

Empty one's mind. Clear one's conscience.

Razer closed his eyes, filtering his thoughts to the barest minimum possible. Any thinking was overthinking now; no wandering what activities he would do today, what hidden obstacles or adversaries may be in store for him, none of that. It was the here and now for the typhlosion that mattered. He filtered out the sound of the ticking wall-mounted clock, the feeling of the linoleum floor beneath his hands and feet along with the metal pot on his back, everything. He was as calm as can be.

The calm before the storm.

Eyes flashing open, Razer bore his teeth as he suddenly unleashed the energy he'd just suppressed. Loose muscles tensed, relaxed jaw clenched, steady breathing now heavy snarling, the typhlosion felt his entire body flare up in a fiery inferno, his vision blurring as the very air around him simmered and rippled. Every inch of him burned in a catastrophic fire; despite being resistant to his own flames, Razer could feel the very fluid in his eyes start to dry. Yet they stayed open, practically bulging from his skull as the typhlosion grunted and wheezed, fueling his own combustion. More... More... More...

A light whistling sound emerged from the teapot along his back, and Razer allowed himself a sigh of relief, his fire immediately dying with a loud hiss. Tea was ready!

Grabbing the kettle from his back, the typhlosion grunted as he rolled himself back onto his two feet, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. It was well known their kind used rage and battle fury to help ignite their flames, but when one was as relaxed and easy going as Razer, well, it became a little tricky to generate their own fire on command. He'd improved in that area tremendously as of late; in the past, the typhlosion had to mentally conjure images of helpless Pokemon wounded and endangered to spark his fury. In fact, it was thanks to his partner that he learned of this technique to begin with.

Alas, their partner probably regretted teaching it to him.

"Really? Again?"

Razer looked over to find the greninja standing in the doorway, her arms crossed. Crazy how they'd known each other for years, yet Razer had never seen the ninja pokemon simply walk into a room. She always somehow just *appeared* in places; that doorway for example. Eitherway, given her posture, it was a safe assumption to assume she was quite frustrated; the typhlosion had to rely on body language to determine that, given the greninja's face was always obscured by her tongue.

Well, there was also her tone of voice as well. "You *just* heated up breakfast thirty minutes ago. We have an oven, *and* flint!"

Razer shrugged, pouring himself a cup of tea. "Well yeah, but this way is faster. Cheaper too."

The greinja audibly scoffed. "The entire house heats up when you do that!"

"Exactly, we save on firewood too. No need to spend on something we don't have to, right?" Razer poured a second cup as a peace offering for his partner. He even made sure to blow away the steam within the cup; he knew the water-type preferred a cooler tea anyways. "Come on, Miyu. It only takes me a minute to—"

He blinked, his hand suddenly squeezing at the cup-shaped pocket of air. The typhlosion's eyes flickered down to his empty paw before looking back up, noting how the greinja suddenly held the cup in her own webbed fingers. Seriously, how does she do that?!

"We must use our abilities to protect others and preserve the peace, not for simple conveniences." Miyu retorted; a fantastic bit of irony, considering that bit of sleight-of-hand she just performed on Razer. Or, sleight-of-tongue? The typhlosion's hand was feeling a little moist. "You wouldn't want this tea to be brewed using my own water, would you?"

Razer frowned. "Of course not. Your water, like, *comes* from you! You're producing it."

"Exactly." Miyu brought the cup up, tilting their tongue-scarf down just enough to take a sip. "And you produce your own fire."

The typhlosion's face flushed at that accusation. "H-hey, that's different! You're not *eating* my flames."

Miyu shook her head, lowering the cup. "It certainly takes like I am. Tea brewed with natural flames wouldn't have this kind of after taste. It's a tad unnatural, if you don't mind me saying."

"Ugh!" Razer groaned. That was one way to cut his ego down. Miyu spoke in a deadpan voice, but the fire-type was certain his partner was hiding the smugest of smug grins behind that tongue. He could have continued with their pointless banter if he really wanted to, something like "then why are you still drinking it?" However, that comment about his flames tasting weird took the wind right out of his sails. Great, now he had something new to be insecure about.

They really complimented each other well, didn't they?

Silently stewing in his own defeat, Razer quickly drained the rest of his tea before sighing. Great, now he can taste it too. "If you're done raining on my parade, I think I'd like to start our day. Those requests aren't going to solve themselves."

Miyu nodded. "Well spoken. We can talk about your fire's stench another time."

Damn, another critical hint. Razer felt ready to faint!

The greninja set the cup carefully on her webbed finger, holding it up. With a flick of her wrist, the cup had vanished, and Razer's pointy ears perked at the sound of glass rattling on the counter behind him. So much for not abusing their abilities. "Have you seen today's requests, Razer?"

The typhlosion shook his head. "I didn't know the mail Spearow had arrived already."

