

THEY were supposed to take the train from Wyndon to Hammerlocke and then get a Flying Taxi, but the train was cancelled and, along with what seemed like Galar's entire commuting population, they ended up squeezing onto a smaller one that left Wyndon two hours later. By the time they arrived in Hammerlocke, all the Flying Taxis had been booked. Not one of the shining, solemn Corviknight lined up outside the station looked their way, and the harried operators seemed like they didn't have much time for tourists.

Eventually, a schoolgirl and her Skwovet directed Hassel to a platform from which one could take the branch line to Curchester. He thanked her in his teacher voice and hurried back to the station buffet to fetch the luggage and Brassius, dragging the latter away from his strong and bitter coffee just in time for the two of them to make it onto the even smaller train the girl had indicated. Unlike the previous one, it was practically deserted. They took seats at a table and stared out at the rolling countryside, dotted here and there with Wooloo herds. Hassel fell asleep within fifteen minutes, drooling onto the lapel of his jacket; Brassius had had too many coffees to think about doing the same.

He woke Hassel some time later, tugging on his sleeve. "Look," he murmured, "Hass, look."

"Hmm?" said Hassel, following his gaze.

It was the light. There were magnificent sunsets in Paldea, of course, but those were different somehow. There was some-

thing about the way the light struck these fields, the clouds casting huge shadows on the grass, the orange tints on the drystone walls. Fluffy clouds in the sky, many more than they usually saw at home, in every possible hue of reddened grey.

Hassel wondered about fetching his sketchbook, but it was in the luggage rack. He knew for next time. He pressed his chin against Brassius' shoulder instead and listened to the repetitive, soothing sound of the train making its way across the track.

“Why have we never been here before?” said Brassius.

“We never got married before,” Hassel reminded him.

Hassel was the romantic; Brassius had always thought marriage too mundane for both of them, but had eventually consented to a sufficiently avant-garde wedding. Sudowoodo had carried the rings in on the two stalks that protruded from its head, and Hassel had started crying as soon as they arrived at the ceremony room. In the end, there hadn't been a thing either of them would have changed about it.

When they arrived in Circhester, the magic of the sunset had ended and the sky was a bluish black. It was a small town, and easy enough to find the imposing hotel; they headed to their room to do a little unpacking and have a quick lie down. Baxcalibur too was keen for the chance to rest; Hassel ended up having to cajole it off the bed to make room for Brassius.

By the time they had regained enough energy to think about dinner, they returned to the reception desk only to

find the attached restaurant was no longer serving. The lady on duty let them know of the one establishment that would definitely be open at such a late hour. Bob's Your Uncle might not have been where they would have chosen to eat, but the food was serviceable. The beer was served in rather larger glasses than they were used to from home, and came at room temperature instead of cold; after wondering about it for a long time, Brassius eventually found a page at the back of his guidebook that explained the peculiar Galarian culinary traditions.

"We can go to the Hero's Bath in the morning," he told Hassel. "It's the kind of thing you shouldn't miss if you're here, they say."

They had passed it anyway on the way to the restaurant; it was hard not to notice, even in the dark. But in the morning, they supposed, the sight of it would be more spectacular. The Hero's Bath was built over the only natural hot spring in Galar, and made of the light-coloured stone that was peculiar to Circhester. Its ambiance was supposed to be unlike that of anywhere else in the region – not that Hassel and Brassius had seen much of the place.

Breakfast the next morning turned out to be hotter and greasier than they had expected, but they took it in their stride, and Brassius was placated by the coffee, which was an improvement on what he had drunk at Hammerlocke station. He had been given the name of the Circhester Gym Leader, a Mel-

ony who used Ice-type Pokémon, and while neither fancied testing their mettle against her in battle, they agreed that paying the stadium a social call might fit into the agenda. Before that, though, there was the promised visit to the Hero's Bath. Brassius declined to go in the water, but Hassel made sure to bring his swimming trunks and was all too happy to go for a soak, with Baxcalibur enjoying the experience beside him. Brassius perched on a ledge and sketched them both in charcoal, although the medium seemed poorly chosen for representing the building's golden stone and Hassel's golden eyes.

After lunch from an ice cream stand, which seemed as if it would have been much better suited to the Paldean climate, they headed up to the stadium and were surprised to find no evidence of the Melony Brassius had been told about. One of the staff recognised Hassel from the television nonetheless, and went to fetch the Gym Leader, but only after the two visitors had sworn with some bemusement that they promised not to mention the person they had originally planned to visit. The young Gym Leader, a man called Gordie, turned out to have heard of both of them and was happy to give them an extensive tour of the stadium, culminating in a battle that Brassius won, but only narrowly. He had had to leave both Breloom and Arboliva at home due to customs regulations, but the Pokémon he had substituted for them performed admirably.

They took Gordie back to the hotel for dinner as thanks; Hassel found that the longer the meal went on, the less inclined

Brassius seemed to want to eat or to contribute to the conversation.

“What’s the matter, dear?” he asked when Gordie had gone to take his Shuckle for a short walk before dessert.

Brassius shrugged and said “Nothing,” and he seemed to become more animated after that. Once Gordie had said goodbye and they had retired to their room, though, he seemed agitated again.

“Brassie, what’s wrong?” Hassel tried again.

“No, never mind,” said Brassius, not looking at him.

“Brassie,” Hassel whined. He stood up from where he had been half reclining on the bed and went to slip his arms around Brassius’ waist, stopping him in his tracks as he paced back and forth by the window. “Tell me.”

“Well,” said Brassius, “you’re the one who booked this holiday. All the flights, the trains, this hotel – I thought I could contribute by looking up the Gym Leader. But then it turns out the name I was given was spurious. So I didn’t contribute anything, did I?”

“Oh, Brassie,” said Hassel, who was used to such catastrophising. “Don’t be silly.” He kissed him on the forehead. “You know what would cheer you up? Another trip to the bath. You should bring your swimming things this time – we’ll both go in. It’s lovely and relaxing.”

Fortunately, Brassius consented to it. The Hero’s Bath was much quieter than it had been in the morning; this time, the

water was undisturbed. They both changed without even bothering to use the cubicles intended for it, and slipped into the water beside each other.

“Feeling better?” said Hassel, after they had been there a while.

“I suppose so,” said Brassius. “What would I do without you, Hass?”

They drifted closer; embracing in water was a novel experience. “Remarkable architecture, isn’t it,” Hassel murmured into Brassius’ ear.

“Indeed,” said Brassius, “but not a touch of the avant garde about it, alas.”

“Well, didn’t your guidebook say it was one of the oldest structures in Galar?” Hassel asked him.

Brassius hummed in agreement.

“The hotel’s not very avant-garde either,” said Hassel, “and that fruit wallpaper reminds me of work.”

“Oh, don’t ruin it,” Brassius scolded him.

Hassel chuckled. “I beg your pardon, my incorrigible modernist. Why don’t we head out into the countryside tomorrow? Get another glimpse of that lovely evening light?”

“That would be wonderful,” said Brassius.

Both thoroughly relaxed, they returned to the hotel. Marriage was a strange thing: they had been together so long that it made hardly any practical difference to their lives. Only the heavy rings on their fingers served as proof they had pub-

licly sworn a commitment to each other that was so obvious it had hardly seemed worth speaking out loud. They had no doubt gained some legal rights, but their right to each other's hearts was more important, and nothing had ever changed about that.