

Chapter 38: A Special Night.

The Aquatic War Arc.

“Short or long answer?” Ramon asks.

“It doesn’t matter, lad.” Coleo keeps his gaze onto the Zoroark, squinting. “Tell us.”

The group huddles around the fox, sprinkling with anxiousness.

“...I was able to talk to Virtuous, but not Behemoth. Regardless—” Ramon looks down, his ears lowered. “I couldn’t convince them to end the war: Virtuous ranted about his hatred towards Behemoth to the point where he doesn’t believe in forming an agreement with him. As for Behemoth, his guards prevented me from seeing him because he was training himself. They even *pushed* me when I tried talking to him.”

“Bro.” Justin’s face distorts into perplexion, the teen raising his brow. “They couldn’t be nicer about it?”

“That’s what I thought!” Ramon sighs. “Apparently they’re more aggressive about ensuring Behemoth’s success, thanks to the war. The Wishiwashis aren’t any better since Virtuous makes them feel superior over the Gyarados, motivating them effectively.”

“I...see.” Coleo gradually stares down.

“I’m sorry Coleo, but considering the things I’ve heard from Behemoth, even he wouldn’t come to an agreement with Virtuous.”

The Blipbug is quiet, his heart feeling as though it’s slowing down. He trembles, sliding off Ada’s head. The teen gasps. “Whoa!” She catches the insect in her hands, a tear sliding across Coleo’s cheek. He eyes the ceiling, clenching his teeth.

“How?” He whimpers. “How do we stop this man-o-war from gettin’ worse?” He slams his setae on Ada’s hand, glaring. “The Illusion plan wa’ all we got...”

Roan’s hand leans against his maw, gasping. “Blasphemy! How are we going to cross the lake now!?” Roan pouts, folding his arms and sitting on the floor. “This war is all sorts of wrong: Getting into speciesism disputes, shooing away those that aren’t their kinds, and having leaders who aren’t willing to hear others’ concerns!” He throws his arms in the air. “It’s an absolute *catastrophe!*”

Ramon scratches the back of his soft hair, staring down. “Not to mention their homeplace isn’t looking so great, either.”

Coleo gazes at the Zoroark. "Homeplace?"

"Both Virtuous and Behemoth have a palace named after themselves."

"Huh...I see. Was not aware of Virtuous and Behemoth ownin' a palace."

Ramon nods. "And from what I can conclude from them: The war led to Wishiwashis being randomly recruited at Virtuous Palace, random objects littering Behemoth Palace, and the increase of tension between the two groups."

Coleo stands up. "I figured the war would lead the two places towards that state."

"Mhm." Ramon stares up. "Although, I wasn't alone in disliking The Aquatic War."

"Hmm?"

Ramon snaps his claws towards Roan. "Like you mentioned, their leaders aren't willing to listen to others' concerns. I've met a Gyarados and Wishiwashi who aren't fans of the war for different reasons: One wanted to know a Gyarados personally while the other wanted to date a Wishiwashi."

Ramon laughs softly, scratching the back of his head as the group looks at him, perplexed. "I'm not kidding about the last part."

"Huh." Courtney snickers. "That's cute."

"Ah..." Coleo scratches the back of his head with his setae. "More power to ye, I guess."

Ada smiles. "Not much of a lover type?"

Coleo shakes his head. "Neva saw meself as one."

"D'aww, but there's beauty in finding love," Courtney joins in, blushing while giggling in her fur-covered hands.

"To ye, that is." Coleo folds his setae like they're arms, sighing while closing his eyes. "Love was neva me thing. Me attention focused on learnin' and explorin' this vast world. Wantin' to know its mysteries, especially in this region, argh."

"Th-That's fair," Mesmeren says, poking her fingers together. "I personally wouldn't mind falling in love with someone. But I-I can see other things being more interesting than attraction."

"Thanks." Coleo smiles at the Drowzee.

Ramon smiles for a moment before reverting back into uncertainty. "Besides those two things, both of them wanted peace between the two species: Regardless of their strengths and weaknesses."

"I see...If only Behemoth and Virtuous agree instead of continuin' their bickers and involvin' others into this war." Coleo sighs. "The only thing we can do is to wait til' the next day. That way we can make our next move when given the chance."

Courtney folds her arms. "Maybe we can leave and hope the war solves itself?"

Ada raises her finger. "Yeah no, there's a lot wrong with the idea. First off, Virtuous and Behemoth have been fighting each other for a long while." She holds two fingers up. "Secondly, their kind already don't like each other, with only their distaste growing more and erupting into a war thanks to those two." Three fingers. "Thirdly, considering this war has been going on for a long time now, I doubt us leaving will end it anytime soon. Nor at all, for that matter." Four fingers along with a glare coming from her. "Annnnd fourthly, that'll be rude of us to leave after the depressing state Purity is in. Plus this lake *stands* between us getting to Glory Pride!"

The Lopunny tilts her head. "Coulda we just...*walk aroun'* it, though?" Shrugs. "Besides, you weren't huge on having Ramon use his Illusion to convince the leaders. So why not just leave?"

Roan puts one hand by his hip while lifting his finger, eyeing Courtney. "About the idea, Courtney ma'am: The Lake of Purity is pretty massive and wide. I noticed how far it stretches, from both left and right." He taps his chin. "So if we were to try to go around, it'll take us a long while. And there's possibly a chance that could lead us into another area instead of Glory Pride."

"Huh." Courtney stares at the lake, rumbles forming due to the heavy rain and war. "Oh right! I remember seein' how wide and lengthy the lake looked earlier, too! Thanks for the reminder, Roan."

Roan smiles widely, closing his eyes and puffing out his chest. "Glad I could be of service, madam!"

Courtney waves her hand, snickering. "No need for formality, kid."

Roan shakes his head. "But I must! Otherwise, it'll come off as rude!"

Sylock rolls his eyes, folding his arms. *Constant formality is no better, though.*

Courtney sits on her knees and pets the Axew, leading the kid to snicker. "If you say so." She then stands back up, Ada walking close to her.

