

No...No!

Muse jerked awake with a gasp, eyes wide with fear. She sprang to her feet, her claws enveloped with shadowy energy. Her gaze darted about the dark room, illuminated only by a sliver of moonlight. No one else was here. It was just her, her nightmares, and the throbbing pain in her horn.

She relaxed slowly, the tension leaving her body. Exhausted, she sank back into her bedding, ignoring the stray bits of straw that she'd thrown about in her sleep. She could fix that in the morning when she wasn't so distressed.

"Musey?"

Muse had failed to notice the creaking of floorboards outside, or that her door had been opened. Shimmer stood in the doorway, eyes glowing with psychic energy. She crept into the room, kneeling by the absol's side.

"Muse, what happened? Are you having another premonition?"

Muse looked up towards Shimmer, locking eyes with her. For a moment she was lost in those eyes, and her heart ached to tell Shimmer all her worries, like she used to. But something held her back. She couldn't tell her. Not yet. The throb in her horn forbade it, made her fear the consequences, scared her of hurting her dearest friend. So, she took a deep breath and, as she always had, hid the pain.

"No, it was only a bad dream."

Shimmer furrowed her brow, then scooted forward and turned so that she was laying against Muse's side with an arm draped over her. Her tiny fingers ran through the absol's fur, providing a hint of comfort. "Oh, Muse. I'm sorry. I wish I could do more to help you."

Muse bowed her head, resting it against Shimmer. "Your company helps me more than you know."

For a while, the two stayed in that position, content. Or at least, Muse feigned contentment. But inside, despite Shimmer's presence, her stomach still churned with worry.

And deep inside, she knew something was very wrong. Something worse than the feeling she'd gotten around that mawile, even. She knew she needed to tell someone else about her premonition. But she couldn't involve Shimmer, not when it was this bad. Not without running it by someone wiser.

But if she couldn't involve Shimmer... who else could she trust? Toshi? He was kind, but he had no power to do anything. Perhaps...

As she drifted off, an idea came to her. Someone that, while perhaps not ideal, she felt she could at least trust to help.

But as she closed her eyes and drifted back into sleep, she decided she could worry about that in the morning.

The smell of petrichor clung to Haru's lungs as she took a deep breath stretched in the weak morning light. The air still felt damp after a shower had passed through before dawn. Perfect weather for a bidoof. She let her breath out slowly, soaking up what little warmth she could get. Autumn was certainly in full swing by now, with the leaves starting to turn a golden color that matched the local mystery dungeon. Soon, short frosty days would drive her to huddle down in her nest for longer and longer.

"Timber!" The sound of her mother's voice and creaking wood caught Haru's attention. She turned to watch as a tree several paces down the path tottered before falling away from her. Haru paused her own work of chewing branches off another felled tree, observing as her mom gave the tree a quick look-over and let out a satisfied grunt.

"That one should make for some good firewood," Saku said, thumping it once with her broad tail. Haru bobbed her head in agreement. Winter was still a couple moons off, but they needed all that time to prepare. The whole town would be needing firewood soon enough.

"Do you want me to start removing the branches after I finish this one?" Haru asked. While waiting for an answer, she turned back and started to gnaw at another branch.

"Yes, but you can do that after lunch. For now, why don't you load some of those branches and take them back home, dear? Your brother can finish them later."

When? Haru thought, a frown forming on her face. When he's done playing guard for the local criminal? To her mother, she didn't respond right away, taking a moment to finish chewing off the branch she already started. Once done, she dipped her head before dragging a few of the branches into a small cart, stepping into an attached harness. Her mother helped tighten the straps. Then she began to pull, straining against the weight, struggling to take the first few steps. Slowly it began to move, and with momentum now on her side, she took off back towards town at a steady gait.

