

Chapter 33: Virtuous and the Virtuous Palace.

The Aquatic War Arc.

Larry, the still disguised Ramon, and Aquatus eye Virtuous: Being within the rows of other Solo form soldiers. Virtuous stands behind the coral castle's fences, gazing at the fishes before clearing his throat, two Solo bodyguards swimming beside him.

"Today marks the end of Phase 30. We'll be transitioning to Phase 31 tomorrow." Squints. "Remember that the Wishis will always be stronger than those vile Gyarados!" His fin slams onto the edge of the fence. "It's the *facts*! Facts Behemoth and his wicked beasts must accept!"

"YEAH!" the Solo armies roar, flailing their fins in the air.

After some rowdiness, they all succumb to silence, eagerness awaits their leader's speech. Aquatus rolls her eyes, shaking her head while keeping her gaze onto Virtuous.

"We pack a stronger punch! A stronger endurance! And most importantly, we take care of ourselves better than those rascals!" Virtuous swings his fin to the side. "For crying out loud, we're even more appealing to others!" He lifts his fins up and down, exaggerating. "Just look at our current form! Downright adorable, aren't we!?"

All of the Solos eye each other before they make a collective "D'aww!"

Virtuous smirks, closing his eyes and lifting his head with pride. "See? Who couldn't resist our adorable, alluring, and *prepossessing* appearance? I know I sure wouldn't." He leans his back against the fence, kneeling over in an over-the-top fashion, his fins caressing his lower body. "The moment I laid eyes on this beauty, I knew I was better than those disgusting serpentine *freaks*."

Larry and Aquatus raise their brows.

"Yeah, I figured at this point, weirdo," Aquatus says quietly to herself.

What the? Larry thinks, tilting his head.

Virtuous straightens himself, clearing his throat. "Anywho, always remember my Wishis: Wishiwashis are superior, Gyarados are inferior."

"WOO! I AGREE, KING!" one Wishiwashi shouts, pumping his fin in the air.

"I definitely look prettier and cuter than those wretched Gyarados, King!" another Wishiwashi says, pressing her fins together while smiling.

The rest of the blue fishes cheer and clap in renaissance, some even swimming around the army in joy. Virtuous gazes at the rowdy soldiers, grinning. "That concludes today's speech. Rest up, my Wishis: We'll resume the war tomorrow."

"YES SIR!" With that, all of the Solo forms exit the area to the main hub of the palace, passing by Larry and Aquatus. Some are looking up at Larry in confusion, Larry shyly waving.

"Haha, h-hi," the large, dark blue fish says, his tone awkward.

"You know you could return to your Solo form, right?" one of the Wishiwashis states.

"Y-Yeah, but I'm paranoid of those Gyarados entering the palace when we least expect it."

"Hmm...Okay then." The sardine fish swims away, Ramon sighing softly afterwards.

The fake Wishiwashi eyes the castle, Virtuous and his bodyguards swimming inside of it. *Now's my chance to convince the leader.* He swims towards the castle, a look of sorrow painting his face like the aquatic blues itself. ...*Thinking about that excuse. Of a Gyarados entering the palace unexpectedly...* He sighs. *Sounds like what I'm doing right now.*

Aquatus folds her fins, eyeing the ground before sighing. *What an awful speech...* She squints at the purple dirt and yellow sands that make up the palace's floor, shaking her head. *I wish there was another way to settle our differences instead of...this.* She then blinks. *Wait, where's Larry?* She looks up, seeing the large fish swimming ahead. She tilts her head. *Why's he heading to Virtuous' castle?* "Larry, wait up!"

Larry stands in front of the entrance, stopping himself. He realizes how small the hole was, being the same height as any smaller Pokémon than him.

I can't fit through here, he thinks, eyeing up the castle. *I'll try entering from up there, then.* He swims up, passing by the castle's fences. "Ex-Excuse me, uh, King Virtuous!"

As Virtuous is about to enter, he looks down at his shadow getting bigger between him and his two guards, raising his head in bewilderment. "Hmm?" The three look behind them, eyeing the large dark blue fish. "Oh? A fellow Wishi wanting to see me, I see?"