"Also Courtney..." Ada pauses, staring off to the side.

Courtney blinks. "Yeah?"

The teen sets Coleo on top of her head before stroking her arm, caressing it. "...at least understand why we all went with the Illusion plan now." The arm is gripped further, the girl wincing. "We...ultimately have no choice. Even despite my concerns about lying, it *was* our only shot."

Courtney rests her hand by her hip. "Right. Sometimes ya need to lie in order to solve some things in life." She lays her other hand on Ada's shoulder, patting it. "They say the truth can set ya free. In some cases, it can. Like tellin' the truth about you feeling cramped in yer friend's home instead of hiding that fact. Helps to let others know what ya really feel to grow a healthy relationship. Keepin' stuff like that in lies will not help anyone nor yerself."

Mesmeren looks up at the rabbit, holding her hands together. *Ex...Express how I truly feel...?*

Ada nods. "Indeed. My father always told me about the perks of honesty. It helps to tell someone—*anyone*, your genuine thoughts on something."

Courtney snaps her fingers. "Attagirl! You are right about that. However..." She folds her arms, her sword's sheath shuffling. "Sometimes tellin' the truth isn't going to help. Take the war for instance: If we all went out there right now and told the two leaders to stop fightin' each other, they wouldn't listen to a single *thang* we say and tell us to scram as a result."

"Ye: Behemoth and Virtuous' hatred are so strong that they wouldn't eve' listen to me, their closest friend."

Courtney nods. "The world is filled with all kinds of things: Not all of them can be solved by a simple truth..." She looks out of the window. "But neither can they be solved by a simple lie. Which unfortunately...we just experienced."

Ada flinches for a moment, taking her attention towards the Zoroark. Ramon keeps his gaze away from everyone: Twirling his bangs, staring down.

Ada frowns. "So if telling them the truth doesn't work, and lying to them doesn't work..." She snaps her attention back to Courtney. "Then what *does* work!?"

Courtney strokes the side of her arm, looking off to the side. "I wish I knew the answer to that, pal..."

The girl sighs, shaking her head. "I'm lost..." She forms a fist. "Was everything I know about truths and lies...false? Is telling the truth not always a good thing? Is telling lies not always a bad thing?" Her hand unravels, raising it—*looking* at it. "I guess it's not always recommended to lie, but in certain cases like this, it's...okay???"

Justin walks beside her. "Again, fam: It depends. Like I've said, you wouldn't want to be blunt about Clinton's shopping, right? Telling him he's bad for it and all...No one gains anything from being told their shopping is a slog, man."

"...Maybe." Ada's hand shakes. "I don't know." She pants, tears welling up her eyes, her heart sinking within the deep depths.

Roan stares with concern, walking close to the girl. "Are...you alright?"

Tears drip onto the girl's hand, the trembling persists. "I'm just—Just, ugh..." She turns away quickly, Coleo hanging onto her hair as she faces the windows, her hand gripping the other. "I'm so stressed and tired and...miss my father and my friends. I miss my father dearly...He has helped me a lot while I was growing up, trained me to defend myself, and taught me to be truthful and honest at all times." Her hands press against her chest. "If only he were here. Right now. He would've known what to do. The *right* decision he would make that'll put me at ease from doubting myself."

"But what if he resorted to lying in this situation, too?" Justin asks.

Ada pauses. Her hearing leaves, with only those words echoing throughout her mind. The father she grows up with, the man who always preaches about being truthful and never deceitful. She wipes back to reality, frowning at Justin. "HE WOULD *NEVER* LIE!" she yells, her voice shaking.

Justin backs away, holding his arms up. "Whoa, calm down, fam!"

"I-I know he wouldn't! He's been so disciplined, teaching himself to not go down the path of deception! He has trained himself to be honest in the most heroic way *possible*. And has passed that honesty down to me ever since my mother di—" Ada gasps, being captured by something clingy yet...warm at once. She quickly pieces it together as Justin hugging her.

"Hey...it's okay." Justin smiles. "I know how good of a person your father is to ya. I get it. He has taught ya not to abuse your usage of lyin'." Sighs. "But sometimes fam, we all get into situations where we have no choice but to lie. It...doesn't make us bad people for doing so. It just makes us *human*. The literal living. Even Pokémon can feel the same way, too. Aight?"

Tears continuously slide down Ada's cheeks, the girl staring ahead, across the cabin, as though mesmerized. Everyone stares at the two, Ramon and Mesmeren forming the look of shock and intrigue. The fox stops twirling his bangs, lowering his arm. Mesmeren squirms, her lips quivering.

Right...Coleo, Courtney, Roan, Mesmeren, and Lycus are all Pokémon just like me. They all rolled with the Illusion plan. Ramon glances off. I...I ended up befriending two Pokémon that way. Wh-While in my Illusion, lying about who I am...I-I had no choice there. I wonder if what

I've done was even a good thing or not! I should've just focused on convincing the two leaders instead of talking with Aquatus and Quintin, but I...I had no other choice! Things just— he grits his teeth. *...Am I a bad person?*

I-I just agreed to this Illusion plan without saying much. I-I don't know if I can even call myself good, knowing that pre-pretending to be one's ally played e-exactly like what my kind does. Mesmeren looks away. *E-Even if the Illusion plan was for ending the war, it s-still adds to how awful I am. I-It involves lies...and my k-kind is filled with it.* A single tear slides down Mesmeren's cheeks, the tapir gritting her teeth. *I-I am a bad person...*

Justin pulls away from the hug, staring into Ada's eyes. "We'll find our friends and family. Together." Smiles. "And when we do, we'll learn more about life as well...*Together.*"

Ada gazes for a moment, her lips sealed. She then wipes away her tears. "Alright."

