

Underwater

UNDERWATER



I'm not a coward. I know they all think I am. Poor Larz can't get a dumb shiny pearl. I'll show them. They'll praise me and call me Larz the Snatcher.

Larz floated a yard above the lakebed, focusing on a pearl down below with his beady eyes and bulbous lips. His slick amber fins glistened in the wan streaks of light piercing from above, exposing his biscotti-colored scales glimmering with alternating hues.

It was him versus the pearl in the center of a coral pink flapping shell monster he called Shelly. The shell opened, releasing bubbles from its side, then it slammed shut.

Bam!

A wave of energy spread around Shelly from the impact. Larz flinched, flapping his puny fins. He took the moment to calm his nerves, soaking in the lake's tranquility. The shell opened. Miniature bubbles formed and popped one after the other.

The pearl sparkled in Larz's eyes. He believed it was the treasure that would gain his school's respect, and all he had to do was build the courage to face his fears.

The shell slammed shut once again with a thunderous sound, loud enough to make Larz twist. His stomach gurgled as he released a faint gas and shifted his rhombus-shaped body to look back at his friends just before turning away.

No! I can't look back. They'll laugh at me, call me a coward. I'm not a coward. Would a coward do this?

Larz busted out of his stagnant state and sliced his way through the translucent water. His eyes remained locked on the prize, fuming with the intent to succeed.

Open! Open! Open!

Larz sped as the force of the current brushed along his scales. The shell popped open as bubbles released. Larz broke through them with ease and lunged toward his prize. He opened his protrusible mouth as wide as he could and locked his lips on the pearl. He felt the spherical perfection as he pictured his friends in amazement with bulging eyes and dropped jaws.

The school of awe.

Shelly reacted to the pearl's disappearance, snapping its shell closed. The shell's impact grazed Larz's tail, breaking him out of his comical imagery of a plethora of googly eyes watching him in astonishment.

He cried, shooting the pearl into the crack of a large rock buried in the lakebed. As the torn piece of Larz's tail fin sank to Shelly chomping away.

Oh, no!

Larz floated upward, avoiding Shelly's ruthless attacks from down below. He sensed the beast dragging its body with the force of each shell drop, pounding onto the lakebed. Larz swiveled through the water, lunging face-first into the cracked rock, scraping his scales up against its gritty edges until light ceased to exist.

Larz forced himself deep enough to be squeezed between the rock, preventing him from moving any further. Through the darkness, he opened his mouth wide and slurped in the pearl's vicinity. He added more force each time until he felt a similar spherical perfection grace his lips.

A sudden flash of light sparked from deep within the rock, exposing a burrow.

Larz failed to release himself from the rock's clutches. The gritty edges held him in place long enough to witness a second spark of light flash down below. He tossed and turned furiously, grinding his scales against the rock and locking his fins. Jerking to his right, the pressure released, allowing him to pull himself out.

His eyes swelled with excitement as the school wiggled back and forth, continuing on their route. Larz took their movement as a sign of appreciation. With the pearl gripped onto his lips, Larz rotated his body several times in celebration.

I did it! Larz the snatcher is born! Snatchy! Oh, I like that better!

A slithering electric mutant emerged out of the crack in the rock, zig-zagging its way to Larz with a burst of light emanating from it.

The school ahead continued swimming away even after Larz came to a stop. His eyes aimed upward in confusion as the fiend drew near.

Where is everyone going? I'm not a coward... don't they see I'm not a coward?

The school picked up their pace, forcing Larz to race toward them.

The electric mutant pursued him, letting out another spark while opening its mouth wide, revealing sharp, devilish fangs.

Shelly trudged along the lakebed, opening underneath the mutant.

The slithering fiend stopped and looked down inside the open shell, spotting an oval gooey substance. The fangs penetrated the goo and ripped it out of Shelly's core. The shell gradually sealed as the fiend chowed down on the blubbery delight then snaked back to where it came from.

Larz made his way toward the school with a sense of accomplishment, completely unaware of Shelly's fate.