"Hmmmf." For once not displaying her speed and agility, Miyu held out a small stack of fliers to the typhlosion. "Take a look."

- A) A group of pokemon have reportedly gone missing in a nearby cave. A standard affair, really.
- B) Strange pokemon have been attacking innocents along a major trade route? They could handle a group of aggressive pokemon no sweat!
- C) A mysterious structure suddenly appeared in the nearby woods? With Razer's strength and Miyu's speed, they should be able to investigate that safely.
- D) A feud between two bakers in town? Razer wasn't a fan of playing police, but maybe he could help them come to an agreement.**
- E) How interesting, one flier is an invitation to participate in a brand new tournament in town... what the heck is "sumo?"
- F) A noble in town is requesting two bodyguards? Hey, this sounds like easy money!
- G) Nothing looks particularly interesting today... they could just take today off. Nothing wrong with having a lazy day, right?

Taking the stack of papers, Razer quickly glanced over his options. It must have been a rather slow day; there weren't any requests involving actual rescuing. No missing persons to find, no pack of feral pokemon to defeat, not even a litten stuck in a tree. Instead, everything was focused on more low-stakes, community requests.

The typhlosion's ears folded back. He should be happy that there weren't any emergencies in need of their skills, but community service wasn't exactly the reason why he wanted to be a guild member to begin with. His skillset was more suited to braving the dark unknowns and rescuing terrified pokemon, not so much completing menial tasks. Miyu's social skills were even more questionable; last Razer checked, she hated being in the same room as three or more pokemon, at least without being hidden, that is.

Well, he may as well pick one to start them out. Lowering the stack, he looked over to the greninja. "So, Miyu. What do you know about baking?"

The greninja's eyes rolled back, briefly pondering the question before responding. "Very little, other than I don't want you using your flames to bake anything."

This again? Razer sighed, setting the rest of the fliers on the counter before pulling up the one that caught his eye. "We've got two bakers working at the same store who refuse to cooperate with one another. They're too busy trying to outdo each other to even bother serving their customers properly. The owner is furious with their antics but doesn't have the heart to outright fire them. They're looking for someone to, uh, deal with it."

Miyu tilted her head. "Am I to assume 'deal with it' does not mean to defeat them in hand-to-hand combat and crush their spirits beneath our overwhelming might?"

Razer sighs. "If the owner doesn't even want to fire them, I doubt he wants us to beat them up. I think he just wants us to help them corporate again, probably as amateur taste testers."

"I see." The frog-like pokemon nodded. "Do you have experience in the forte of baking?"

The Typhlosion rubbed his chin. "I remember helping my mom make bread when I was a little Cyndaquil. Outside of that, not really. These two probably know much more than I do."

Miyu's eyes lifted, no doubt a slight smile was hidden beneath their tongue-scarf. "Perhaps they can teach you how to use the oven, or a stove? You seem to have forgotten how to use them lately-

"Alright!" Razer groaned. "No more fires, I get it!" Everyone's a critic...

---

While Razer was a more confident fighter than a baker-squabble-resolver, he had to admit it was nice to have some time off of his usual stressful tasks. He enjoyed his walk into town at a nice, leisurely stroll, with no fear of imminent danger to hurry him along. It was a beautiful day, and it felt great that he had the time to fully appreciate it.

His joy must have been infectious, for he soon heard a familiar voice shouting from the distance. "Yo, Razer! You're looking thwell!"

Razer recognized that lisp anywhere. His smile widened when he saw the large, round, and oh so sweet Lickilicky waddle up to them. "Heya, Lester! It's been a hot minute, huh?"

"Yeah, it thure hath!" Lester huffed, leaning forward slightly to catch his breath. "It'th been, what, a month?"

“At least.” Razer chuckled. Lester was a childhood friend and irreplaceable in the Typhlosion’s heart. Unfortunately, the rotund ‘mon didn’t quite have what it took to be a Pokemon Ranger, thus making it a bit hard for the two to keep in touch, but that just made their rare encounters all the more special. It was interesting to see that Lester’s tongue injury still hadn’t healed up, not that Razer dared to mention it out loud. The Lickilicky claimed it didn’t bother him, but Razer noticed he still made envious looks towards Miyu from time to time.

This time, however, Lester looked at the pair with curiosity and amusement. “It’s been even longer since I’ve seen you two out of uniform! You guys quit being rangers?”

The badger-like pokemon chuckled, tugging on his denim jacket. “Nah, nothing like that. We’re just settling a public dispute today, not rescuing anyone from some perilous situation, so there’s no need to wear our uniforms. It was Miyu’s idea.”

The greninja nodded, tugging at her own plain white T-shirt. “We are dealing with civilians today, thus we shall disguise ourselves as civilians.”

Lester’s brows furrowed. “You’re not, like, hiding from someone, are you?”

