediate veritable buffet splayed before their eyes that would catch every ounce of their salivation and attention. Still steaming generously were pastas soaked in plentiful sauces and rolls of bread not twenty minutes from the oven, butter already melting into the spongy textures. There were berry spreads and salted almonds and seemingly any kind of well-seasoned grilled vegetable they could ever crave. It was within Panne's interest to preserve this saccharine fog that had rolled into her chest, but there were few things on the planet that could take precedent over the point-blank scent of Pops' irresistible cooking.

And there was Nuzleaf, sharing a proud smile at the corner of the table from his own personal contributions to the feast. Though it was not nearly parallel to Carracosta's knowing grin as he took in their agape faces. It had been so long since they last had a proper home meal like this, anticipation practically overrode breathing over top their tongues.

"Just a little celebratory dinner mixed with a big 'welcome back'. I know you've probably eaten plenty over the past week, but I just couldn't help myself. Any excuse to cook like this, right?" Pops' humble chuckling quickly became him sighing of reverence. "Goodness me, look at what's happened to my little girl. One blink and she goes off to save the world, another and she's drawn the entire thing from the ground up. I'm going to wake up tomorrow and you're going to have solved all crime, eh?"

The Braixen strode past the endless platters and took up her father in a sizable but vigorous hug. "Aw come on, Pops. Quit trying to make me cry in front of everyone." Not even his stone shell could keep at bay their cheerfulness in the midst of such a holiday. Even Vallion had softened up somewhat and reached over to give Nuzleaf an awkward show of affection before Panne could rotate there. Nuzleaf specifically had been off on business by the time they had first arrived in the village today, only now appearing to help with the creation of this overwhelming and enticing feast. There was always time for greetings with family before one drowned themselves in gluttony, however, and she had plenty of greetings to spare.

"Now now, that's enough of that," Carracosta pat her on the shoulder. "I don't need to break into tears, either. This is a huge milestone you two have reached, and I will see to it that no crying of any kind will go on so soon after. And besides, the food is only getting colder the longer we wait. It took far too long for us to get all these ingredients together to just stare at the table longingly."

They needn't more of a signal than that to sit down and begin. Heartfelt moments aside, the matter of everyone's incredible voracity was at hand, and would promptly be answered by the pressing choice of first bites. A rainbow of flavors fell to each of their greedy hands, either to try new experimental recipes before any others or to steal away with a few mouthfuls of tried-and-true famous ones making a reappearance. There wasn't a single part of the tongue that had gone ignored, no taste that had gone unappreciated in the preparation of it all. At times the fear would rise that even their combined efforts would not be able to finish off a great enough portion. Of course, the next begrudging bite always managed to convince her otherwise.

No one spoke during the first few minutes, as it was an impossible task to make legible and mannered conversation while heaven had descended before them in the varied forms of peppered cheeses. It wasn't until their stomachs felt like they were about to split asunder from

gluttony did they find time between bites to trade a few words. Even then, they couldn't manage more than a few insignificant exchanges for a good few minutes longer. Everyone but Carracosta seemed to have forgotten how to breath naturally with so much to shovel in and savor. It would take until most of the bread had been indiscriminately devoured before one could catch enough air to make whole sentences, but not before the rawst berries were entirely depleted had they been mildly coherent.

"Hey Pops," Panne began, inhaling deeply to alleviate at least some of the uncomfortable pressure in her gut. "We went to go see Meowstic before coming here, just because we haven't been able to. And.. How long has she had these weird allergies that give her nightmares? We've never really heard of anything like that before, and she was absolutely ragged with sleep depravity because of them. I was just wondering if someone else knew anything about it."

It was Nuzleaf who would set aside his appetite to meet the inquiry. "Oh, those? That's, uh, probably a little more than allergies, if that's not too hard to believe," he said, taking a preparatory breath and stretch as he pushed his plate forward. "You could say that there's been a bug going around since last fall, but nobody really noticed it then. All of the dreams we thought were just coincidence, and as we got healthy again it was all forgotten. Then the same thing happens a little while later, and it goes just as quickly. It simply became a thing that happens, and at worst it'll give one sniffles or a sore throat. Meowstic a few days ago told us that she was getting a cold, but I wasn't aware the nightmares were accompanying it, and getting worse at that."

