

Chapter 26: Journey into the Gloomy Woods.

Large shrouds of trees shield the woods from any sunlight, shadows seeping every corner. The hoots of Hoothoot echo, the trembles of bushes rustle, and the creaks of branches snap. The six look around, narrowing their eyes.

“...It’s quite dark in here,” Ramon points out.

“No kidding,” Ada agrees. “Makes me wonder what it looks like at night.”

“Let’s say in short: You’re not going to see a single damn thing,” Courtney answers.

“Really!?” Ramon, Justin, and Ada shout, startling the Drowzee.

Courtney presses her finger against her lips. “Shh! Keep it down, will ya?” She stops, eyeing around with caution. “Don’t want to alert any strong Nativus, now.”

“Str-Strong Nativus?” Mesmeren asks, widening her eyes.

The Lopunny stares ahead for a brief moment, sighing. “Yes. Gloomy Woods has a lot of them strong Nativus roamin’ here. Trust me: Be on the lookout for them.”

Courtney and Sylock keep glancing around as Mesmeren holds her hands together, gulping. Ramon, Justin, and Ada stare at each other for a brief moment, the boy shrugging afterwards. Everyone moves forward, each step being steadier than the last.

Mesmeren sniffs the air, salivating. “Mmf,” she murmurs, closing her eyes and licking her lips. Ramon looks at her, tilting his head.

“Um, Mes—”

Mesmeren jolts past everyone, reaching a bush filled with Oran Berries thanks to the small sunlight: Those blue spotted features captivate the Drowzee, her tongue hanging with glee. She takes one of the berries and bites it, shaking her head. “Mmm!” She bites another. And another. And another!

Everyone stares at the Drowzee with perplexion, lifting their brows. “Hey um...Mesmeren—” Ada clears her throat. “You never consider those berries to be rotten or anything?”

The ribbon wearing tapir turns around, some juices spilling out of her stuffed mouth while carrying many Oran Berries. She swallows, looking away with a blush. “S-Sorry...I really like Oran Berries,” she says, lowering her ears.

"Hey don't feel bad about liking them things: I once ate an Oran Berry pie, and it's some of the most delicious pie I've ever tasted in my life," Courtney says, licking her lips while rubbing her belly.

Mesmeren perks up. "Wh-What? I th-thought Forest was kidding around when he said that!"

"Nope! Those things are real, and I highly recommend giving it a try." Courtney then turns towards the others, snapping her fingers. "That goes for y'all, too."

Sylock sticks his tongue out, shaking his head. "*Yuck! No thanks,*" he signs.

The Lopunny pouts. "Of course you'll despise it. I kept tellin' ya about that one being cooked by a garbage chef, Sylock!"

"Well that 'chef' gave me a bad impression on Oran Berry pies and possibly pies in general."
The Blaziken folds his arms, his face wincing.

"Look, at least give it another chance by a good chef!"

Ramon, Justin, and Ada stare blankly before the trio snicker. "Look fam, I don't know what that guy is...doing? But I find you two hilarious together."

Courtney smirks. "For one, he's using sign language. And two...huh." Mesmeren returns back to the others with so much Oran Berries as Courtney elbows the Blaziken. "I guess we make for an interesting duo, eh Sylock?"

"We're boring, actually," Sylock counters, his hands behind his head.

The rabbit pouts. "Okay, that's how I know yer ass is lyin'." Her arms fold while Sylock grins.

"What did he say?" Ada asks.

"He thinks he and I are a boring duo," Courtney answers with annoyance as Ada and Justin snicker once more.

"Heh. To be honest, I'm thinking about trying some Oran Berries," Ramon says, staring at Mesmeren's giant pile. "Curious to know what they taste like."

Mesmeren looks at the Zorua as the group continues ahead. "O-Oh?" She blushes. "Well, I'd hand some to you but um..." She stares at the pile, chuckling nervously. She soon yelps from one of the berries lifting off from it, surrounded by purple auras. She looks behind her, Ada's hand coating in the same auras.

The berry descends in front of the Zorua, Ramon blinking. "Hmm?" Turns around. "Oh."