“That remains to be seen.” Miyu’s eyes shifted around.

Even Razer sighed. Typical ninjas. “No, it’s a completely peaceful, nonviolent mission. But, erh, we are running a bit late. It took us a while to pick out a good set of clothes for this mission.” Miyu was quite picky on what she wanted to wear in particular. She wasn’t used to not hiding in the shadows, after all.

“Ah, right! Thorry!” He nodded, those jovial cheeks of his dimpling. “Don’t wanna hold you guys up. Take care now!”

With that, the rotund pink pokemon sauntered off, Razer waving him away before continuing on their own path. It was only when Lester was out of earshot did Miyu speak up again. “I believe he’s gotten plumper since last we’ve seen him.”

“Probably.” Razer shrugged. There was definitely a bit more jiggle to the Lickilicky than he remembered. “He’s never been one for, erh, physical activity. That’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“I didn’t say it was.” Miyu responded so softly, the typhlosion had to strain his perky ears just to pick it up.

---

Razer could hear shouting and screaming before he even opened the bakery door. Apparently this “civil dispute” was less civil than he realized.

Already, he felt hesitant to enter. Villainous pokemon in dangerous environments? Yeah, he'd gladly barge right in to save the day, no questions asked. Dealing with two pokemon shrieking at each other over whose muffins were better, well... at least with the former example, Razer didn't need to second guess who was in the right... right?

Rubbing his forehead, he turned to face the greninja. "Alright, help me out here. What am I doing once I open this door."

"You announce your presence, hold your ground, and bravely help those in need. Just like any other mission." Miyu proudly declared. Yet, despite her bold statement, she was much, much farther away from the door than the typhlosion was.

Razer sighed. "Right..." This mission sounded easier on paper, literally. Not even pressing his ear against the doorway, the badger-like pokemon could hear cries of "At least my muffins don't sag right out of the oven!" or "I don't wanna hear it from someone whose cakes look like Trubbish!"

Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. With a deep breath, Razer gripped the doorway into the bakery and opened it wide.

- A) It was worse than he thought. These two bakers were quite literally on top of one another!
- B) This wasn't a food-fight, this was a food-war! Cakes and pies were flung throughout the air like cannonballs on a battlefield; in fact, one was headed straight for him!**
- C) The two baker pokemon's snouts were practically rubbing against one another, too locked into their argument to even acknowledge the two guests.
- D) The inside was empty; the screaming all came from a tape recorder being played on the counter. Just as Razer recognized it was a trap, the doors flung shut behind him.

Razer didn't even have time to yelp before something warm, gooey, and sweet-smelling flung itself into his face. It was quite the shock to be sure; the typhlosion would have fallen right back, were he not still gripping the doorknob for support. Somehow, he was expecting this outcome, as though he'd waltzed straight into an early 2000's Nickelodeon sitcom.

At least the pie tasted decent. Key lime, how yummy!

The yelling continued before him, yet Razer felt a hand cloth press into his face, helping to wipe away the excess frosting. "Oh, I'm so terribly sorry about that, sir! Please, pay them no mind!"

“It’s all good. I should have been faster at dodging.” Razer muttered, still licking at the pie filling across his muzzle. “If I’m gonna have more pies flung at me, can I request the next one be an apple pie?”

With his vision cleared, the typhlosion was finally able to assess the situation, his ears folding back. What looked like a respectable bakery had fallen into complete disarray; foodstuffs stained everywhere; the counters, the tables, the walls, floors, everywhere! There were messes on the ceiling even, as Razer felt raspberry jam drip onto his head next. It was genuinely an overwhelming sight; the sight, the smell, the taste (which was at least pleasant), and *especially* the sound!

Well, it didn’t exactly take a detective Pikachu to discern what was the cause of it all. “Your pie nearly broke that guy’s nose!” A Dachsbun cried out, hurling a cupcake from his towering stash at his opponent. “Pies should be *soft!* Learn the basics, moron!”

In retaliation, a Smeargle launched a pie that just barely chipped the dachsbun’s brown shoulder. “At least my food looks as appealing as it tastes! Not even a Muk would touch those rotten cupcakes of yours!” She roared, using her frosting-slathered tail to brush the tops of her pies before ultimately hurling them back.

Back and forth, back and forth, the Dachsbun and Smeargle traded insults as well as food items. Alas, no matter who was the better baker, it was clear none of them were winning any accuracy awards, as pastries found themselves flung all over the building. A few even made their way past Razer’s shoulder towards Miyu’s direction. Not that he needed to worry about Miyu getting struck by something as ridiculous as a cupcake.

The scene was quite shocking, so much so that he failed to even notice the Alcremie standing before him, holding the dirty rag used to clean his face. “Please tell me you’re the help I requested.” She whined, that soft light-pink face furrowed with distress.