Ramon looks down, his bangs shielding his left eye. *The things Nomar told me. The thoughts, concerns, and feelings Justin and Ada have...They're completely conflicting. The awfulness of humans doesn't match with the sincerity of Justin and Ada. Their genuine kindness and concern for their loved ones...versus the many wars caused by humans over the usage of Spells, along with The Aquatic War being formed by one trainer. I...I don't understand. Are all humans truly evil?*

Mesmeren looks down, panting heavily. *So many deceptions and lies and cruelty my kind are capable of. I-I'm capable of those things, too! I don't get the kindness I received from Ramon, Ada, Justin, and others...I don't get why they accepted me. Even after stating I have nowhere else to go. E-Even after admitting I have no goals of my own!* Her eyes tremble. *I'm just a runaway! A Drowzee who doesn't want to do that family ritual ever again because I am a disgrace towards everything! Why does everyone tolerate something as evil as me?*

Roan looks at her, raising his brow. "Hmm?"

Justin turns around at Ramon, lifting his brow as well. "Eh?"

Both Ramon and Mesmeren stroke their heads, trembling. *I'm so lost!* the two thinks, clenching their teeth.

"Hey!"

The two Pokémon stop in place, looking at the location of the voices. Justin and co. stare at the two, all except for Sylock forming the look of perturbation. "Are you two aight?" Justin asks. "You were like, panicking hard there."

"Yeah..." Roan agrees, lowering his head in sorrow.

Ramon and Mesmeren look at the group for a brief moment before sighing. "Sorry," they say in unison.

"I'm just stressed out by...everything going on so far," Ramon elaborates.

"S-Same..." Mesmeren strokes her arm. "I feel useless during all of this." *Which I am.*

"Argh, that ca' happen sometimes when a plan doesn't succee'." Coleo sighs before the group stare outside, a Gyarados and Wishiwashi colliding their Aqua Tails. "What we ca' do now is let this day pass...We are all tired, so let's rest for the time bein'."

"Yep," Courtney agrees.

Justin folds his arms. "You know, maybe some good ol' fashion joke can—" yawns. "Cheer us... up. Man, the tiredness is getting to me more now, haha."

"Justin, I don't think a joke is really nece—"

"What does an Intellicate use to wash their clothes?" Justin asks.

Ada folds her arms, tilting her head. "A cloth?"

Courtney scratches the side of her head. "Uh, their Water moves if they're a Water type?"

Roan pokes his chin. "Hmm...Their hands or paws???"

"Nope: A *Wishiwashimachine!*" Justin slaps his knee before bursting into laughter.

Courtney and Roan snicker, covering their mouths. "Oh wow, that was a pretty clever pun, Justin sir!" Roan says.

"I second what the kid said! Man."

Ramon and Mesmeren chuckle while Sylock, Lycus, and Ada roll their eyes, Ada folding her arms. Justin looks at the teen and snaps his fingers, displaying his usual finger guns. "Come on, man. You gotta give me a big, *BIG* credit for that one!"

"Not funny. Didn't laugh," Lycus says, shaking his head. "Can't believe you topped your Cloud Balls joke in the bad pun department, kid."

No kidding, Sylock thinks, leaning against the wooden wall.

"Hey man, I wasn't talking to ya. I was talking to Ada." Justin chuckles. "You think that was good, right fam?" Ada glances at the boy for a moment, deadpanning. "Right?"

The girl soon turns away slightly, closing her eyes before forming a small smile and giggling. "Alright, admittedly that was a good one. Been a while since I've laughed at your silly gags."

I genuinely hate to admit it...but that was a good pun, even if corny, Nomar says in Ramon's head, pouting.

"Ayy, thanks fam!" Justin points at the teen while glaring at Lycus, smirking. "See? Even *she* agrees that it was good! And she usually hates my puns, haha!"

"Pfft, her awful taste, not mine." Lycus folds his arms, finishing his apple and tossing it towards the fireplace.

"Hey!" Justin and Ada exclaim, puffing up their cheeks in an over-the-top manner.

Lycus looks at his tail, one apple lying on it. *Oh right! That reminds me*. He walks towards the Zoroark. "Hey Ramon."

Ramon tilts his head. "Hmm?"

Lycus lifts his tail, the apple shifting side to side. "Want an apple? You must be hungry after traveling a lot underwater."

Ramon lifts his claw. "Funny that you mentioned it because I've already eaten. Was given something to eat while in Behemoth Palace."

"Ah, but surely their food may not be enough for you."

"It is, actually. I ended up eating a dead Alomomo—" the apple is shoved against the Zoroark's lips, Ramon blinking. "Eh?"

"That wouldn't be enough to fill your whole belly, though! Surely some nutritious, juicy flavored fruit can fill a fella's belly up in no time flat! Far better than eating an Alomo—"

"My guy, I am not hungry." Ramon quirks his brow. "I've been saying this like...three times now. I am very, *very* sure about my hunger being satisfied."

Lycus eyes the fox, the suspicion plastering over Ramon's face while he glances. *Hmm. Thought I could get him, too. Tch.* Lycus shrugs and sighs, setting the apple onto his paw. "Alright. I'll eat it for myself, in case I get hungry later on."

"Right..." Ramon folds his arms. "Which reminds me, Lycus: While in my disguise, I've noticed other species of Pokémon living alongside the Wishiwashis and Gyarados. Didn't you tell us they're against those who aren't their species?"

Lycus nods. "I did."

"Then why was I seeing the opposite?"

"The Gyarados and Wishiwashis are very selective about what species can live with them."

Roan raises his brow. "Really?" Lycus nods, the Axew tilting his head in confusion. "So not only they're speciesist, but also very picky about it, too." He shakes his head, his hands on his hips. "I cannot *STAND* anyone that thinks this way, let alone a group! It's uncalled for!"

"Yeah..." Ramon lays his paw against his chin. "Pretty weird that the two society's function that way."

"Agreed," Ada follows.

"I guess' Virtuous and Behemoth make exceptions on which species gets to live in their palace." Coleo raises his brow. "Still weird though, argh."

Everyone continues wondering about the selectivity, all bouncing around each other's theories and predictions.

Lycus forms a small smirk, caressing his apple. *Good. The excuse worked.*

. . .