Her route took her back into the outskirts, where she passed dozens of rows of berry bushes. She'd reached Roselei's farm. She slowed to a stop and — with a bit of effort — loosed the straps enough to come out of the harness. If she remembered Toshi's hasty explanation before he'd dashed out on breakfast this morning, this is where he was watching Nip work. Curiosity got the better of her. She stood on her hind legs, then climbed onto one of the wooden rails of

the fence running along the path. With the added height she could just barely see the tip of a green feather dipping up and down.

Returning to her cart for only a moment, she wedged one of the branches against the wheel to act as a temporary brake, then scrambled under the wooden fence and into the field. She passed oran bush after oran bush — the most common berry that the grass-type couple grew.

Before long, she reached the row where Nip was working, reaching up to pull the orans from the bush and place them into a straw basket. Roselei was nearby, picking from plants on the opposite side of the path. When one of the baskets filled, she'd raise a vine into the air, and a local avian, an unfezant, would take the basket and fly it back to the farmhouse. He came for another pass just as she arrived, giving Haru the chance to see Nip shrink back when he dove, as if he expected to be carried off like a piece of prey. For the briefest heartbeat, she felt a pang of pity, before reminding herself that he didn't deserve sympathy.

He could use a little fear, anyways, she thought.

Toshi, who was standing a few paces down the row, noticed Haru approaching. He stood on his hind paws for a moment, then ran over to greet Haru with an affectionate headbutt.

"Hey, sis, what are you doing here?" he asked after taking a step back.

"I was just passing by, and I wanted to see how you were doing," Haru explained. "How are things?"

"Good." Toshi glanced back watching as Nip tossed a couple more berries into the basket. "Everything's been quiet. There's been no trouble at all." He hesitated, his cheerful expression faltering. "Actually... I'm getting a little bit worried, if I'm being honest. I know I didn't have a lot of interactions with Nip, but he's been acting... weird since the incident with Celebi. Subdued. I think he was really bothered by what happened."

Haru groaned inwardly. Not the celebi again. The small god's appearance had been shocking to her, to put it lightly. After all her insistence about how the gods were either useless or non-existent, she'd been proven wrong on one theory, and right on the other. And yet... as much as it made her want to feel smug, to tell everyone else that she told them so, that she knew these godly pokemon were bad news... it left a sour taste in her mouth. Celebi's ditzy, useless behavior was almost everything she'd feared. The only thing that could have made it worse was if he'd been malevolent; and she still couldn't be certain he wasn't.

Instead of that, she voiced another thought that she thought might be controversial. "I don't see how you can show any sort of sympathy after everything he's done!" Her voice came out in a loud whisper. She glanced at Nip to see if he showed signs of noticing. But if he did, he said nothing. His posture didn't change. Not even the twitch of an ear. In fact, he barely looked up from the ground, reaching mindlessly for another berry.

"I know I probably shouldn't," Toshi admitted. "But I can't help it. I keep thinking about how I would have acted in his paws. And... I dunno. He made a lot of mistakes, but don't we all?"

"Not everyone's mistakes result in the deaths of children," Haru pointed out flatly. "I don't know why I have to keep repeating myself here."

"Fair..." Toshi hesitated. "But even so... look at him. Have you ever seen a pokemon look so beaten down?"

Haru followed his gaze as he turned to look back at Nip, squinting against the sun to get a better look. Now that he mentioned it... Nip didn't look as well kept as usual. His fur truck up in spots, as if he hadn't groomed properly in days, and he worked quietly and sluggishly without looking up.

Her attention was turned back to Toshi as he continued. "Even if you're not concerned by Nip, think about everyone else affected by this. I know how you feel about pokemon like Celebi or Regigigas, but all those stories are important to some pokemon. I mean... think about how shaken up Anu must be, on top of everything he and Whisper have already been through in the past moon."

Haru felt a twinge of guilt twist her gut. She wanted to argue but... but it didn't feel right to. She wanted to say she told them so, to point out that she'd told everyone that the gods either didn't exist or didn't care about them. That they weren't worth wasting breath and prayers over. Even so... though frustrated, she didn't want to upset pokemon that were already hurting by sticking her paw in her mouth. She'd done enough of that already.