“I-I am, I mean, we are.” Razer glanced back towards Miyu, who was holding the pastries flung at her in her arms. She clearly wasn’t interested in entering the building, not that he blamed her.

“Oh, thank heavens!” A wave of relief washed over the cupcake-esque pokemon as she turned to the rowdy bakers. “Marle! Bery! The judges have arrived! You can stop your fighting now!”

“Judges?” The Typhlosion frowned. That wasn’t what the flier requested. Was he here for a taste test?

In any event, the Dachsbun and Smeargle froze upon hearing that, their arms frozen with pastry clenched tightly in their paws. Turning to face them, the Dachsbun, Bery, dropped

his cupcake and grinned, placing his dirty hands on his hips. "About time. Hurry up and declare me the victor so we can kick her out."

"Excuse me?!" The Smeagle, Marle, glared right back. "He clearly has a working set of eyes. If anyone's packing their bags, it's you!"

"It's his tastebuds you should be worried about. Unless there's something wrong with them, you're gonna be out of the job."

"Hey, that's a good one! Maybe you can get a job as a comedian, once our boss finally fires you."

"Yeah?! Well-"

"*Enough!*" Razer yelled out, the fire on his back flaring up for just a moment. He hated shouting like that, but this was getting nowhere fast. Bery and Marle were winding up to resume their food fight yet again, and Razer did not want to get caught up in it once more. Bery was right: Marle's pies were actually painfully firm!

Thankfully, his shouting did halt their arguing briefly, although the Alcremie was quick to jump in his way. "P-please, don't take it out on them! If anyone's to blame for their behavior, it's me!"

Frowning, Razer tilted his head. "How long has it been like this?"

"Nearly a month now, and growing worse by the day." She sighed. "Bery and Marle are my brightest proteges yet. Both of them are talented bakers, and extremely enthusiastic, as I'm sure you've picked up by now. Alas, while their rivalry has helped push them to greater and greater heights, it's also made them a tad competitive."

"A tad?" Razer raised his brow, a brow that still had a bit of frosting on it.

The Alcremie whined again. "It was never this bad! But, there were little spats here and there. I thought the best course of action would be to teach the two in private, help them hone their personal strengths, give them a unique style, so they couldn't directly compare to one another. But, sadly, that accomplished the opposite. Now they're both certain their own style is better, and nothing I say matters to them anymore! I'm at a complete loss of what to do."

"I can understand." Razer nodded. This was indeed a complicated situation. No wonder the Alcremie called them taste testers; a simple verdict might be enough to get these two to stop arguing and appreciate each other once more. Even now, after having been silenced, the two bakers continued to glare at each other, showing teeth.

This was much more complicated than just battling a villain. Oh, what to do...



- A) Why not ask Bery and Marle to make their signature dishes and compare the two of them? A simple solution, but sometimes complicated problems require simple solutions!
- B) These two are clearly quite riled up. A single dish might not be enough to settle this dispute. Perhaps he should ask them to make a broad selection of food, to get a better idea on how their methods differ?**
- C) Uh oh, Marle and Bery look ready to hurl more food at each other. They're clearly too agitated to focus on cooking now. Maybe they should throw that food at something, or someone else, instead?
- D) Ugh, this was too complicated. Maybe he should invite Miyu inside and ask for her input.

As he pondered this, Miyu finally stepped into the building, sensing the warfare now at a temporary ceasefire. "Good timing, Miyu." The Typhlosion smiled softly. "What do you know about taste-testing?"

The greninja brought a finger to her snout, lowering her head in quiet contemplation before responding. "There are more factors to look for than just what 'tastes good.' You must pay close attention to texture, quality, how it feels on the tongue, or traveling down the throat, or settling into your stomach, as well as-

"Ok ok, so like, a lot." Razer quickly interrupted, not out of disrespect for Miyu, but more into getting to the point faster. The less time Marle and Bery have to attack each other, the better. The badger-like Pokemon cleared his throat, turning to the Alcreme. "And you have a standard menu in your bakery, right Miss... erh."

"Paula." She nodded. "And yes, we do, but I encourage my students to try new recipes to be put on the menu."

"That won't be necessary." Razer smiled, now gesturing towards the feuding bakers. "So how about this? You guys make one of everything off the menu, but only the foods your master Paula made. I'm sure you've both made delicious treats all on your own, but if we're judging who is the best chef, you both gotta cook the same things, you know?"

That sounded right, right? Razer wasn't so sure honestly, as he was mostly flying by the seat of his pants. He looked closely for the bakers' reactions, and saw Marle nod her head at the notion. However, the Dachsbun furrowed his brow. "Wait, that's not fair. I've made way more unique menu items than that clumsy oaf! That should matter somehow, right?"