"What do you think it could be?" Vallion spoke up after having washed down a reluctant but apparently delicious mouthful. "Dream-related illnesses sound suspiciously psychic type in nature. I don't want to discount the possibility that there's actually a weird new pollen floating around, but it's probably smarter to assume some mental influence. It's not like Darkrai decided to travel all the way to the Water Continent and mildly terrorize a tiny town for the last half a year."

A shrug was given in response. "I mean, all signs do point to an invasion of some kind, but no one has found any evidence to support that. If there were psychic types sneaking around Serene Village and corrupting people's dreams, they'd have to be entirely invisible. I'd personally say that a haunting was to blame, but we ruled that possibility out as well when Simipour went into the barrow to check on the Reuniclus that still lives there. Apparently the same thing has been going on down there for just as long. There were some pretty fundamental issues with how a pollen would affect a ghost type. Mainly that it could at all."

"Um. Meowstic's going to be okay, right? And we're not going to get some dream plague for having seen her, are we?" Panne had found her limit as well, and the conversation a perfect excuse to keep from stuffing anything more into her face. It also stood firm that whatever had been circulating through the valley was dangerous to its inhabitants. Vacation or not, they were the most well-established rescue team for the next hundred miles. Nothing would threaten this village so long as they hadn't fallen into a food-induced coma.

"You may or may not have some strange dreams tonight, perhaps an irritating feeling in your throats in the morning. No more than that. Nobody remembers anything particular about them once they awake, anyway." Pops was next to finally gain the willpower to turn away his

next bite. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. Meowstic's always had a slack immune system, remember that. Even the children here that have shown symptoms were annoyed at best, and you two could probably trudge through a swamp and not have a single cough to show for it."

The Servine took on a look of contemplation regardless, typical for when something like this arose. As for her, there stood nothing she could think of that would really add fuel to the issue. It was an enigma they'd likely have to encounter themselves to get a better grasp of. Perhaps even tonight, if the problem would be so bold as to make itself apparent. There was nothing confirmed other than its presence among the community, but Panne still felt a twinge of fear that it might be psychic types who were most susceptible to the anomaly. Meowstic being the only obvious and sickliest example didn't put that unnerving thought to rest at all.

With that sensitive topic worn out and their bellies ready to stage a rebellion, things quickly began to wind down. They all sluggishly began to clean after the tremendous meal and expedited the process of storing away the still sizable amount of leftovers. That which did need to be stored in cold found its place in an electric cooler that only became more and more overstuffed as the table itself became visible. After the task had been completed, Nuzleaf had given his farewells to us all and started to set off to depart the short distance to his home for the night, but not before pulling Vallion aside and asking him to come along for a moment. Seemingly in the know of something she did not, they took off out the door and slinked from earshot.

"I can't believe it," Panne began once certain they were the only two to hear. "You finally managed to teach Nuzleaf to cook, and extremely well at that. He really is happier now than he used to be, isn't he? I thought he'd never stop beating himself up."

"Yes. While he hasn't gotten quite as old as I have, some things come much more painfully into perspective with age. I believe he's finally beginning to understand how much time he wasted trying not to be the villain. Nobody should be wallowing in so much self-pity that the calendar practically melts away. Most people tend to learn how to cook much easier after they realize that." Pops let loose a rich laugh that clashed with the sound of clinking dishes. "I don't want you to go around thinking that you need to be the hero, either. You should know better than anyone the shifting north of a moral compass."

The labored wait droned on while Vallion was out speaking with his old father figure. When he did return, what also came through the door with him was a new cotton bag tightly in his grasp. It was a small and crude sack tied at the mouth, but he had held it dearly to his chest like it was the finest velvet. Before she could ask exactly what it contained, he had already sped off into the room they would be spending their night in. Pops hardly even noticed the suspicious entrance with how immaculately he stored away cleaned plates and dishes. A smirk colored the Servine's lips as he walked back and saw the curiosity on hers.

"And what was all that about?" she said, taking strides towards the bedroom without taking her eyes from him. Was that a pinch of nervousness she saw flash across his vision?

He buried the look and shook his head. "Hey! No peeking, sweetheart. It's part of the secret. And I mean it, or else the surprise will be spoiled completely." Vallion turned back for a moment longer before returning to the bedroom, like he had only come out here again to say so. "We'll tell you if we have any of those nightmares, Carracosta. Goodnight!" Panne huffed at his flighty behavior and chased in after him while shouting similar farewells to her father, who had

just finished up and was retiring as well. His bellowing calls echoed to a similar notion, but that of one who gained twice their weight from an overzealous dinner.