"I should... probably get home," she finally said, averting her gaze. "I've got firewood to get back and other things to take care of. See you tonight?"

Toshi stared at her for several heartbeats. Just a little too long, to make the moment more awkward than it already was. Then he closed his eyes and dipped his head. "Alright. See you tonight, sis." With that, he turned to pad back to the working group, leaving Haru to walk by herself back to the road.

After dropping off her branches and a brief conversation with her dad – in which she found out that he'd been distracted and burned everyone's meal - Haru decided to take a lunch break and head to town for food. She suspected this, too, was a result of being stressed by Celebi's appearance. The way others were acting was really starting to get on their nerves. What had they expected? Before being proven real, the gods had already proven themselves useless, in Haru's eyes.

On her way to the main square, she passed Umbra and Vale, who were making their way out of town muttering in low voices. Huh, she never expected the two of them to get along. How odd. It had escaped her mind by the time she reached the main square.

In a village this small, most pokémon had to make their own food. There was only one place one could get a hot meal in town, and that was the local tavern: The Lazy Meowstic. It was one of the largest buildings in town, standing two stories and made of sturdy timber. In the spring, the front would be decorated with pots filled with colorful daisies and daffodils and tulips, but at this time of year the storefront was barren.

Haru pushed her way through the lightweight wooden doors and stepped into the main entrance. Light filtered through windows on either side of the building, illuminating a few particles of dust dancing in the sunbeams. To the right was a small dining area, where a quagsire and an espurr – the owner's daughter – quietly picked at meals of grain and thinly sliced meat. Haru fought the urge to shudder at the thought of whatever poor pokémon had become their meal. At least the meat was unrecognizable as any single pokémon. It made it palatable enough to keep her from gagging.

To the left was a small reception desk, where the tavern owner, a simisear, was speaking with an unfamiliar group of pokémon — a charmander, a charizard, a girafarig, and a raichu. As the charmander shifted in place, Haru caught sight of a badge glinting on her bag. Explorers, by the look of it. Probably passing through for the night. Unimportant. Toshi would be interested, though. He'd want to bombard them with questions about work at the society, and how things had been in the big towns. Maybe Haru would mention them to him when she headed home for the night.

"Just take a seat at any table, Haru," Meaad, the simisear, called from behind the counter. "I'll be with you after I get these fine folks settled in." And then he was no longer paying her any mind. "Now, how long are you looking to stay with us?"

Haru turned her attention away from the desk, taking a seat at a low table close to the window. She found the light soothing. And, as a bonus, it was far enough away from the other patrons that she'd probably be left alone. She wasn't in the mood for small talk right now. Not that she normally was.

"Sorry about the wait, Haru."

Looking up, Haru saw the kindly face of Meaad giving him a lopsided grin with his hands clasped together. "Now, what can I get for you today?"

"Veggie sandwich with Mago juice, please," Haru answered, turning her attention back to the window. She heard Meaad shuffle away and closed her eyes, relaxing on her cushion.

"Hey! Look who it is! Hi Haru!"

The peace couldn't last long. Haru bit back a groan as she turned her head, seeing Shimmer waving at her from by the door. Muse was by her side, stoic as always. To Haru's surprise, Tempest was on Muse's other side, his tails waving slowly behind him. Likely, they were on volunteer guard duty, like Toshi. Haru willed them to turn around and leave, but Shimmer zipped straight to her table, plopping down by her side.

"I won't keep you long," the kirlia promised, her grin wide. "I just thought we'd take a minute to catch up. It feels like you've been avoiding us, and that's not very nice, is it?"

"I'm always avoiding you, Shimmer," Haru replied curtly. "I don't enjoy spending any more time with you than necessary."