"Erh," Razer rubbed his chin. "A-alright then, you both also have to make something unique from your own personal recipes, or something. But just one, so make it your masterpiece, got it?"

The Typhlosion was relieved to see Bery nod in agreement, happy to have the two finally stop glaring at each other. Even Miyu lowered her head in approval. “Well done, Razer.”

With the room finally silent for once, Paula stepped forward. “You heard the ‘mon! You two have two hours to wow them. No do-overs, got it! Now get to cooking!” With that, she grabbed hold of both Razer and Miyu’s paws and led them out back, shutting the door with her hip.

Once she’d done so, Paula wore the biggest grin Razer had ever seen on an Alcremie. “Aaaah, do you hear that?”

“Huh?” Razer perked his pointy ears up. “No, I, uh, don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly!” Paula giggled. “No screaming, no name-calling, and no food-flinging for the first time in over a week! I’d almost forgotten what it sounds like!”

Miyu crossed her arms, looking back towards the bakery. “Do not mistake silence for peace. This may be just the calm before the storm.”

“Oh, I know, I know. I just want to savor it while it lasts.” The Alcremie sighed, before looking up at Razer with wide, hopeful eyes. “But you’ll fix this, right? You’ll make everything better!”

“I, erh.” Razer gritted his teeth, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. Honestly, he hadn’t thought this far ahead. He was working with the assumption that the loser would admit defeat gracefully. There was a very real chance that they would instead insist the contest was rigged, or that he and Miyu were unqualified and thus began the war anew.

The best he could do was to offer his unbiased, as-professional-as-possible review. “Don’t worry, Ma’am. We’ll save these two or die trying.” He flashed a toothy grin.

If only he felt as confident as he looked.

---

“Two hours have passed.”

Razer sat upright with a grunt, slowly blinking the sleep away from his eyes. Whoops, he didn’t mean to doze off like that. He didn’t exactly look professional sleeping on the job, after all. Thankfully, Miyu stood alert and focused throughout the entire shift, making at least one of the pair appear competent. Hopefully the Alcremie didn’t notice. Oh good, she looked as though she’d been reading from the book the whole time as well.

With a quiet grunt, Razer rolled himself upright, dusting off his pants. "Well then, shall we?" He smiled, opening the door.

- A) The bakery was in even worse shape than before! Dammit, they were fighting with each other again!
- B) The tables had been pushed together to show off the variety of sweets the bickering bakers produced! Razer couldn't help but lick his lips; they all looked so tasty!
- C) Razer was floored. Every surface top, from the counter to tables to even chairs, were full of treats! That was just so much food, it was questionable if he and Miyu could even stomach so much, even if they took a single bite from every dish!**

As if the bakery wasn't an assault on the senses before! Razer's eyes could barely even process just how much food he was seeing. Everywhere he looked, he found donuts, custards, cakes, pies, cupcakes, muffins, tarts, crepes, and so much more. Just how big was this menu of theirs?!

"Impressive, is it not?" The Smeagle smiled smugly. "My artistic beauty is enough to make anyone speechless."

"You sure they're not smelling my splendid selection?" Bery scoffed in response. "Or, maybe they are smelling what you made, and they simply can't process how rancid it is."

Oh dear. Razer couldn't let this go on any longer, not when these two were surrounded by so much ammunition as is. "Alright, alright." He held up his arms. "You're both right, or wrong, or something, I dunno. Just hang back, we'll get through this test. One bite of each dish at a time-"

"No." Miyu shook her head. "Flavor distribution is equally as important in food tasting. One bite is not enough to properly pass judgment on a dish."

"Miiiyuuuuu!" The typhlosion groaned. "That's, like, two weeks of food there *minimum*! We can't eat that all!" He knew the Greninja just wanted to help, but just this once couldn't she keep her mouth shut?

Alas, the feuding bakers heard Miyu and spoke up. "The Typhlosion's right! You can't just take a single bite of my food!" Marle cried out.

"Yeah!" Bery echoed. "It's all or nothing with my masterpieces."

Razer groaned yet again. Great, so they do agree on something. "Fine, fine. Let's get on with it." The badger-like pokemon took a seat that didn't have foodstuffs on it, looking across the table. He was really starting to regret eating breakfast today.

On the bright side, he really didn't need to ask who made what. From their brief spat earlier, Razer could tell that the Smeagle's dishes were colorful and vibrant, whereas the Dachbun's were more plain-looking, albeit with a stronger smell when he brought it closer to his nose. They were both quite distinct, a clash in ideologies. Was the outside more important, or the inside?

When it came to taste, well, Razer didn't really have an answer.

When it came to the key lime pie (which already tasted much better when it wasn't being hurled into his face at Mach 5), Razer noticed he was more excited to eat Marle's version more. The little paintings of limes on top of the pie made it look all the more appetizing, a hint as to what he was about to sink his teeth into. The light frosting even paired well with the pie-filling inside, although it was a tad hard, hence why getting hit by it hurt so much.