Light rain showers across the lake, the cabin remaining still as the trees protect it. Justin and Ada relax on the cabin's first sofa, Courtney and Sylock on the second, and the rest sit near its warm fireplace. Coleo rests on top of Ada's head as Lycus leans his back against the couch.

They all chat with each other: Smiling, even exchanging some laughter.

"And then X threw the cake at Serene's face after singing happy birthday!" Justin snickers. "The look on her face was priceless: She was as red as an apple, man."

"Daaang, did he now?" Courtney laughs. "That's a little cruel to do on someone's birthday, don'tcha think?"

Justin shrugs. "Eh, that's why X and I got a backup cake for her."

Ada huffs, folding her arms. "Hmph! I still think it's unnecessary to throw a whole cake at someone during their birthday."

Justin scratches the back of his head, laughing nervously. "Maaaybe, yeah. She wasn't all that stressed about it, though. Hell, she even commented on liking the taste of the cake after licking it off her face."

Ada rolls her eyes, shaking her head while smiling. "Right."

"Also the fact she slapped both of us with her vines afterwards." Justin rubs the side of his cheek, whimpering. "Serves us right, haha."

Lycus stares at the fireplace, jittering his fingers. *Wished that vine wrapped around X's neck and sna—*

"Just goes to show you: Never prank someone on their birthday!" Ada smirks while puffing her chest out.

Justin snaps his fingers, giving the teen the finger guns wink. "Noted: I will remember that for everyone except you."

"Thanks—" Ada blinks for a moment before shaking her head, lifting her fist. "Hey!"

Courtney laughs more, covering her lips. "You two sure had some interesting time living at Synchronic Village. Lovin' the energetic friends and supportive family y'all hang with."

Ada pounces towards Courtney, inching closer by the edge. "Oh you don't know the *half* of it! There's all sorts of fun activities and trips we did together."

Justin nods. "Yeah! Like the time my mom and I played darts with you and your dad!"

"Or the time Serene and I went climbing a small mountain with Ethan!"

Justin gasps, clashing his hands together. "Yo, what about the time X and I went camping at Synthesize Lake? You were there with the whole gang, too!"

Ada blushes and looks away. "I-I'd rather not remember the Great Move Massacre."

"The great what now?" Courtney asks, flickering her ears.

Ramon points at the Lopunny. "I second what she said."

Justin laughs. "She's referring to us messin' around with our attacks while chasing each other for 5 minutes straight."

"I-In other words: Playing tag, but it involves us using our moves. Anyone hit by them ends up being the tagger until the game ends." The girl sighs heavily, shuddering.

"Heh, sounds like y'all are trynna hurt yerselves during that trip." Courtney snickers.

The boy lifts his hand up and down. "Naaah, we were just using our moves lightly. So no one got hurt."

"Not even your Intellicate buddies?"

"Nope." Justin rubs his hands together, smirking. "Although, they had to endure the absolute dread and horror of this serious as heck game of tag!"

"Oh wow." Courtney grins back. "Sounds like fun!"

"It's not!" Ada huffs. "No one wasn't hurt during the Great Move Massacre, b-but 13 year old me was mentally scarred that day...." Shudders. "I still think about the time I was zapped by Mystical Projectiles left and right, a random leaf fell onto my nose leading me to sneeze like crazy, and—Just, ugh!"

Mystical Projectele? Coleo thinks, tilting his head. *Or whateve' it's called.*

Ada's hands nudge her forehead, gazing at the ground as if she's being stoned. "I will never forget about that battlefield."

Justin rolls his eyes. "Now I know you're being overdramatic, for real." He shakes his head at the rabbit. "Again, we all used our moves softly. To a point where it be ticklish, for real for real."

The teen huffs and looks away, closing her eyes while folding her arms. "E-Even ignoring my disastrous rundown with that event, it just feels *off* having to use my moves that don't involve fighting."

"Eh." The boy shrugs. "Elemental moves don't have to always involve fights, fam. Sometimes they can be used for other fun stuff like tag or a race. X and I were racing each other one time: He was using Aqua Jet while I was relying on Mystical Projectile to outrun his ass."

The girl lifts one eye at Justin, the look of judgement displaying. "I see."

"And for the record: *You* called our game the Great Move Massacre, *I* called our game the Move Tag. We are not the same." The dark brown teen tugs on his collar while sneering at the girl. She rolls her eyes.

"Whatever."

Courtney, Roan, and Ramon laugh softly at the exchange, the Lopunny elbowing Sylock afterwards. "Ya know, this reminds me of the time I first met Sylock at the Serenity Vicious Center." Sylock blushes, staring off at the fireplace.

"The what now?" Coleo asks.

"It's a center built next to the Windmill Forest, which is also next to this lake. It's where anyone who did something wrong in Serenity goes to be taught a lesson."

"I see."

Ada blinks, looking at the Lopunny with curiosity. "Wait, you two used to be at that center?" Courtney nods. "Huh...What did you do to end up there?"

Courtney scratches the back of her head, laughing nervously. "Weeeellll, when I was a little ol' Buneary, I used to get myself into a lotta trouble cuz of folks doesn't like it when I'm into activities meant for 'men'."

Ada forms the look of befuddlement, her hands frozen. "...OH..."

"..." Courtney smacks her lips. "Yeeeeeaaah, we got some yikers in Serenity ever since Tranquility left. As I've stated before."

"No kidding."

"Eventually, I ended up in the center due to needin' to be taught a lesson for doing stuff meant for 'men' when I'm not supposed to."

"Who sent you? Forest???" Ada asks.

"Nope: The previous mayor of Serenity. His rules were...so dumb, oh my gosh. But that's a different topic in itself." Courtney waves her hand. "Just know one of those rules involved ladies not being able to work nor do fun activities that's considered a 'guy' thing, which uh...yeah." Courtney shakes her head. "My childhood was nothin' but stupid sad."

Everyone forms a look of grimace, Mesmeren holding her hands. "Y-Yeesh! I-I'm surprised you even stayed in that pl-place..."