Shimmer laughed and gave her a dismissive wave. "I know you don't like me Haruru, but you really gotta learn to get along with people. You're gonna get yourself in trouble one of these days with that tongue of yours."

Haru pointedly ignored her and turned her head away. She heard shuffling as Muse and the ninetales stretched out around the other side of the low table. A tingling sensation pricked the back of her mind, and she focused to push it away before turning around to glare at Shimmer. "Could you at least have the decency to stay out of my head?"

Shimmer giggled. "Oh, that's not me."

At the same time, Haru lost her focus and heard a faint word echo in her mind. H...lo. He...llo.

"You've heard ninetales around here tend to have latent psychic abilities, right?" Shimmer continued. "Well, I figured that Tempest here might have those same abilities, despite having an ice affinity. And I was right! I've been teaching him some basic psychic skills, so that it's easier for him to communicate." She paused, glancing to Muse. "It's not perfect. I don't have a way to help him link with a dark pokemon's mind. But it's an improvement!"

Haru stared at her for several heartbeats, processing her explanation. Her paws dug into the hardwood as her mood soured further. This seemed like a mistake. She had to speak her mind here. "Don't you think that's a bit... unwise?" Shimmer tilted her head, so Haru continued. "I mean. I know it's hard for a psychic to take over the mind but think about it. You're teaching someone who's in jail techniques that can confuse and manipulate. What if he uses it to break out? Or to hurt someone.?"

A chill settled over the group, and Haru fell silent. She glanced over to the ninetales. Was he the source of the cold? He met her gaze with... disappointment. Sadness maybe. She felt a pang of guilt for just a heartbeat, but then pushed it away and stayed firm.

Shimmer didn't stay silent for long. She rolled her eyes and leaned forward to pat Haru's paw. Haru yanked it away. Briefly, Shimmer's perky facade broke, and she looked genuinely surprised by Haru's hostility. Then she was back to her usual self. "Look, don't worry about it Haruru. Tempest's nice. He's a surprisingly nice conversationalist, even if he's still getting the hang of things."

Haru turned to Muse. "And you're... okay with this?"

Muse was looking out the window, eyes unfocused. It was only after a long pause she realized she was being addressed. She jolted, then shuffled under Haru's scrutinizing glare as the bidoof repeated the question.

"Well..." Muse began, "I am... concerned for Shimmer's safety. It's my job to make sure she's safe. But... Tempest has shown no ill will since settling in. If Shimmer thinks it's okay, then... I trust her judgement."

Haru blinked. Since when had Shimmer shown good judgement? Was Muse being serious? There was some emotion in her tone that Haru couldn't place, but the absol didn't appear to be joking.

She raised a paw sliding it across the table towards the absol. "Are you... feeling okay, Muse?"

"Hm?" Muse's gaze returned to the window. There was a distant look in her eye. "Oh, I'm fine. Just... thinking about something is all."

Haru let out a slow breath. This was getting her nowhere. She stood, shook out her fur, then moved to a different table. She didn't have to deal with this nonsense. She'd eat quickly, then get back to work, where the trio wouldn't dare bother her. Fortunately, they seemed content to leave her be.

It seemed like everything was flipped upside down lately. She wished Jhorlo would just send the troublemakers off for the Enforcers Union to deal with. Maybe then her life would go back to normal.

Whisper worked by candlelight, making neat lines of dots and dashes across the page. With the new season upon them, she needed to get her expense report finished soon. Jhorlo wasn't going to like it; taking care of prisoners was expensive, and while they'd done several tasks around the village to help other locals, none of that money was going back to Jhorlo's pocket.

Her claws faltered as she reached the part of the report where she would request more funds. Were they just wasting time and resources, trying to rehabilitate these two? She was certain Tempest could be a responsible member of society. He was willing to work with others, willing to learn. Nip on the other hand?

She started to reach a claw towards her feathers, then stopped herself. Turning her head, she stared into the darkness. Her night vision was not the best, but she could hear a faint shuffling from Nip's cell well enough. Occasionally she could see the glint of claws in the moonlight, but they were never raised.