Why are they all freaking out? I got the pearl. Shelly had nothing on me. I'm Snatchy!

Larz turned back out of pure curiosity as a faint vapor seeped out of Shelly, but all he witnessed was Shelly's color drain from a rich coral pink to an ashen gray. Without a second thought, Larz spat the pearl out and watched it sink to the lakebed. He flapped his fins and sprinted toward his school while fighting off the throbbing pain down his spine.

You see! I told you I could do it! From this moment forth, my name is Snatchy!

~~~~~

Larz glided through the azure water, sweeping his way into formation. He waded between the shoalers as they all swam in unison. Larz swelled with joy but couldn't understand why no one wanted to celebrate with him.

The school drifted together toward their next venture for edibles.

His master plan to gain their respect had failed.

He plotted a second strategy by envisioning himself leading the enormous school to a cavern of tiny, colorful zooplanktons. His stomach grumbled at the savory image in his mind. Larz believed the feast would be the ultimate key to his friends' hearts.

Brief images of praise and glory formed right until he felt his tail smacked up against a fellow shoaler's head. An excruciating pain sprung from his wounded tail following the impact. Larz grimaced as he spun around, breaking formation, and attempted to apologize.

*Oh my... Jimmy, are you alright?*

Jimmy's brown scaled body twitched as his left eye struggled to open from the blow.

Larz thrust toward him, but Jimmy instinctively lunged himself ahead of the group.

The school took his urgency as a sign of danger and cut through the water with intent.

Larz's jaw dropped as he watched the school flee in panic.

He sliced through the thick water, but a resounding jolt of pain shot from his tail once again. Larz yelled for their attention, but it only resulted in bubbles spewing. Realization came over him and he stopped in shame. His desperation would never work because it never did, though it didn't prevent him from watching his former school of familiars drift into the dark depths of the lake while dropping his lower lip.

This was how the story always played out for Larz. No one ever responded. Larz's life wasn't based on communication. It was the life of one school to another. Names were irrelevant. He considered it humorous because it helped him get through the day.

So, it didn't matter that yesterday his name was Lumpy. The day before that, Carl, the day before that, Rancher, and the list went on. Today, Larz chose a new name... Snatchy, but in his heart he always had a soft spot for the name Larz. It was an acronym standing for Lenny,

Arnie, Ruckus, and Zane. They were part of his first group of shoalers, which he named quite some time ago. Though his memory of them had grown vague, he subconsciously engraved their names in his mind.

Larz was alone once again without family or friends. He stared into the abyss as his stomach grumbled. His dorsal fin slumped, longing to fit in and desiring to understand why he was so different.

His fondest family memory was coursing through the water with a school large enough that could mimic the size of a whale. They stood together with no form of communication besides telepathy and gestures, which was a formality Larz didn't comprehend. So when his first school scavenged for enough food to disperse, he didn't make it back in time. The leaders had no clue, because to them, he was just another number. One of the thousands amongst the school. Poor Larz didn't stand a chance.

An opal hovered past him, waving its frail, olive-green arms and legs. Noticing Larz gawking at him, the opal defensively absorbed its body into its impenetrable oval brown shell with black streaks.

Larz frowned as yet another potential friend descended into the depths of the lake, evading him like the plague. Not even an opal wanted to stick around. That was a new low for Larz, considering they were the slowest species around.

Every time he disbanded from a school, chagrin burned from the inside with such intensity it became hard to accept moving on. So, the only solution through his eyes was to pretend.

As he waited for a sign of a school to draw near him, he continued scanning the surrounding area. His wound throbbed as a constant reminder. He knew swimming on was going to be a struggle regardless, but it couldn't stop him. His life depended on schools for survival.

The apprehension came over him with the thought of predators spotting him aimlessly floating about. His fins flapped out and froze in place. His body shivered as he waded to the left. There was nothing in sight besides floating reeds, woodchips, and sediment.

The soft light penetrating the gleaming surface of the lake dimmed as Larz floated about with caution. He was no rookie to the murky feeling, but it always developed a certain amount of anxiety. Being a loner meant dealing with anxiety and acclimating.

At night, Larz's neuromast would kick in. It allowed him to feel his surroundings. He always loved the sensation of being protected by his imaginary force field. He'd often joke about daring anyone to come his way, but today was different. Larz didn't possess the speed to flee on his own. With inconsistent and jittery movements, he feared predators would consider

it a sign of weakness. He had to calm himself. Larz flapped his fins steadily and took in the smooth fresh water through his gills.

*I miss Lenny, Arnie, and Ruckus. They probably miss me too. What if they've been searching for me this whole time? Maybe this entire world is a gigantic circle and I'm going further and further away?*

Larz turned around, and even though he could only sense his surroundings, he pretended to see a light. Larz drifted toward it as excitement graced his face. The blinding light grew wider with a bleach white core. Out of the light sprung a small army of hobblers representing the same color scales as Larz. They strode in unison, as Larz imagined them muttering, "Snatchy!"

*Lenny! Arnie! Ruckus! Oh, I missed you all! Did you see me snatch that pearl!? I was a magifican! Just like Zane! But Zane has nothing on me. See!*

Larz rotated, waving his tail back and forth, ignoring the pain. The school drifted by without acknowledging him at all, but it didn't faze Larz as he continued to tell his story.

*I have a scar to prove it! I'm a magifican! See! See!*

The school continued as Larz joined the formation. Others in the school spotted him and created a small gap. He hopped right in, synchronizing with them.