"Yeah." Courtney rolls her eyes before shrugging. "On the plus side, I've gotten to meet Sylock this way. And we slowly became friends throughout our time there: From random sparrin' to drawin' on the walls while the guards aren't lookin'. And much more fun stuff we did together!" She hugs the Blaziken, who jumps a bit in shock. "Honestly, meeting Sylock was the best thing to come out of that dumb mayor's decision."

“D’aww.” Ada puts her hands against her chest, smiling. “That’s genuinely sweet to hear.”

“Mhm! Soon, we got released from the center after Forest became the new mayor. I think the previous mayor’s name was like...Actually I forgot his name.” The rabbit shrugs. “But at the same time, I do not give a damn about him, HAHA!”

Roan snaps his fingers. “Serves that fella right: Justice to him by forgetting thou name of him!”

“Pffft!” Everyone except Sylock and Lycus laugh, Justin grinning in response. Sylock forms a small smile not only to Courtney...but to the rest of the group as well. As if he’s feeling some level of reassurance and...warmth.

“Yo, I like this Roan kid: He’s just like me, for real.”

Roan shakes his head, waving his hand up and down. “Maybe in terms of humor, but we definitely have a lot of differences when it comes to how we approach things, Justin sir.”

Justin blinks at the Axew, shaking his head. “Aight, you have a point there: I don’t call someone by their name followed by some polite word to address my gender, fam.”

Roan lays his hands on his hips, smirking. “And I don’t always end sentences off with the word ‘fam’.”

Justin smacks his forehead. “Ah, you got me there!” The two snicker with each other as a result.

“Anywho—” Roan turns towards Courtney and Sylock, eyeing them with astonishment. “We truly live in such a wonderful world where even in the bleakest parts of our lives, we still bond with someone during it all! I’m happy to know that’s how you two met each other, Courtney ma’am and Sylock sir.”

Courtney smiles. “Thanks, Roan.”

Roan nods. “No problem! It reminds me of how I met my oh-so amazing mentor!”

Justin jumps up for a bit, shoving Ada against the couch. “Yo where’s the popcorn: We’re bout to hear the origin story of Roan meeting the dude he *loves* talkin’ about!”

“Ugh! Hey!” Ada pouts, frowning at the boy. “Watch where you’re going! Yeesh!” Justin shakes his head while his hands and eyes move in exaggeration, mimicking. The girl punches him in the stomach.

“ARGH!” Justin covers his belly, keeping his eyes on Roan.

"Sorry about that, Roan: Go on." Ada crosses her legs, her hand over her lips before giggling softly.

Roan snorts before clearing his throat. "I was traveling around the vast fields of Windmill Forest, lost and clueless of where to go! This vile rainstorm back then didn't help, either." He looks down. "I've called for help numerous times: Not a single person, nor Pokémon, came to my aid." Whimpers. "It was...*heart-wrenching*."

"Oh dear..." Ada presses her hands against her chest.

"And then there was a tree, ready to strike me. I thought I was a goner..." The Axew's hands tremble, rising up. "Until *he* stood in front of me!"

Roan rises his head up, tears filling his eyes. "SIMON VICTOR! My mentor...my friend. Who carried that fallen tree over his head, thanks to being gifted with Magic type." He sniffles, wiping away his tears while smiling. "The moment he asked 'Are you alright?' was the moment I knew: I must know how to fend for myself and become as strong as him!"

"Oooo." Ada claps her hands, smiling. "Interesting to know this Simon guy is a Sorcerous."

Sorcerous? Magic type? What the blimey are these lots talkin' bout? Coleo scratches the side of his head, tilting.

The dragon blushes, closing his eyes while smiling back. "Yeah! I became so intrigued by his strength and will to help poor ol' me. Or poor youn' me, in this case." He waves his hand up and down. "Either way, I asked him if I could travel with him due to wanting to become strong and protect the weak. Plus I had nowhere else to go."

"I see." Ada smiles.

"Thankfully, he accepted me as not only his student, but also his partner too!"

"Ayy, that's great to hear, fam!" Justin lifts himself up. "I'm happy for yo—OUCH!" He sits down, covering his stomach again as the group chuckles. Justin glares at the girl. "Man, you didn't have to punch me THAT hard."

"I'm sorry, Justin: *You* believe that was a punch, / believe that was a tap. We are not the same." Ada winks at him while smirking.

"I—That's not how this works!"

Courtney and Roan burst into laughter, Courtney tapping on the sofa repeatedly while Roan covers his snout. Ramon, Mesmeren, and Coleo laugh softly at the teens while Sylock and Lycus give the whole group an eyebrow raise. Lycus blinks.

How the hell are they a threat to Team Conjure? the Floatzel thinks, squinting.

Ramon leans close to Mesmeren. “We have some interesting friends, huh?”

Mesmeren gasps softly before taking a proper look at the group: The laughter, the commotion, the agreements and disagreements. She stares in awe, rendering herself speechless. The tapir gulps, gazing down at her conforming hands.

“R-Right...” She partially closes her eyes, caressing her hands.

Ramon lowers his ears with concern. “Is...something wrong?”

“...” Mesmeren stands up, nudging her fingers against each other. “U-Um...” Everyone stops and turns towards her, the Drowzee shivering at the sight, looking away slightly.

“Something’s up, fam?” Justin asks.

“...” Mesmeren pokes her fingers more. “Are...Are you all okay with me? Being here? L-Like... traveling along.”

Ada raises her brow. “Um, yeah?”

The Lopunny shrugs. “I don’t have any problems with you hangin’ around with us. Doesn’t matter, to me.” She then looks at Sylock, who also shrugs before nodding. “Even Sylock agrees.”

“Same here!” Roan follows.

“I second what the kid said.” Justin smirks at the tapir, giving her the usual finger guns. “You’re aight in my book, Mesmeren.”

“O-Oh...” The Drowzee strokes the side of her arm, gazing down. “Are you sure?”

Ada tilts her head. “What do you mean by that?”