"Y-Yes!" Ramon bows his head. "It's an ho-honor to meet you in person, King Virtuous." *I hope I can get the right words across here.*

Virtuous eyes the illusion School up and down. "Why aren't you in your Solo form, fellow Wishi?"

"I, erm, wanted to re-remain in this form, in case those Gyarados intervene at night."

"But they—"

“Sir, I wanted to ask you something!” Larry exclaims.

The Solo adjusts his King’s Rock, his guards scooting close to him. He glances. “Mind not interrupting me next time you want to ask a question?”

“S-Sorry.” Larry bows. “Not t-to be rude with this kind of question, but I must ask: Ar-Aren’t you taking this war too far?”

Both Aquatus and Virtuous eye the School in curiosity, Virtuous squinting his eyes. “Elaborate.”

“Well, I know you w-wanted to prove your kind is str-stronger than the Gyarados to Behemoth. But maybe you two could ag-agree to disagree, perhaps?” Gulps. “Even if you’re right, he’ll still think differently about his str-strength. And that’s fine.”

Virtuous’ maw is sealed, the look of judgement spreading. “...What part of his numbskull thinking is *okay*?” His head shakes. “Behemoth boasting about his strength is what led to his foolish behavior. Always getting under my skin about his beliefs, thinking his kind is so strong that they can swing five trees at my Wishis while in the air.”

...*What*? Aquatus thinks, crossing her fins.

“I absolutely loathe his brawns approach at everything, constantly trying to prove he’s stronger than me, even going as far as to not receive my help when he *desperately* needed it the most. Ever since my trainer’s pokedex stated my species is more powerful than his, he became more and more boastful.” Virtuous grits his teeth, glancing off. “He caused the two of us so much trouble thanks to his incompetence, throwing us into situations that ultimately had our trainer *blaming* us.” Sighs. “It’s why my trainer abandoned us: He got sick of our incompetence after his last battle with another trainer.” He closes his eyes. “All thanks to Behemoth.”

“O-Oh...”

Virtuous nods. “I’ll use this war to prove how wrong Behemoth is. Hopefully, he’ll learn his lesson.”

“...W-Would you two ever come to an agreement by then?” Larry asks.

Virtuous shakes his head. “Our relationship has pretty much become a burning bridge since we got to this lake. With his empty, numbskull brain, I doubt we’ll ever reach an agreement.” He turns around. “A reality I’ve come to accept about him.”

“Ar-Are you sure there’s no way you two can s-set your differences a—”

Virtuous snaps towards Larry, glaring. "I'm *certain* of it." His gaze remains, silence rising between everyone. Then he and his guards swim inside of the castle, Ramon staring on in somber.

Aquatus taps his side, tugging his large fin. "Come on. Let's head back to the main area," she recommends. Larry nods slowly as Aquatus swims away, the false School turning around following her.

Wished I'd thought of a better way to convince him...Stupid me, he thinks, shaking his head.

The two Pokémon route their way towards the main hub, Ramon grieving down the purple-yellow dirt. His mind scatters into the many ways he would've approached the conversation: Try showing an example on setting aside differences, or going into more details on why this war hinders everyone. Probably put some pressure into convincing the Wishiwashi, but he isn't fond of such a brute approach.

Aquatus lifts her head at the fake Wishiwashi's sigh of despair, stopping and turning around. "Hey, are you alright?"

"Hmm?" Larry looks at her before chuckling softly, scratching the side of his body. "Oh uh, I'm fine. Just...dozing off and thinking about stuff, that's all."

The small fish knows that isn't the truth, shaking her head. "It's fine, Larry. I get how you felt about wanting the war to end peacefully..." She looks off. "I get that exactly."

Larry stares at her with mystique. *Does she know I'm a Zoroark or...?* he thinks, paranoia seeping in. *H-How obvious was I!? I never once reveal any hin—*

"Come on. We're nearing the main area, and I don't like to have my family be worried sick about me," she concludes the topic, swimming towards the main hub.

Ramon gazes. *She has a family?* His mind converts to blankness, his lips sealed. Without much consideration, he follows.

The two reach the center, passing by a couple of small Wishiwashis and Chinchous floating about, one of them tossing a single pebble to another like a volleyball.