~~~~~

Larz traveled, scouring the lake with his new school. As his vision cleared and his senses revealed the variety amongst the shoal, he wasn't even fazed. His moment of relief had overcome all forms of logic. He swam joyously amongst the group of strangers at a pace he was ecstatic about.

This was the first school that nonchalantly coasted through the water. They were composed of various scales, sizes, and colors. One of the fellow members was a mauve tone with a brown trimmed outline. Larz gravitated to the female companion and called her Mindy. As Larz went by scouting, his stomach grumbled once again.

This school was unique, but their pace would soon mean grave danger without nutrition. Larz thrust toward the front of the school, breaking synchronization. He hoped it would have the same effect Jimmy caused when he bolted.

Larz fought the pain and pushed himself to the very front of the assembly. There, he met with the largest of the variety of scales, a meaty charcoal gray behemoth. He was twice the size of Larz and moved with half the pace. Slow and steady was a nice concept to Larz from time to time but not when his belly came roaring. His effort had little to no effect on the school; they had just waltzed their way from point A to point B.

He grew impatient until he witnessed a slick brown slithering Swiggly Wiggly penetrating the surface above.

It floated, squirming back and forth.

Larz's eyes scintillated with joy. He turned to the behemoth to his right and chuckled, knowing he would be no competition for Snatchy.

A Swiggly Wiggly! Oh! Lenny, Arnie, Ruckus! It's a Swiggly Wiggly! What? You think I'm a coward! Why would you say that, Zane? I'll show you!

The school paid no attention to the floating Swiggly Wiggly that showed no sign of sinking. It appeared like a gift from the sacred above that called for Larz.

The Swiggly Wiggly tossed and turned from the impact of the current. Its thick juicy gummy layers of auburn flesh swayed as an aura of glistening light surrounded it.

Larz sprung to the defenseless meal.

I'm not a coward! You all think I'm a coward! Slow Snatchy can't get himself his own Swiggly Wiggly! Well, I'll show you all! That's my Swiggly Wiggly!

The comments toward his newfound school did not affect them at all, and his mental hunger neglected to even debate it.

Larz pursued his prey, fighting the throbbing pain generating from his tail. His eyes were locked in on what would be his first Swiggly Wiggly.

The meal swayed with the current until a sudden jolt rose it closer to the surface.

Larz's eyes widened as he figured his time was depleting.

No! That's my Swiggly Wiggly!

Larz diced through the murky water, reaching a speed he couldn't even fathom. A trail of billowing white foam developed behind him as he opened his mouth wide. The Swiggly Wiggly showed little to no signs of life and didn't even make a peep as Larz swallowed the gummy delight whole.