“Erm.” Mesmeren keeps staring. “I-I feel like I’m slowing everyone down. You all have different g-goals in mind: You and Justin want to find your friends and family, Ramon wants to recover his memories, Courtney and Sylock want to participate in a worldwide tournament, and Roan wants to find his mentor.” She bites her lower lip. “E-Even Coleo and Lycus have a goal of wanting to end this Aquatic War...Meanwhile—” she looks up at the group, trembling. “I-I have no goals of my own. I-I am just...*here*. Following you all wh-while not contributing much. Not doing anything gr-great...J-Just like my ki—”

"That's not true." Ramon lays his paw on Mesmeren's arm, the Drowzee gasping. "You did a lot of great things for us. Such as saving me from Travis in Majestic City and Gloomy Woods."

"B-But you were still badly hurt as a result..." Mesmeren lowers her ears. "H-He was too strong for both of us."

"Regardless: You *risked* your life saving mine. Whether through indirect means behind the dumpster, or direct means in front of him." Mesmeren blinks before gazing at the Zoroark. "You've even helped the group fight off against Team Conjure at Serenity. Point is, you've contributed to the group in more ways than you think." Ramon smiles.

Mesmeren is still, motionless while tears slowly climb their way up. She rubs her eyes within a flash, wiping those tears away as her shakiness returns. She looks at the group, her lips quivering, stammering into a smile.

"Th-Thank you..." This is all she can say, conflicts riling inside of her.

Roan lifts his arms up in enthusiasm. "No problem!" He then tilts his head, blinking. "Although, I wonder who these Team Conjure guys are."

"Same here, lad," Coleo follows. "I am also wonderin' what the blimey is a 'Mystical Projectele'?"

Ada looks up at the Blipbug. "Oh right: You're not aware of Magic type and humans being the ones capable of using them." She then points at Roan. "Annnnd this is your first time hearing about Conjure."

"Technically second: I heard it earlier while you were talking with Lycus, but was too busy eating my apple to question it." Roan snickers.

Ada scratches the back of her head, her laughter raspy. "Right." She then yawns and stretches herself. "I'll explain all of it tomorrow since it's getting late right now, and I want to..." She yawns, covering her mouth. "Sleep badly, as you can see."

Roan nods, slamming his fist onto the palm of his hand. "Sounds like a good idea!" He collapses on the spot face first, snoring.

Courtney snickers. "Well goodnight to you too, partna."

Lycus hops up, stretching himself out. "I'll sleep on top of the cabin. Just wanted to feel that cool breeze, to be honest."

The rabbit quirks her brow. "But it's raining out there."

The weasel shrugs. "I'm a Water type: I'll be fine." He walks towards the back window.

“Heh, good point.”

. . .

Everyone rests on the sofas: Justin and Ada’s head lean against each other, Courtney and Sylock pinning their backs together, Coleo nesting well on top of Ada’s head, and Roan snuggles up on Justin’s lap. Mesmeren is also there leaning against the sofa’s edge, shaking throughout her slumber.

Ramon is sitting at the front window, doused in the only light source: The full moon, shining down at the cabin despite the light rainstorm. The Zoroark sighs, leaning his paw against the window. He looks up, sorrow plaguing him.

What is this world? What...do I even believe in it? he thinks, shaking his head. *Ugh, everything’s so confusing...*

“H-Hello,” a soft voice speaks, the Zoroark flicking his ears while blinking. He turns around: Mesmeren walking forward, twiddling her fingers. “I...didn’t expect you t-to remain up at night.”

Ramon smiles. “I can say the same for you, too.” Mesmeren scoots beside him, leaning close to the window. “Any reason why you woke up?”

The tapir shrugs. “I couldn’t sleep...” She quickly turns towards the fox. “Wh-What about you?”

“Oh. Um,” he sighs, gazing at the lake. “Just wanted to admire the lake in its peaceful state. At least, close to it without all the fighting.” He shakes his head, eyeing the sky. “Still raining a lot here, though.”

“Y-Yeah...” Mesmeren’s hands are behind her, nudging together. “At least it’s less hectic than earlier.”

“True.”

Soon, voices are heard outside:

“Larry?”

“Sam?”

Ramon and Mesmeren blink for a moment before two figures roam the lake: One being a Wishiwashi with a Mystic Water necklace while the other being a Gyarados with a Water Gem necklace, both eyeing around with concern.

Mesmeren tilts her head. "I-I didn't know those two Pokémon w-would roam around at night."

"Me too," Ramon agrees before eyeing the Wishiwashi, who he recognizes as Aquatus. "Although, that Wishiwashi is in her Solo form."

"S-Solo?" Mesmeren raises her brow. *Also, 'her'? Does he know that Wishiwashi?*

"Erm, a form change thing that only Wishiwashis gain access to. Their other form is called 'School'."

"Huh. I see, then."

Aquatus darts her head from side to side, her necklace jittering. "Larry! Where are you!?" she yells, sometimes hovering her fins over her maw.

Quintin swims forward, scanning everywhere while carrying two purple berries on his back. "Sam! Dude! Did you run off or somethin—OOF!" He bumps into the sardine, gripping onto the berries. "Whoops, my ba—"

Aquatus gasps before increasing in size, glowing blue. As the transformation fades, she frowns at the Gyarados, her tail surrounded in blue auras. "What are you doing outside of your place, Gyarados!?" she questions in a menacing manner.

"Whoa whoa whoa! I mean no harm here, lady!" Quintin states, raising his tail up like he's surrendering himself.

Aquatus remains firm. "Are you sure?" Quintin nods, shaking with pity. Aquatus sighs before reverting back to her sardine state, staring up at the towering serpentine. "Alright...Admittedly, I didn't want to fight you. I've...done enough of that with you Gyarados." She looks away with guilt.

"I understand, man." Quintin shrugs. "I don't like fightin' myself, to be honest."

"I see." Aquatus tilts her head. "Although, it still begs the question of what you're doing here at night? Shouldn't you be resting at Behemoth Palace?"

Quintin waves his tailfin up and down. "Meh, I ain't worrying about them complaining about me not being there. I'm too busy trynna find my buddy, Sam."