Valion had already found his place among the many blankets and cushions that were strewn about the floor by the time her eyes caught the unsuspecting sack's hiding place. Ideas of what could have been inside sprung from all corners, but she had silently surrendered to whatever grandiose plans he had in store. Certainly there were eyes against her back at this very instant, expecting fully that his big scheme remained hidden until the exact perfect moment. "Fine. You could have probably brought it in more discreetly, though. Darting across the house with it doesn't really make it any less easy to notice." The Braixen turned out the final lights and settled down beside him in the ensuing darkness.

"Sorry. I got a little excited." Their bodies entwined upon impulse, Vallion's long body holding to its flexible nature and finding a way to curl intimately around hers. She welcomed the position like a flower did Combee, pushing her face beneath his and letting loose a contented rumble from the deep of her throat. Soon their synchronized breathing was the only sound that crept through the room as weariness began to creep in and take hold of their limbs. Panne did try to push the forbidden mystery from her mind during this sinking comfort, but what had taken its place was anxiety of the strange ailment that had arisen while they were gone. What if it really was more potent on pokemon of her type? And if it was, did it matter what variety of psychic type? Or- or... affected or not, she wasn't going to fall asleep agonizing over it.

"Val.." she gently muttered into his neck. "You think that the worse dreams Meowstic ends up having is because she's a psychic type? I'm scared that the second I get to sleep will be splattered with horrible imagery or something. If it really is a haunting, wouldn't it be right to have a stronger effect on us than anyone else?"

"Nah, I don't think that's the case. I trust that Reuniclus was being truthful about what was happening in the barrow. It's usually a fairly peaceful place down there. The Litwick we befriended are evolved now, and they have no reason to let other lesser ghosts run rampant and make people's lives worse. Besides, it probably has something more to do with her abilities than just what type of pokemon she is. You don't have much to worry about at all."

"But- but what if there's a haunting going on that doesn't have to do with the barrow? Nothing that's been going on HAS to have originated from there. Whatever it is could have come from somewhere else looking to feed. I'd rather just stay up than have my dreams eaten by some invisible demon."

She felt the length of his tongue gingerly lap just behind her ear, the closest thing to a reassuring kiss he could manage. "We don't even know what's been floating around and making people sick yet. For all we can guess, pollen a strange grass type might have truly fallen from the mountain and is playing with people's minds and sinuses. The chance that a bandit group of pokemon has been preying on innocent dreams for the last few months completely undetected is extremely unlikely. You don't think that Meowstic wouldn't have detected them first?"

"It's not pollen, it can't be. Pokemon in the barrow are getting sick with the rest of us. Whatever it is can't be natural enough to simply drift down on the wind."

Deeper into his wrap she went, a familiar routine to calm her whenever this kind of thing stole away with her restfulness. "Whatever it is, we can deal with it later. And we WILL deal with

it, because I doubt it's anything more than a whisper compared to some of the other things we've braved through. I'm not going anywhere without you. Remember that."

Finally, the firm body she had pressed into offered a radiating relief which grew more powerful the warmer they became. He was right, after all. For more reasons than what he said in his consolation. Panne peeked out to see the window's crossed shadow be pressed into the wall by the rising moon's bright glare, the same image it always was. The amount of obsessing that had turned sour nights sleepless in this room was more than she could count. To add to that number willingly, and especially during a respite as precious and young as this, was completely worthless. What WAS a few bad dreams to some of the most perilous adventurers that have graced this era of time? This single night of sleep was not.. was not worth wasting over... anything this insignificant...

...ZZ...

...-What?

From throes of slumber came some semblance of a conscious thought. Her eyes could suddenly be opened if they had so desired to, and intelligent yet groggy processes once more took the forefront of her mind. There was still darkness lying over her eyelids, so it hadn't turned morning quite yet. Why had she awoken? It wasn't until a shuddering cough sounded nearby her ear and reverberated from the sweating figure clutching her that Panne realized the sounds causing her to stir. The puzzle pieces fit slowly together while her systems booted up. She had no dreams at all, and Val was the one to suffer.