He was pacing again. Over the last several nights, he'd awoken from sleep and begun to pace restlessly, sometimes deep into the night. She figured it had to do with Celebi's appearance. She didn't want to sympathize, but it was difficult not to when she knew Anu was going through similar struggles. Not that he could show anyone else; as the village religious leader, he couldn't show shaken resolve after Celebi's... lackluster appearance. If he faltered, others would. No, he had explained to her time and time again why he had to be strong. She didn't think it was fair, but at least she understood.

Her claws went back to the wooden desk, tapping at it as she tried to reign in her focus.

Just as she turned back to her report, though, she heard an out of place noise. A scratching at the hut's front door. Whisper paused, tensing, and waited. It happened again. Slowly, she stood, picking up the luminous orb she'd been working with, then tip-toed towards the door.

The scratching sounded again. She cracked the door open only a sliver.

"...Muse?"

The absol's fur glowed in the moonlight, giving Muse the appearance of an otherworldly creature. Whisper opened the door further and caught sight of Muse's grim expression.

"What's wrong?" Whisper asked.

Muse crept inside. She kept low, her muscles coiled, as if she expected trouble to spring out at her at any time. Whisper's heart raced, egged on by the absol's unusual behavior.

"Can I speak to you? Privately?" Muse's voice was quiet and tense.

Whisper dipped her head, walking around her and moving into a small, secluded office space. If it weren't for the prisoners, this was where Whisper would usually conduct business. It was sparsely decorated, just how she liked it. Another wooden desk, a chair, a couple of flowers starting to wilt in a cracked vase. A small, crude painting of herself and Anu sat on the desk. The only other decoration was a line of small portraits lining the wall. At the very end was Whisper's painting. To its left was an illustration of a fierce looking leopard. And just beyond it, a painting of a luxray with gentle eyes. Muse's gaze lingered on it for a few heartbeats, and briefly, Whisper saw the fear in Muse's eyes be replaced with a deep sadness.



"Your father was an incredible pokemon," Whisper murmured. "I'm sure he would be proud of you." Muse said nothing in reply but dipped her head. Whisper allowed her a moment to grieve before ruffling her feathers and continuing. "Now, what did you want to talk about?"

Muse looked back up. The fear had returned. "I... wasn't sure who to talk to. I considered telling Shimmer, and I still might. But..." She trailed off, her tail tucked between her legs. Whisper had only seen Muse act like this once. And it was before one of the worst tragedies to hit the village; the death of both of Muse's parents, Haru and Toshi's grandfather, and Shimmer's mother – the Mayor before Jhorlo. The four of them had perished on a journey to try and find Regigigas, and their deaths had left the town in turmoil for some time.

The absol had to take a deep breath before she was able to speak again. "I... you knew my parents better than anyone. If they trusted you, then I can too. For nearly the past moon, I've been plagued by feelings of disaster. They started small; the first one came after Umbra came to the village. But they've gotten worse."

She paused again, and Whisper couldn't help but feel frustration roil in her gut. Why hadn't Muse's powers picked up that the sneasel would bring trouble. His actions had hurt the village. His actions had hurt her. It took all her self-control to remind herself that it wasn't Muse's fault.

"Sorry," Muse mumbled, shrinking back.

Whisper realized she must have been showing signs of aggression and forced herself to relax. "No, you've done nothing wrong. Go on."

"It's... a lot. It's hard to talk about. The premonitions worsened after Celebi appeared. And then... last night. Last night I... I had another one. A premonition within my dreams. A horrible nightmare of death and destruction. I... I don't know who causes it, or even who I could trust. Telling the wrong person could lead us all to our doom."

Muse tilted her head up, staring at Whisper with a fierceness that threatened to make her heart stop. "All I know is that I don't know how to stop it. I don't even know if it can be stopped. And that. That terrifies me."