As elation overcame Larz, so did the most agonizing pain he had ever experienced. Crimson liquid spewed from his mouth, merging with the azure essence of the water. Larz panicked as he tasted the sweet, chewy core of the Swiggly Wiggly accompanied by the metallic taste of blood. Larz squealed in pain, a sound he had never known he could make. His body flapped back and forth with the urgency of the damned.

The piercing jolt of pain intensified as he attempted to pull away. If tears could be shed, he would've overflowed the lake. The more ruthless he became, the redder his aura grew. Larz shouted for help in agony as the surface above came closer and closer.

Lenny! Arnie! Help! Oh, please! I'm sorry... I know I wasn't a great friend. I know I never fit in. I couldn't keep up. I didn't want to. I'm sorry! Ruckus please! Help me! I don't want this. I don't want this! Zane! Zane! I'm a coward. I'm a coward! Zane!

Larz's desperation was fruitless as the school below vanished into the abyss. When Larz's rhombus body emerged out of his environment, asphyxiation took the reins. His lustering scales dripped with the remains of the lake, emptying from his core. Inhaling was inefficient and struck him with shards of pain, quadrupling the effects of Shelly's wound. The agony developed into a desperation that depleted his remaining energy within mere seconds.

He witnessed a world unlike any other. A tall unreachable surface high above with the resemblance of the azure lake's complexion surrounded by an array of soft puffy alabaster edibles, and an orb of scintillating gold watching its colorful companions.

Larz embraced the beauty above as his scales dried and his throat congealed with crimson ooze. In his final moments, he felt an unfamiliar surface, one that was indestructible, resembling the brownness of the Swiggly Wiggly and with jagged edges on his feeble physique. He pattered the surface as an irrevocable act of desperation, but it had little to no effect.

An enormous olive-skinned creature with lanky arms, thick claws, and five radials attached to them, forced itself into Larz's mouth and yanked out a long-hooked needle. The needle dropped onto the hardened surface, clanging into Larz's ear.

Though fear had overwhelmed Larz, he continued to fight, walloping onto the ground with all of his strength.