The road ahead of Ramon has more Water types that aren't Wishiwashis, all resting against some coral structures and chatting with one another: Tentacools, Dewgongs, Basculins Blue-Striped, and Corsolas. Larry tilts his head, peculiarness erupting throughout.

I'm seeing all kinds of Pokémon living alongside these Wishiwashis. And yet, Lycus told me the Wishiwashis and Gyarados are prejudices to those who aren't their species. He glances. *Was that a lie? ...No, maybe he was misremembering things when attacked by the Wishiwashis. He*

could be telling the truth about the Gyarados, though. Not sure since I have yet to convince their leader to end the war. Gasps. Speaking of which, I need to go there right away!

Larry poker faces for a moment before sighing. *Nevermind. Just realized that it's too late to do that since it's dark out. Would likely cause Aquatus to be suspicious of me if I were to abruptly leave, anywa—*

“Hey, try not to let Virtuous’ stubbornness get you down, alright?” Aquatus says to the large fish. “You seemed really stressed out over it.”

Larry jumps a bit before eyeing her, the two swimming by the shops and houses. “U-Um, thanks. I’m not stressed by it. I’ll be fine.” *So she doesn’t know I’m in a disguise. Good.*

“Larry, are you sur—”

Ramon smacks the side of his head with his fin. “Say, did Virtuous built this palace by himself?”

Aquatus quirks her brow, bewildered. “No. He had some help from his followers when he arrived here.”

“Really?” Larry says with as much intrigue to his tone as he can muster.

The lady sardine nods. “After his dispute with Behemoth, he wanted to build a palace with other Wishiwashis that shared the same thought as him.” The two turn to their right after reaching a corner, swimming by more Wishiwashis. “The palace was built as a safe and secure place for every Wishiwashis out there. While the point of the palace is to convey how superior Wishiwashis are, we do allow other Water types to visit and live here.” Aquatus shifts. “Assuming the war isn’t going on at that moment, anyways.”

“I see.” *So these guys aren’t entirely prejudiced, but do have a high sense of oneself, from what Aquatus is saying...*

“Ever since the many speeches Virtuous gave to his followers, my kind wanted to help him in the war, too. There’s even kids becoming inspired by the unhealthy morals he teaches.”

Unhealthy...?

Aquatus looks up, many Water types swimming above them to admire the purple and pink ceilings. Her fins tap together. “You’ve been aware of Virtuous distaste towards Behemoth. But before he got here, us Wishiwashis weren’t fond of those Gyarados living in the other palace. So...you can probably guess that we saw his words as the truth.”

“Much like the speech he gave earlier?”

"Yep. We're quite the prideful fishes, when it comes to believing something so strongly." Aquatus stops and swims in front of Larry, facing him. "Say, I think you're a pretty nice guy, Larry. Would you like to stay at my place for a bit?"

W-Well this is sudden! Ramon thinks, staring off to the side. *I...don't know what else to do at the moment, so I'll just roll with this.* Larry nods. "S-Sure! I really don't have a place to stay due to being homeless. Thank you."

The two continue swimming forward, passing by a Lanturn nibbling on a starfish appendage. Larry winces a bit at the sight.

"Say, if you're homeless, then how did you participate in the war?" Aquatus asks.

"U-Um, a random gu-guard saw me sitting by some coral and decided to recruit me," Larry answers quickly.

"Ah..." Aquatus sighs heavily. "Figures."

The disguised large fish pokes his fins together. "I-Is it common for a soldier to randomly recruit someone in th-the war?"

"Yep." Aquatus eyes ahead, the two turning left now. "I remember seeing Virtuous doing the same thing around these parts. Right before I was asked to participate."

"Huh..." Ramon taps his fin, shrugging. "Not going to lie: It's not ve-very smart of Virtuous to recruit someone randomly. Shouldn't he be, um, m-making an advertisement about the war or something?" *Another relief for me to be truthful...*

Aquatus glares ahead. "Yep...You got a point there." She clenches her fin, gnashing her teeth. "This is one of the reasons why I'm not fond of the whole 'Virtuous vs Behemoth War', as I'd put it."