"Figure I'd lend you two a hand there," the girl says, smiling.

"Thanks," Ramon and Mesmeren both say, the fox biting into the Oran Berry. He looks around, chewing on the gush and fruitfulness of the berry, nodding.

"Whoa...This tastes really good."

"I know, r-right!?" Mesmeren looks at the Zorua, giggling. "I loved them so much that I gained the ability to sniff any nearby."

Ramon smiles. "I see. That explains why you were salivating yesterday."

Mesmeren pauses, her face intensifying in red. "Y-You noticed?" Ramon nods, the Drowzee shielding her face behind the Oran Berries. "Th-That must be so embarrassing and disgusting to see. Sorry..."

"Hey, no need to apologize for loving Oran Berries." Ramon closes his eyes while wagging his tail, smiling up at the Drowzee. "I see no harm in it."

Mesmeren trembles. "But I-I was being weird about it...A freak. Like I wasn't supposed to—" a paw touches Mesmeren's arm before she can finish her sentence, the Drowzee gazing at him.

"Hey, I'm telling you that it's okay. You're free to drool over your love towards Oran Berries. It's just a preference, after all: It's not hurting anyone." Ramon smiles warmly, the Drowzee's rumbles ceasing itself.

Mesmeren nods. "O-Okay..."

The two roam around further, eyeing the shadowy corners. The Zorua comes to a halt, jolting his brow.

Mesmeren stops, looking beside her. "What's wrong?"

"...Where is everyone?"

"U-Um...What do you—" Mesmeren looks around: Nothing but Ramon, berries, trees, and bushes are there. "O-Oh no..." She quakes, dropping the berries.

The fox tenses up from them and looks at the tapir, leaning close to her. "Relax. I'm sure we can reunite with them eventually."

"...I-I hope so." Mesmeren whimpers.

. . .

“Ada? Ada!?” Justin shouts, his hands over his lips. He and Sylock roam around the dark woods, brushing aside any bushes in front of them. “Damn, how did we get separated from them?” He looks at Sylock: His eyes widening, his hands trembling. “Hey uh, are you—”

Sylock’s claws seek into his left hand, one of his eyes twitching. Blood seeps out, the boy staring at the Blaziken with wide eyes, perplexed. He remains still, not wanting to move a muscle.

The Blaziken looks at him, moving his hands rapidly. “*WHERE’S COURTNEY!?*”

Justin lifts his hands up. “Look, I don’t know what you’re saying, but I’m going to assume that you’re worried about our buddies, too.” He locks eyes onto the Blaziken’s hand, red liquid dripping on the grass. “I wish I knew where they’re at.”

The Blaziken remains silent, squinting down. He snarls before turning around and runs off. Justin stares at the Blaziken, blankness spreading across him. “Um—”

An aquatic shuriken bats against the Blaziken, blasting him into the teen. Sylock grunts, the two colliding against a tree. “GAH!” Justin yelps, clinging on the tree barks.

Both of them look at each other with bewilderment. “What the hell was that!?” Justin exclaims, raising his brow. Sylock covers his bleeding hand, shaking his head.

Soon rustles spark up, the two eyeing ahead: Bushes shake and tremble, shifting side to side. Sylock squints as a blue blade casts on Justin’s left hand, the boy grabbing the hilt.

Rearing its head from one of the bushes lies a blue frog creature with red eyes and a long pink tongue. Two more Nativu Greninjas poke their heads out, the three leaping up afterwards. “What the...” Justin gazes, the Greninjas clinging onto the tree branches: Two hanging upside down while one sits on top, its fingers’ bulbous tip nudging its face. The darkness hides these ninja amphibians, only their red eyes can be seen.

Justin gulps, casting another blue blade as Sylock frees him. The Blaziken looks around: Seeing the first Greninja on the left, the second on the right, and the third in the middle. “*We’re surrounded,*” Sylock signs, lowering his brows.

“Looks like we’re surrounded by these guys,” Justin says, gripping his blades’ ends.

Sylock looks at the boy, glaring. *I just said that.*

Justin looks back. “...What?”

. . .

"Justin! Ramon! Mesmeren!" Ada shouts, her hands over her lips.