Bery's pie, on the other hand, was far more basic looking. Even so, it stood out just as much, perhaps moreso than Marle's. Razer couldn't tell if it was better ingredients, or better cooking skills altogether, but the pie definitely packed a wallop! The dessert itself was so soft and easy on the throat, the flavor strong yet not overbearing, making the Typhlosion yearn for more.

Which was perfect, because there was more to be had. Much, much more!

With nearly every dish, Razor came to the same conclusion. Marle's meals were more visually appealing and gave a wonderful first impression, yet Bery's packed such a punch that the Typhlosion was tempted to lick his plate clean. What stopped him was basic public decency, on top of the fact they still had so, so many more dishes to go through, to the point where eating a crumb more might just cause him to pop! He had a feeling this pattern would continue throughout, and that eating any more in this contest would be redundant, but Razer couldn't bring himself to say so out loud. He was a Pokemon Ranger, brave enough to charge into strange and dangerous environments for the sake of others, and that's exactly what he planned to do!

Even if the only danger here was his waistline.

Pies, cookies, cupcakes, donuts, Razer felt them all enter his stomach and then some. Around his tenth dish, The Typhlosion paused to lean back in his seat, rubbing along his middle. He may have a large appetite, but that food wasn't simply disappearing into his maw; he actually had to undo his denim jacket somewhat to make room for the food baby growing in his middle, his hands gingerly rubbing along the cream-colored dome that was starting to form. As delicious as everyone was, he'd just eaten more now than he usually ate in a day. A break was needed.

“How ya- *bwurp*, holding up, Miyu?” He grumbled, wiping his pointy muzzle of any frosting.

“Just fine.” She responded; but despite the stoicness of her words, Razer could hear it in her voice that she was struggling as well. It was fairly obvious when he looked over, the lithe ninja now looked as though she’d swallowed a bowling ball, the dome of a stomach far more noticeable on her frame than on Razer’s broader body. Given how her shirt rode up along said dome, Razer would have assumed she were pregnant if he hadn’t seen her wolf down so much food.

Still, seeing the bloated Miyu only exacerbated Razer’s fullness, who let out another burp as he patted his full belly. “I think, hurf, a little break’s in order, huh?”

Miyu glanced back, her eyes narrowing.

- A) “Agreed. We cannot properly sample these meals if we’re too uncomfortable to enjoy them.”
- B) “We mustn’t let a simple construct like ‘fullness’ prevent us from completing the mission.”**
- C) Miyu didn’t get a chance to speak. Seeing their taste testers taking a break, Bery and Marle quickly descended upon them, holding out more treats for them to eat!

“I thought you’d say that.” Razer sighed. He should have known his partner wouldn’t leave a job half finished, even for her own sake. While the Greninja’s face was mainly obscured by either her tongue or the next morsel she bit into, Razer could see it in her eyes that she was struggling a tad. Of course she’d make it through just fine, her pride as a Ranger wouldn’t allow her to leave empty handed, or empty stomached.

As for Razer? Well, a good thing he knew the move Endure.

Steeling himself, the badger-like pokemon began to systematically devour every pastry, pie, cake, and more that was brought before him. He tried not to focus on his own growing fullness, and instead on the flavor of the treats brought before him. What was it that Miyu said about judging taste? Texture, sweetness, uh... something about how soft it was?

That worked for the next 5 or 6 platters, but after a rather hearty strawberry tart, even Razer found himself wincing. Oof, he had to be careful reaching for more with his bulbous stomach pressing against the table. There wasn’t any give there, either; the slightest bump against that hearty gut would be like getting struck by a critical hit. Taking a careful deep sigh, the Typhlosion grabbed at the apple pie next, biting into it-

“Hey!” He heard Marle’s voice cut out. “Why are you closing your eyes? You aren’t experiencing my art if you do that!”

Oops. Razer didn't even notice he'd shut his eyes, actually. "E-erf, don't worry. I can tell who's who without having to look." He grunted, taking another bite. That came out a little more blunt than he would have liked, but it was the truth. With his eyes open, he preferred the Smeargle's confections. Without his vision, however, the Dachsbuns' dishes were definitely more delightful. Should this be taken into consideration for their final scoring? Well, Razer knew quite a few blind pokemon. Perhaps they liked sweets as well.

In any event, eating with his eyes shut made the whole ordeal much more tolerable. If he couldn't see how much more there was to eat, he could just keep tricking his brain into thinking he was nearly done. All he had to do was hold out his hand, wait for someone to plop something into it, then bring it up to his face to eat. Surely this next slice would be the last, right? No? Well, how about this one? Not it? Then this one for sure... bwurp! N-not it either, huh? Maybe the next one... the next one... hrrrf...