The claws opened wide, revealing a bleached center with a countless amount of creases throughout. The breadth of the claw extended over Larz with the weight of the world, paralyzing him. Within seconds, Larz retired his will to fight.

~~~~~

"There you go, boy!" an overzealous, broad-shouldered man with a thick scruffy beard cheered. He patted his son on the back, lurching him forward.

The young student turned to his mentor with a pleasant grin as he scooped up the biscotti-colored carp off the surface of the boat.

His elated father joked, "Tonight, Carpe Di Yum!" The boy chuckled, tossing the carp into their blue bucket, filled to the brim with fish.

The ecstatic father couldn't seem to wipe the smile off his face as he tipped his beige bucket hat at the young apprentice. "I remember my first catch. Not nearly as big as yours, but it was one hell of a feeling. Whoa!"

The boy's youthful face perked up as his identical hat shaded his eyes.



The father stomped rhythmically onto the bottom boards of the dinghy, making his boy chuckle. "Do you feel that?"

The boy emulated him with excitement coursing through him as the vibration almost took the hat off his head.

The father continued stomping and then tilted his head back with a vacuuming inhale, sniffing the aroma of the lake. "Do you smell that?"

They sniffed away at the putrid scent of scales drying to their misfortune.

"You're a fisherman, my boy!" The father leaned forward, pressed his palm up against the boy's head, and rubbed vigorously in celebration.

The boy swelled with enjoyment, producing a laugh loud enough to reverberate throughout the lake.

The father took a seat on the boat while reaching for a small, red and white cooler. He flicked open the top and snatched a can of orange soda. The tab popped open, followed by the refreshing sound of fizzle as a light overflow of orange foam spilled out.

The boy jumped for joy, rocking the boat from side to side with a smile stapled to his face. He received his reward as his father grabbed his own favorite lite beer.

The boy sipped at the overflowing foam as his father waved his finger from side to side, "No, no, remember."

The startled son froze as his father tapped the bottom of the orange soda can, insinuating his child should raise the can. He followed suit as the sound of a second pop and fizzle sang.

The father thrust his can up against his boy's, clashing the beverages together with enough force to erupt potable rain. "Cheers!"

The boy arched his head back while resting the lip of the can into his mouth. The sugar and fizzle gulped down his throat without pause.

The father watched his boy draining the fluid with ease until he came to a halt.

The boy reacted by forcing the can from his lips and grasping his throat.

The father chuckled, sipping away at his golden hops as his boy felt the immediate carbonation burn. "Who taught you to drink like an animal? Pace yourself, boy."

The misty-eyed boy, remained absorbing the sting in his throat with a simultaneous cough and chuckle.

The father took the time from his son's brief struggle to dock the boat, paddling the dinghy to the shore.

By the time the boy recovered, he had already taken several more sips and was pondering whether he would be allowed to have a second.

His father caught the curious look in his son's eye and denied with a vigorous shake of the head.

The boy took his last sips while gazing over at his father with a furrowed brow and dejected eyes.

His father ignored the desperate attempt as the hull of the dinghy scraped onto the dirt shore.

Once they came to a full stop, the father pulled out his stainless steel fillet knife enclosed in its plastic sheath. "Today's the day you become a man, boy. We are going to gut those bad boys and have ourselves a feast. What do you think about that, boy?"

The boy jumped with excitement, flinging the empty can out of his hands and onto the vibrant bed of grass several feet away. He hooted with a simultaneous burp that widened his eyes in shock. After a brief pause, they both chortled. The boy had always wanted to use his father's knife for just about anything. If he knew all he had to do was catch a fish, he would've attempted it months ago.

He was moments away from scaling his first fish at only eight years old.

His father flipped the sheathed blade onto his palm and extended the handle toward his son, gripping the covered blade portion with a grin wider than a watermelon slice. As his son reached for it, the father pulled away.

The boy responded with a pouty look on his face and drooping eyes.

The father squinted his eyes and deepened his voice, imitating a sergeant, as he explained, "This is not a toy. You got that?"

The boy nodded.

His father used the handle of the blade to point toward the can his son had littered. "Now, pick that can up. We aren't slobs."

Obedying his father's command, the boy hopped off the boat and collected the empty can.

His father carried a thick wooden cutting board with the blue bucket toward a nearby flat top rock. He placed the sheathed knife to the side of the rock.

The boy grabbed hold of his first catch and plopped it down onto the board. With an endearing smile lifting his youthful cheeks, the boy accepted his father's knife.

The moment he gripped the polymer handle, he felt an impulse of power surge through him.

His father motioned where and how to cut the carp. He placed his left palm over the carp's head and imitated the motion of the blade with his right, pressing his fingers up against one another, crossing the rhombus body from gill to tail.

The boy took a deep breath, held down the carp's head, and inserted the blade into the gill.

An undulating faint vapor sprung from the carp's core, masked by a sweet aromatic scent followed by putrid fish odor.

The boy covered his nose with his forearm and forced the blade down the carp's belly in a drawing motion as the scales lost the essence of their altering hues. The boy grinned at the lifeless meal, but the carp's eye never lost focus of its predator.

~~~~~

Why are those opals so big and intimidating? This doesn't make any sense.

Larz reacted with a puzzled thought to the still image pinned up against a sapphire painted wall. The image showed four enlarged masculine opals from head to toe sporting different colored bandanas: red, blue, purple, and orange. The opals' mysterious transformation baffled Larz. They now appeared to have arms and legs extending out two to three feet from their shells and claws large enough to hold weapons.

The blue one crossed two shiny metallic rods against one another. The red one had two short spears gripped firmly with a mean look in his eyes. The orange one laughed as he gripped two handles chained to one another, and the purple one held a long wooden pole.

Larz failed to grasp the reality he had been witnessing and soon pondered why the opals weren't moving.