"Sylock! Where are ya!?" Courtney shouts as well, doing the same motion as Ada's. The two keep calling for their friends, their voices echoing into nothingness. Footsteps press the grasses down, the two girls stopping their tracks and sighing.

"Shit. How did we get separated from them?" Ada asks, laying her hand onto her head. "We were all together not too long ago. And I was behind Ramon as well." She shakes her head. "Hmm..."

Courtney folds her arms, looking up at the dark leaves. "Huh...You truly can get lost in the woods that used to be joyful." Ada looks at Courtney as a leaf detaches itself, falling with elegance. "The woods that used to be serene...Very brightly lit, too..." Courtney hangs her hand out. "And now..." The dark red leaf lands on her hand, curling up. "It's all mellowed out. Gone." Courtney sighs, looking back at Ada. "Ain't it sad? Seein' what these woods have become?"

Ada blinks for a moment, lifting her brow. "Clarify."

"Hmm?"

"About Gloomy Woods." Ada walks close to the Lopunny. "Did it *not* look like this before?" Courtney shakes her head. "Huh...How did it become this way then? To the point where someone can easily get lost."

"..." Courtney grips the side of her arm, dropping the leaf. "Ain't no point in hidin' how I feel about this place, huh?"

"What?"

ROAAAR!!!

GROOOOWL!!!

The two jump. "What in tarnation!?" Courtney exclaims, eyeing the bushes rustling in front of them.

Two Nativus emerge: One being a yellow humanoid creature with a brown armor-like chest while another is a blue bipedal creature with a giant mouth hanging open. Courtney slowly gets her sword out, backing away. Ada casts her purple claws, the Alakazam twirling its spoons as the Exploud rams its fist to the palm of its hand.

Courtney glares. "I'll explain later. Right now, we have these two to worry about."

“Got it.”

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Clittering. Jittering.

Mesmeren presses her hand against her face, her teeth clanging nonstop. She eyes around, lowering her ears: Shaking beyond belief. “M-Mm.” She murmurs, stroking her chest before her lips squirm.

Ramon squints at the darkness, turning his head from one side to the next. The Drowzee sticks close to him, her arms suddenly wrapped around his head. The Zorua blushes.

Does she have to cling to me like this? She’s...bigger than me. I think we even look awkward this way while walking. Silence rises between them, nothing but the footsteps are heard. “...So —”

Snapped comes the twig as Mesmeren screams, hugging the Zorua’s head. Ramon flinches and yelps, gasping in the lockjaw. Mesmeren looks at the headlock, dropping Ramon immediately. He gasps for that glorious air.

“I-I’m so, so very sorry! I...This place scares me m-more after we got separated fr-from the others...” She pokes her fingers together.

“It’s—” the fox sighs. “...fine. I understand, considering I have no clue where the others are, too.”

The two keep going.

The Zorua whimpers. “Justin! Ada! Where are you guys!?” No response. Ramon lowers his head, sighing. “I hope they’re okay...”

Mesmeren eyes the Zorua, her hands pressing her chest. Melancholy casts within her eyes. *He looks so down about his friends, she thinks. I-I’ll see if I can cheer him up a bit...* “...Y-You know, my pare—” the Drowzee’s eyes widen before she stops, gritting her teeth. *Y-YOUR WHAT!? Trembles. WHY WOULD YOU USE THEM AS A WAY TO ENLIGHTEN THE MOOD, ME!?*

“You know’?” Ramon stops, turning around. “What do you mean by that? I never knew about what you’ll tell me until now.”

Per-Perfect opportunity to change the subject completely. “I-I mean, it’s a way to start a conversation.”

“Oh...Wasn’t really familiar with that. That’s neat.”

Hopefully he doesn’t bring up what I was about to—

“Were you going to say parents, by the way?” Ramon asks, tilting his head.

...*Too late*. Mesmeren shrugs, looking away. “Y-Yeah. I was...going to say that my parents would tell me to hum while twirling around.”

“Huh?”

“It’s bizarre, I know. But it helps c-calm me down whenever I get lost.” Mesmeren smiles meekly. “Y-You should give it a try.”