This pattern went on for so long, Razer didn't even recognize when he actually finished. He simply sat there, his body swaying and ready to fall at any moment, awkwardly holding his paw out for his next bite. It took the Alcremie's gentle nudging on his back to rouse him of his stupor. "Erh, Mister Razer? Your judgment, if you please?"

"Oh?" He meant to ask, but due to the sudden belch rising up, he instead let out a "Bworp?" Slowly pulling back his arm, the Typhlosion allowed himself to open his eyes.

The first thing he saw was his stomach. Sheesh, what a gut! Razer knew it'd been pressing against the table for some time, but he had no idea it'd actually grew large enough to rest *on* it! Even touching the beachball-sized orb wasn't enough to fully convince Razer that it belonged to him, his claws gently ruffling the yellowish-cream belly. How he managed to contain even half of that food astounded him. Still, the fullness he felt was undeniable; he'd need to take care in waddling home, as even bumping against a Sandslash's thorny carapace might be enough to make him pop. Clearly, there was no way he was covering this food baby with his jacket anytime soon.

In fact, his jacket actually felt rather snug along his shoulders and back, enough so that Razer was afraid it'd rip if he pulled his arms forward too fast. That couldn't be related to the food, could it? I-it's not like a single meal, no matter how absurdly big it was, would be enough for him to put on that much weight, right?

Just in case, he looked over towards Miyu for confirmation, only to see she clearly wasn't ready for a conversation. The Greninja was struggling just to stay conscious, her eyes half-lidded and unfocused staring blankly ahead, her webbed hands rubbing along that sizable tummy. Goodness, it was almost comparable to Razer's, and given the two's differing body shapes that truly was an accomplishment. Maybe it was her stretchy amphibian skin that kept her all in one piece? Even so, Razer assumed that even one more bite would be enough to stretch that stomach translucent, revealing that large mushy mound of food hidden beneath.

Razer had to physically pry his hand away from massaging his own massive middle to brush Miyu's side. "H-hey, are you with me?"

"Yes." The Greninja responded in a barely perceptible voice, still staring blankly ahead. "I have... not left just yet."

Razer snorted. Good enough. Suffice to say, the two would still end up leaning against each other on the way back. Sheesh, not even their most violent, turbulent mission as Rangers had left them in such a defeated state before.

But Razer wasn't defeated, at least not yet. With his metaphorical one Hit Point left, the Typhlosion carefully faced the two eager-eyed chefs, his body still hunched slightly around his broad stomach. "Alright... I've eaten enough to give, hurf, a Munchlax a stomachache, but I think I have an answer."

"You do?!" Paula the Alcremie perked up, joining her students in awaiting his decision.

Razer nodded.

- A) "Marle, your eye for aesthetics will be what helps draw people to the bakery. I'd say you've won this contest."
- B) "Bery, your rich and delicious flavors will be what helps retain customers for years to come. I'd say you've won this contest."
- C) "Both of your dishes were incredible, but they'd be even more so if you just worked together!"**
- D) "None of you win. You both failed to meet my expectations. If only I could try something as tasty as Bery's dish, with the appealing appearance of Marle's decorations..."
- E) As Razer announced his victor, however, Miyu blurted out her preferred pick... the one Razer *wasn't* about to pick.

"What?!" Marle and Bery yelled, appalled. How wonderful, they agreed with each other yet again: They both hated Razer's verdict.

"You can't give a cop-out answer like that!" The Dachsbun growled. "One of us is clearly better, so pick who it is already!"

Ugh, it was like dealing with children. Razer could already feel his stomach ache worsening, not to mention the food coma. Best to settle this with as few words as possible. "Alright, just answer me this: When was the last time you two tried each other's food?"

"Earlier today." The Smeargle responded matter-of-factly. "When we were having our food fight."

“Erh, alright then.” Razer furrowed his brow. Was it really ‘tasting’ if it’s being flung into your face like a missile? To be fair, the key lime pie that struck his snout was quite tasty. In any case, he looked at the Smeargle. “Marle, be honest. Would you say Bery’s dishes were tasty and flavorful?”

“Well...” Marle sighed. “I *guess* they’re pretty good. Still look hideous, but whatever.”

“Close enough.” Now, to the Dachsbun. “Bery, would you say that Marle’s dishes looked striking and appealing?”

Bery crossed his arms. “Sure, they look great. Beautiful, even. But what does it matter if they don’t taste as good? Quit beating around the bush, Razer, which of us is better?”

“You’re missing the point!” Razer groaned. He was tempted to just use Rollout on either of these chefs. And given how heavy he felt right now, he was certain that’d leave quite a mark.