"Those are The Ninja Turtles," a welcoming silvery voice interrupted Larz's concentration.

Larz was startled, but incapable of maneuvering. His conscience remained alert, but his senses seemed to have vanished.

The voice spoke a second time, "Leonardo is my favorite! He's the blue one." A long stick-like figure came into focus with a lanky claw and four radials curled inward. The fifth one aimed at the large blue bandana-wearing opal.

Leonardo? Ninja Turtles?

The friendly voice chuckled as Larz's surroundings altered.

Larz soon realized he was no longer in the water, despite the sapphire walls and mutated opals. He saw the claws-not one, but two-grab hold of a fluffy imitation of the blue opal... Leonardo. He had vibrant green skin, two handles for the metallic rods on his back, and a friendly smile pasted onto his face.

The voice explained, "See, Leonardo!" The claws motioned both of Leonardo's arms up and down then bobbed his head back and forth, while the voice altered into a raspier tone, "I'm Leonardo. I slice and dice the baddies. Ya, ha, wa!" The voice broke character and started chortling.

Leonardo looks cool! Do you think Leonardo and I can be friends?

"You and Leo? Of course!"

The ardent response built an instinctual comfort within Larz. He didn't understand where or when he was, but the charming voice and exuberant nature appeared promising.

The silvery voice continued, "Leonardo and I are best friends. We go everywhere together."

The image lowered, facing downward at a lakebed of yarn, which was accompanied with an overwhelming sorrow.

The tone of the silvery voice saddened, "Except for today... Daddy didn't want me to bring Leo to the boat."

The sensation Larz felt corresponded with the disheartened tone from the friendly voice. It was an emotion he recognized all too well but couldn't recall why. The history of his previous life had been dwindling unexpectedly. He remembered living underwater, swimming, and hunting for pebbles of food protruding out of the lakebed. Then, it all went blank.

The voice peaked, "I'm sad because Leo didn't get to see me catch my first fish, and now I think he's mad at me. It wasn't my fault."

Larz didn't understand the context of the story very much, but he was familiar with the feeling. He knew how important it was to share a story with a friend, and how rewarding it could make someone feel. So he diverted to his old way.

I was there. I saw you catch your first fish. You were amazing! Best fish catcher I've ever seen!

The voice chortled once again, as the chagrin in his heart turned to a cooling sensation that Larz shared. The voice spoke enthusiastically, "You were there! So you saw me reel her in. I was like, 'You're mine, baby!'"

The arms and claws motioned something unfamiliar to Larz, but he felt at ease experiencing it. The elated voice exclaimed, "And you saw me use the Tanto Knife. I was a natural! Wasn't I?"

It's like you were born to do it. Slice and Dice!

The voice laughed as it chanted, "Yeah. Slice and dice!"

Larz watched the claws swing back and forth as the two shared identical emotions of warmth and endearment. He didn't understand what had happened to his old self, but for this very moment, it didn't matter.

The voice was ecstatic as they pranced around the room that Larz had been experiencing for the first time. He saw images high on the wall with more lanky figures with various complexions. One wore a blue top with yellow buttons pinned to the cotton fabric, fat white covered claws, and a bright red cap with an "M" in the center. His smile was so inviting, Larz couldn't wait to hear more about him.

The voice became silent as Larz's vision flew back and focused on the sapphire ceiling. Their bodies landed on a soft cushion as an even fluffier cushion rested on the back of their head.

The image locked onto the ceiling right before the voice calmly asked, "So... what's your name?"

You can call me Larz.

"Nice to meet you, Larz. My friends call me Ralphy." The voice cleared its throat and let out an innocent cough before muttering, "Can I ask you something?"

Of course, anything.

"Will you be my friend?"

Larz dug deep into his emotional thought process as he remained locked out of the reaction the old him would've given.

Long concentrated breaths ensued as the voice's silence lingered.

A sense of loneliness scudded through the air, gracing Larz with a familiar sentiment. If only all those times before could come to fruition, he would know how gratifying his next words would've been.

Yes. I'll be your friend.

Underwater