"Oh! Coincidentally, I'm looking for a friend of mine as well. Named Larry."

Quintin snickers. "Niiice. We can form a mini-team called 'The Searchers' to find our buddies together."

Aquatus giggles, covering her mouth. "Perhaps. Technically speaking, I'm not supposed to talk to you due to our kind being against each other."

"Pfffft, like I give a shit." Quintin rolls his eyes. "I don't see anything wrong with me talking to a little Wishiwashi here."

The Solo blinks for a moment before she nods. "...Yeah. You're right."

The serpent flinches. "Wait, really?"

"Yes: It can get rather boring having to talk with the same Wishiwashis over and over. Plus I would love to know what a Gyarados is like, personally." Aquatus gazes up at Quintin with intrigue.

"Hah. Then why not get to know each other a little before finding our friends? Let's start with you: How's life for you in Virtuous Palace? Or whatever he calls it." Quintin smiles.

Aquatus rolls her eyes. "A borderline snorefest." She lifts her fin up and down casually. "There's the same 'Virtuous is great!' here, and 'Virtuous is great!' there. As in, different topics *can* happen...only for it to be overshadowed by the massive Virtuous praising." She stares ahead, deadpanned. "It gets old and annoying fast."

"Oh man, I bet. Didn't think your kind would have a big hard-on for the fella," Quintin says before snickering.

Aquatus snorts. "Well if you put it as such, yes. But it's also the way they treat him as if he can do no wrong when...he's been blatantly against understanding the other side because of his petty rivalry with Behemoth." She shakes her head. "His self-entitlement to being the strongest has led his followers under a similar mindset, thinking they're better than your kind because of it. It...bothers me. A lot." She clenches her fin. "Maybe Behemoth would've been a better leader than Virtuous."

"I...wouldn't say that, man."

Aquatus blinks, tilting her head. "Why's that?"

Quintin looks away in an awkward manner. "My bro's been so focused on the war that he hasn't done an alright job at managing his palace."

"Wait, Behemoth is your brother?"

Quintin looks back at Aquatus. "Yep."

"That's interesting."

The Gyarados nods. "But yeah, his way of managing the palace isn't all that great: It be lookin' all barren and filthy, havin' trash from the surface everywhere. And even though I've seen some peeps chilling there, most of em' are lonely." Quintin shakes his head.

Aquatus lays her fin on her maw. "Oh dear. Virtuous Palace doesn't look messy at all. Nor barren with lonely people, for that matter."

Quintin shifts. "I guess I have a trashy leader while you have a brashy leader."

Aquatus giggles. "Right. Or as I like to call them: Team Self-Absorbers!"

Quintin bursts into laughter. "Dang, that's a better joke than what I came up with."

Aquatus folds her fins together, closing her eyes and looking up with pride. "Why thank you!" She then holds her fin out. "Aquatus is my name, by the way."

Quintin uses his tailfin to shake Aquatus' fin, being mindful of the berries. "Quintin's mine. Nice to meet ya, lady."

The sardine puts her gaze onto the berries, tilting her head. "Wait, are those what I think they are?"

Quintin looks at the berries. "Eh? You've heard of Bluk Berries before?"

Aquatus gasps. "YES! Those are my favorite kinds of berries! I tend to sneak one with me whenever I get tired of the usual kelps, hehe."

"Heh, same! I really love eating them, too!" Quintin leans his tail close to Aquatus. "I was gonna to eat two but eh, you seemed like a kind lady so here ya go."

"Oh. Thank you!" The Wishiwashi grabs one of the berries, moving it close to her in eagerness. Quintin tosses the other into his mouth, munching.

"Mmm!" The Gyarados exclaims, licking his lips.

Aquatus bites into her Bluk Berry, her eyes rolling up in pure bliss, some crumbs already clinging onto her mouth. "Mmm, indeeff!" she agrees, chewing more. She and Quintin smile at each other, eating their food in peace. Aquatus then swallows, licking the crumbs off.

Soon after they're done, Aquatus' lips lowers at a gradual pace, sorrow spreading throughout. Tears are spiraling up, clouding her vision. Quintin looks down, tilting his head.

"Did I do something wrong...?"

"N-No," Aquatus answers, looking away as multiple tears slide down her cheeks, whimpering. "It's just..." She covers her face with one fin. "This is the first time I've...ever managed to talk with a Gyarados without having to fight one. Which is sad yet...relieving all at once."

"Fight one?" Quintin leans his head close to Aquatus out of curiosity.

"I...I participated in the war. Virtuous chose me to do so without giving me any choice, hence what I've said earlier."

"Ah...I get it, now. Sorry that you're forced to enter." Quintin nuzzles against Aquatus without warning, the Wishiwashi gasping before blushing. "At least I'm glad you feel relieved from talkin' to me, dude." He smiles.

Aquatus is silent for a moment, tears keep streaming down before she nods. She nuzzles back, patting Quintin's side. "...Thank you, Quintin."

"No problem." The serpentine brings his head back. "I don't like the war as much as you do. It prevented me from being with a Wishiwashi cuz of how weird and questionable that'll be to my kind, man."

"Figured." Aquatus sighs.

"So yeah...Glad I've gotten to talk to ya, too."

A brief silence rises.

Both stare at each other with warm smiles they haven't felt in a long while. Soon, they look away, a simple blush forming on their faces. The rain continues its downpour, the full moon shining its light at them.

"...Well. I guess this is farewell, for now," Aquatus says, staring down in gloom.

"Yeah. It's real late, I feel. So we can try searching for our buddies tomorrow."

Aquatus shakes her head. "We probably won't due to tomorrow being the next big phase."

"...Oh. Right." Quintin smacks his tail against his face.

"Phase 32 is going to take up most of my time in the field since your brother and Virtuous are participating in it." She sighs. "If only this sweet moment can last a little longer..."

The Gyarados leans his head close to the Wishiwashi again. "Hey man, no need to feel too gloomy. Maybe someday when this war ends, we can keep hangin' with each other and know

more about ourselves. Free of these self-boastings from your home and the eyebrow-raising from mine.”