"Hey.. Wake up..!" her murmurs came with a shove to shake him awake. Gentle at first, the nightmare locked him under incredibly tight, and she eventually was forced to throttle him just to hear a gasping yelp emerge. "Val. Are you alright? What happened?" He only continued wheeze as if still trying to catch his breath from being chased. The Servine did eventually manage to catch up with his surroundings and let loose a grunt to clear his mucus-filled throat.

"Did you get one, too?" he pushed the words out, his voice labored and scratchy.

"No. I woke up from your coughing. Have you actually gotten sick because of it?" Panne pulled away from their embrace to see the remnants of desperation in his eyes. Whatever was tormenting him seemed to have had a strong effect even the waking realm.

Despite this, Vallion seemed relieved to find out he was the only one to encounter his demons tonight. "Good. That's.. that's good. I didn't want you to have to go through something like that. C-could you get me something to drink? I, heh. Whatever it was definitely tried to feast in the same way we did. I'm so drained.."

It took no more for her to rise up from the pristine warmth of the bedding and begin staggering on the tips of her toes into the kitchen. While her vision had grown partial to the darkness, she snapped an illuminating spark onto the tip of her finger just so that she wouldn't crash into anything that was camouflaged and wake Pops. Though accomplishing such a feat

as that was easier said than done, even her frantic rummaging through cupboards and clinking glasses together failed to rouse any changes in his distant snoring. Panne continued to listen for any disturbance in that white noise while she poured water as best she could in near blackness. Why had the nightmares solely targeted only a single person in the whole household?

Vallion stared blankly at the window when the Braixen reentered as swiftly placed the filled glass within reach of his vines. He was hesitant to react at first, but soon snatched up the water and greedily gulped it down as she had seen Meowstic do. Was it specifically dehydration that was wracking his body, or some other side-effect of the slumbering illness that overcame him? She sat down beside him once more and watched closely as the entire glass went dry in a single breath.

"What was it like? Was it really like premonitions after all, or do you not remember?"

A scoff passed into existence through an especially raspy throat, clamoring for a better breath. "I wish it were that harmless. It was like.. hold on. You do end up having some difficulty remembering." He coughed a moment and clutched at his neck, a clear indicator that it was likely as ragged as it sounded. "Like, you know that feeling when you're trying to hide from something terrible, and all of a sudden it finds you? Imagine that single moment of dread and hopelessness, but it just goes on forever instead of you moving on to run away. I would compare it to being chased, but you can't really move at all."

She found the explanation plenty to warrant scooting in and wrapping her arms protectively around her lover. Vallion leaned into her form, still staring off into space like something was there. The longer spend recovering while wide-eyed at nothing, the more fright began to transfer into her that there really might have been something here with them. It was never supposed to be as intense as what Vallion had experienced, right? What if the thing that was sapping people's fear was in this very room still from the abrupt awakening, and he was simply looking unconsciously at it? Was if it angry at her for interrupting the nightmare? Would it go after her next? A panicked quiver effortlessly found its way into her breathing.

Detecting this, the Servine shook from the trance and pressed himself deeper into her chest, suppressing as much of the disdain in his lungs as possible. "Hey now, what's with that heartbeat? Everything's going to be fine, I promise. I won't let anything get through to your dreams, even if I have to take the full brunt of whatever it is."

Steadily, gradually, they had lowered down into their bed and brought the backs of their heads to pillows still shapen to them. Vallion slithered into her side and could be felt still trying to woo sleepiness back into her, rustling soothingly through her belly fur in rhythms that had been proven to melt her worries away before. Her eyes darted to the dark corners of the room regardless. "But I don't want you to have to go through that again. I.. I don't care about ghosts or demons or whatever. I don't want to be safer if that puts you in even more danger."

"Then protect me. I'm scared, too," he said, and buried his head deeper beneath her shoulder. It was a resonating request, but one that didn't sound as honest as his vows. Surely it was a plea made just to instill enough confidence in her that sleep would shortly follow the void where fear had once been. But she didn't care, curling tighter around his slender body and hugging his tail with her legs. Whatever attacked him would absolutely have to get through her first, no matter what he intended with his words. As if she would allow anything close enough to hurt her Val, let alone some cowardly creature that infested the dreams of innocent people...

His plan succeeded, and her mind became too weighted to stay afloat any longer.