The Typhlosion tried again. “It doesn’t matter which of you is better! Just... look at it this way. What if you two built a real big, delicious cake for someone? What if Bery handled all the prep work and cake crafting, and Marle worked on the finishing touches and icing? You’d have this beautiful cake that’d have anyone drooling, that tasted so jaw-droppingly delicious that everyone would be back for seconds and thirds!”

Razer winced as he said that, his table-resting stomach gurgling loudly. Oof, he did *not* need to think about more food right now.

But for once, Bery and Marle didn’t argue back. In fact, they were actually looking at each other in a new light, as though seeing each other for the very first time. That was certainly progress.

“But...” The Smeargle finally spoke up, shyly grabbing at her lengthy tail. “Master Paula told us we would one day form our own bakeries. If we... if we don’t settle this debate now, one of us will run the other out of business.”

Razer smiled. “Then don’t compete! Run a single bakery together. You two are already talented on your own, but together... heh, you might be able to give your master a run for her money!”

The Alcremie tugged nervously on her collar. “Heh, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.”

But Bery and Marle continued to stare down one another. No scowling or death glares, no food in hand ready to be hurled, just a simple observation of who they would be working with.



And before long, Bery offered a faint smile. “You know, I have a few ideas for some new recipes. I just never bother trying them, because I... well, knew they’d look pretty ugly.”

“I think I can help with that.” Marle responded, returning the smile. “If you’ve got the canvas, I got the brush.”

“It’s a deal.” The Dachsbun’s doughy tail shook with glee as he turned to face the bloated pair. “We’re really sorry for putting you through this trouble. We’re, heh, a little passionate, as you can tell. But I really, really appreciate you setting up this opportunity for us! I promise we’ll make you both proud. In fact, we’ll make sure to send you two plenty of new treats, free of charge!”

“Arceus, no!” Razer gasped, clutching his stomach. “I already feel ready to burst!”

“Starting tomorrow, then.” The Smeargle laughed. “But it’ll be even tastier than what you just ate, I can guarantee that!”

“R-right.” Razer nervously chuckled. Oof, he already felt fat enough as is; eating every day from these two would seriously damage his waistline. Hopefully they’d just send small samples and snacks, but seeing as just how much the two prepared for their little contest, it was a safe bet to say that wouldn’t be the case.

But that was another problem for another time. For now, Razer simply to head home and sleep off this impending food coma. Scooting out of his chair, the Typhlosion carefully hopped onto his feet, cradling his belly in both arms. Sheesh, this thing was heavy, not to mention sensitive. What he’d give for a massage right about now.

He carefully nudged Miyu’s arm. “Let’s head back, Miyu. These guys have a lot of cleaning up to do, and we shouldn’t get in their way.”

“... Miyu.”

Oops, the Greninja had fallen asleep. Poor thing.

- A) They return home, nothing eventful happens as they fall into their much needed sleep.**
- B) On the way back, they run into Lester! Oh dear.
- C) They’ve barely left the bakery before hearing cries of “Thief!” A Weavile is fleeing with a satchel of money! Oof, were they supposed to catch him in their bloated state?!
- D) As they head home, they smell something rather... funny. And is that a Jigglypuff singing nearby? Drat, someone was putting them to sleep! They try to fight it, but they’re just... so... ZZZZZ

It took a little more than a few gentle shakes to wake up his partner, and a few more to get her standing. Razer wore a smile as he waved goodbye to the three bakers, but in reality he was barely able to keep standing. As though they'd just barely survived a harrowing battle, the two Rangers lazily sauntered back home, arms wrapped around each other to support themselves. Their other hands were too busy nursing their immense, gurgling stomachs, the two cream-colored guts pressing against each other like two moons. Damn, were they full. Razer couldn't even work up a burp to free up some space, and poor Miyu was struggling to stay conscious even while standing.

In any event, the two managed to lumber back home, although given their bloated frames, the two Rangers needed to take turns fitting through the front door. Given that Miyu was more or less snoring before they even stepped inside, Razer let the Greninja flop onto the couch to sleep off that hefty meal. That left his upstairs bed, the added effort of giving there just piling on to the list of reasons the Typhlosion was done doing anything the rest of the day.

Phew, he felt fat! It could just be his imagination, but Razer swore the bed creaked when he flopped his back on it, the fire-type groaning as he roamed around that enormous gut. His stomach was creaking, his clothes felt tight, he barely made up the stairs with plenty of wheezing and panting. It was early afternoon, yet the Typhlosion had no intention of moving from his bed until tomorrow morning at the earliest. But then, he'll work up a big sweat tomorrow to burn off the excess calories.

... Oh right, Marle and Bery said they'd send him food tomorrow. And by then, he'd probably want to eat it, too. Maybe a snack or two wouldn't be too bad...

- A) The next day
- B) Three days later
- C) Five days Later
- D) Next week
- E) Two weeks later
- F) A month later
- G) Two months later**
- H) Much, much, much later...