Aquatus looks at Quintin, a toothy smile emanating joy and hopefulness from him. She smiles back. “I hope so, too.”

Soon, the two turn around before diving beneath the lake, never to be seen by Ramon and Mesmeren again.

Ramon smiles, his arms resting on the window’s edge. “I probably did something good after seeing those two so happy with each other.” He sighs. “Which is...a relief, honestly.”

Mesmeren looks at him. “You know them?”

Ramon looks back. “Yes. I was Larry and Sam, thanks to my Illusion ability.” He puts his paws by his hips. “Those two mean well compared to other Wishiwashis and Gyarados I’ve seen. They view the war differently than their leaders, as you saw earlier.”

“Oh...Y-Yeah, I see then. That explains why you know th-the Wishiwashi.” Mesmeren pokes her fingers together. “I-I wonder how they’ll re-react if they find out about your true identity...”

Ramon shivers before gulping, staring off to the side while scratching the back of his head. He sighs. “I am honestly scared of that pos—” he coughs onto his paw, grunting.

Mesmeren jumps back, flinching. “Wh-What’s wrong!?”

“Ugh...” Ramon looks down at his paw before his eyes widening in mortification, trembling. “...What the...” Black blood paints the Zoroark’s paw, dripping down his arm at a sluggish pace. *My...My blood! It looks different this time!*

“R-Ramon?”

It...It looks exactly like those black stuff mixing in with the normal blood at the institute! But... why? Ramon sweats, shaking nonstop. Why does my blood look like this instead of the usual purple?

“R-Ramon!” Mesmeren finally catches the Zoroark’s attention as he looks at her, the Drowzee quaking. “A-Are you okay?”

Ramon looks at his paw, and then at Mesmeren, and then back at his paw before nodding. “Y-Yes. I’ll be fine...I hope.” He stares out of the window. “C-Can you open the window so that I can wash this off, please?” Mesmeren nods and uses her psychic powers to lift the window, the Zoroark dousing his paw into the rain. “Thank you.” He looks at his paw, the blood sliding off

each time the droplets hit it. Eventually, his paw becomes all clean. "...M-Mesmeren." He brings it back.

Mesmeren blinks. "Y-Yes?"

"Don't tell the others about this. Along with me remaining in my Zoroark form, too. Play along with me being an Intellicate, okay?" Ramon sighs, closing the window. "I...meant to tell you the latter ever since I've saved you from drowning."

"...O-Okay. I...I don't get it, but—" Mesmeren looks out of the window, her hands behind her back. "I-I'll go along with it."

"Thank you." Ramon looks out of the window as well.

Silence.

The two keep staring, nothing but the raindrops splashing across the lake with its ripples. They then look away: Ramon tapping his arm, Mesmeren shrugging in place.

The Zoroark twirls his bangs, losing himself into thoughts. He looks at Mesmeren, the tapir now tugging her blue ribbon before yelping from its tightness, stopping. She then nudges her fingers together, submerging herself into deep thoughts while staring at them.

"...Hey Mesmeren."

Mesmeren flinches and gasps, jolting her attention towards the fox. "Y-Yes!?" Gulps.

"Um, relax." Ramon pauses, looking off to the side before staring back. "I wanted to know why you asked that question earlier? About you thinking you're slowing everyone down?"

"...Hah." Mesmeren shakes, stroking her arms as she stares out of the window. "I believe I'm not w-wanted in this world."

Ramon blinks. "Why's that?"

"B-Because of the...*things* my kind has done. Drowzee and Hypno." Tears climb their way up the tapir's eyes, her hands pinning against her chest. "I used to live around a group of Drowzees and Hypnos. The gr-group did...so many terrible things I-I wanted to forget about, but c-can't."

Ramon looks down at her, concerns coursing through. "Such as?"

Mesmeren bites her lower lip, trembling more. "S-Setting u-up a c-ceremony in-involving kidnapping people a-and..." Her breath becomes irregular, her eyes struggling to keep in the

aquatic rivers, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Hy-Hypnotizing th-them, st-stealing th-their thoughts, an-and kil—” she whimpers, covering her maw.

Ramon places his paw behind her, rubbing her while leaning close with anxiousness. “H-Hey! Calm down!” he exclaims, shaking himself. “You can leave parts of the story out if it’s making you feel awful.”

Mesmeren’s shakiness slows down, the Drowzee lowering her hands. “...Th-Thank you.” Her breathing slowly comes back, her heart beating at a steady pace. She inhales before exhaling, sniffing. “A-After that c-ceremony, I ran away from the group...and wandered around Wizlore since then.”

“I see...” Ramon gets on his knees. “I’m so sorry to hear about that ceremony terrifying you...”

Mesmeren looks at him, her eyes meeting his’. “Mmhm...My life didn’t get an-any better after I ran away.” She stares down. “P-People didn’t wa-want anything to do wi-with me. Wh-Whether in towns where I get harassed and bullied by others, o-or in cities where I-I’m threatened to be killed if I e-ever step near them.” Whimpers. “I-It’s all the same result.”

Ramon leans back in mortification. “Why would people do that to you!?”

“...Because people hate the Drowzee line: Th-They’re horrible.” Her lips quiver, the Drowzee trembling once more. “*I’m* horrible.” Without warning, she bursts into wails, covering her face. “I-I’m such an aw-awful person for what I-I’m capable of doing!” She grits her teeth, tears bypassing her hands and falling onto the wooden floor.

Ramon simply hugs the Drowzee, the crying persists. He stares at the floor, caressing the back of her head gently. He trembles, his other paw resting on the floor. *Is it true? About what Mesmeren’s species has done? If so, then...* Tears rile up the Zoroark’s eyes as well, Ramon gnashing his teeth.

Above the cabin lies Lycus staring at the moon, closing his paw while smirking.

What if Pokémon aren’t any better than humans?

Lycus looks behind him, Xenia sitting on top of a tree branch while eyeing her Bitter Glory gem. She takes her attention towards the Floatzel, grinning.

What if we’re just as awful as them!?