She looks at Larry. "With his ridiculous approach at recruiting someone *ON TOP* of his petty rivalry with Behemoth, it just...makes me think that this whole war has no meaning to it. It comes off as two guys with large egos fighting each other while having some fans along the way."

"I-I see..." *If you found the war pointless, then why did you join it? Hmm...* Ramon thinks, contemplating on the connection between Aquatus in the war and her distaste towards it. He submerges himself within the depths of his inner thoughts, gazing at the wavy kelp attached to rocks. He squints, swimming at a steady pace as if he's sneaking into a base. He soon bumps into a coral wall, yelping.

"Oof!"

"Watch yourself," Aquatus says before snickering.

"U-Um." Larry shakes his head, swimming next to the small sardine. "A-Apologies!"

"It's fine. Also, we're here." Aquatus turns to her left, eyeing up a coral building with many holes and rooms jam-packed in it. She swims inside, the hole being tall enough for a Wishiwashi School to fit in.

How...convenient, Ramon thinks, following the smaller fish.

Aquatus waves her fin. "I'm home, everyone!" Soon, about four Wishiwashis appear in front of the sardine, all within their Solo forms. Despite this, two of the Solos are taller than the others: They're Aquatus' mother and father.

The mother has some wrinkles on her face while the father has a rock in the shape of a hat on his head. The smaller Solos are her younger siblings, one brother and one sister. The interior of the coral isn't anything special: Just the purple ceiling and floors, a higher section that leads to the rocky rooms, and a dining area from afar, containing nothing but a single Lanturn sitting in the corner. She has a Mystic Water necklace around her, eyeing everyone in a nonchalant manner. Kelps are sitting on the ground in front of her, waving due to the water.

"Welcome back home, sweetie! Momma's so happy that you survived today's war!" the mother, Yowa, says, bringing Aquatus into a hug. Her brother and sister, Marsh and Beckett, swim towards the two, group hugging them.

"Big sister's home!" the little ones shout, giggling in glee.

Aquatus hugs back, smiling. "Thanks."

The father, Fisher, eyes the large dark blue fish behind Aquatus, raising his brow with concern. "Who's this fella here? And why is he posting up in his School form?" he asks. Everyone turns towards Larry, who waves at them shyly.

"H-Hi." That's all the illusion Wishiwashi can say.

"He's someone I met from the war. He's a nice guy," Aquatus explains. "These are my family, Larry. The two larger Solos are my mother and father while the smaller ones are my siblings, Marsh and Beckett." She turns to her family members. "Family, this is Larry."

"I-I see. PI-Pleasure to meet you all."

Yowa tilts her head. "Hmm...Hello, Larry. Last I checked, a fellow Wishiwahsi didn't stay in their School form after the war stops for the day," she points out, her tone dancing with uncertainty.

"Well, I wanted to remain in this f-form to make sure those G-Gyarados don't sneak a-attack us!" Larry looks behind him quickly, displaying a little act of cautiousness.

"But wouldn't that be stupid for a Gyarados to infiltrate our palace aft—"

"Dad, I told him that already. He insists on staying in that form so...can't really force him to get out of it." Aquatus shifts in place.

"Oh."

THANK YOU, AQUATUS! Ramon thinks.

Yowa turns around, eyeing the Lanturn in the diner. "Well then, since you're home now Aquatus: How about some supper?"

"Kelps?"

"Peeeeeeer usual!" Yowa presses her fins together and closes her eyes, smiling. "I'll be sure to get one for your big friend there, too."

"Thanks." Aquatus is about to head to the area until she's tapped on the fin, looking to her side.

"Is he your boyfriend or something?" Marsh asks beside her, his tone being child's play. Aquatus stares at him with mortification, shaking her head.

"What? No!" After the response, Marsh and Beckett giggle, swimming around the sardine at a rapid pace. Aquatus squints. "Glad to see you goofballs again, too."

Larry watches the Wishiwashis head to the diner, unsure of how to process everything happening to him. From the moment he transformed into a Wishiwashi School to the moment he met Aquatus during the war. And now he's going to stay at her place for the night!

"Hey, are you going to stare in outer space or join us for dinner?" Aquatus says, snapping Ramon out of his gaze.

The illusion School nods. "Ye-Yeah, I'll join up!" He swims towards the group afterwards.