Ramon shrugs. “I...suppose I don’t mind doing that.” He looks down, chuckling in a nervous manner. “Yeah...Maybe I should stand on twos for this.”

He gets on his hind paws, turning himself around in place. “Hmm hmm hm—” Ramon falls on his back. “Oof!” Mesmeren presses her hands on her lips, giggling. Ramon looks at the Drowzee before laughing himself, standing on all fours. “That wasn’t my best humming twirl attempt.”

“T-To be fair, I haven’t shown you how to do it properly.”

“I see. Well, at least I tried to pull it off, right?”

Mesmeren stares at the Zorua for a moment, gripping her chest a bit before nodding. “Y-Yeah. You’re right.”

“What’s your humming twirl?”

Mesmeren’s face reddens at the question, the tapir backing away. “Wh-What!?”

“...Is it wrong for me to ask?” Ramon looks up with concern, the tapir looking off to the side. “You don’t have to show it to me if you don’t wa—”

“N-No...It’s fine. I’ll show it to you.”

“Are you sure?”

Mesmeren closes her eyes and smiles, her hands behind her back. “I-I’m certain!” She stands on one foot, keeping her eyes closed. Ramon watches with intrigue, sitting down. The Drowzee spins around, humming an ecstatic tune. She then comes to a complete halt, opening her eyes and shaking her hands. “Tada!”

The Zorua wags his tail. "Ah, impressive!"

Mesmeren strokes her arm, staring off. "N-Not really. Anyone could do it."

"At least you found your way to remain calm, thanks to your parents," Ramon says, smiling.

Mesmeren bites her lower lip, shaking. "...I-I guess so..." The Drowzee looks back at Ramon. "Hey, um..." Wiggling in place, she fiddles her fingers. "Do you remember any sort of hobbies you like to do?"

"Hmm?"

The two keep moving ahead. "I...know that you've lost your memories and all because of the Prospective incident, b-but surely you know something from your past li-life that you like to do, right?"

"Hmm..." Ramon looks up at the trees.

Mesmeren leans closer to the Zorua. "N-Nothing you can think of?"

"Well—" the Zorua turns towards the Drowzee, smiling. "I do enjoy learning new things as a part of my hobby. Such as the humming twirl thing earlier."

"O-Oh..." Mesmeren blushes, looking away.

"Perhaps learning has always been something I'm into, even before losing my memory."

"Th-That's good to gain interest in." The tapir smiles back in a shy manner.

"Speaking of memory, do you know why Conjure was after you? Or you still don't know?" Ramon asks.

Mesmeren shakes her head. "St-Still have no clue..."

"I see then."

"Although—" Mesmeren stops. "I did hear them saying something about 'there's another one of mistress' dream targets'."

Ramon looks at the Drowzee, straight face ensues. "What?"

Mesmeren gives him the same look. "I don't know if they said that as some sort of pun or what." Sighs. "Wh-Whatever they meant by that phrase, I'm...certain it's not good. I'm not even sure who this mistress person they're talking about is. It's...bizarre."

"Agreed..."

Silence springs into the air once again before the two continue onwards.

"B-By the way, Ramon..."

The Zorua eyes Mesmeren. "Hmm?"

"Th-Thank you for listening to what I have to say..." The Drowzee twirls her fingers around, moving her lips up shakily.

Ramon blinks for a moment before nodding, smiling back. "You're wel—"

SWOOSH!

A large bone swings between them.

"AH!" Mesmeren screams, the two jumping to the side. She falls on her back while Ramon slides across, gnashing his teeth.

"What in the world was tha—ACK!" The fox is thrown in the air by an unknown foot, slamming against the tree behind him.

"RAMON!" Mesmeren shouts before staring ahead, her eyes growing and quaking. She covers her mouth, begging to scream.

"Who...did..." Ramon's ears twitch to the slamming foot, blinking. His head gradually lifts up, the decaying black cloak shifting in front of him. He stops, gazing into the familiar red eyes of death, the cloaker's blue ears poking out. His Bone Rush lifts as Ramon strokes the grass, shaking to his core. "...That."

The cloaked individual swings down.