

CHAPTER FOUR

“First Impressions”

Tosh stared up in silence at the yellow electric cat pokemon—well, the *other* yellow electric cat—still processing what had just happened. The pokemon in question, on the other hand, was not so reserved, jumping up and down in excitement and elation, repeating the same phrase.

“Another me! Another me! I finally found another me!” Zeraora thrust his paws in the air in joy, then leapt at Tosh, grabbing him by the shoulders, his bright blue eyes practically sparkling. “Tell me everything! Who are you? Where'd you come from? Are there more of us somewhere?”

Finally, Tosh managed to hold up a single paw to try and calm down his rescuer. “Hey, one question at a time, please; I've had a really, really, really, *really* difficult day.”

“Heh, sorry,” chuckled Zeraora; “I'm just so happy. I've been alone for so long. To start with... what's your name? Or have you not earned one?”

Tosh tilted his head. “I'm... I'm Tosh. And what do you mean, 'earn one'?”

A pause came over Zeraora, who tensed up a bit. “That name sounds... human.” The word came out with a very *bitter* tone, as if just saying it left a bad taste in his mouth. “I guess that answers where you're from. You were a prisoner of humans, right? Or a 'pet', as they like to call it...”

“Actually—” Tosh started before stopping himself. *He clearly doesn't like humans, so maybe I ought to leave out the whole thing about having been one.* “...Yeah, I was a pet. I escaped along with another of us—”

Zeraora's eyes widened. “There's more?”

“There... there's only one more that I know of, aside from you. He got captured while we were escaping... that was just this morning. I've been running from the same humans all day.”

The bitterness on Zeraora's face turned immediately to sympathy. “...I'm sorry. I can't imagine how scary that must've been, especially for someone who's never had the chance to be a *real* pokemon. But hey, you both escaped once—maybe your friend could escape again and get away next time, and join us here!”

Tosh nodded; as much as he was playing along with his host's assumptions, he felt a flicker of hope that he might see Casey again at some point. “Thanks. Changing the subject back... what's this about names?”

“Oh yeah,” replied, Zeraora. “I forgot! Okay, now wild pokemon don't really start OUT with names; we just kinda... know each other from sight. Getting a name is the first sign that you're fully-grown; sometimes it's a description, sometimes it's based on something you've done, things like that. But you can't give yourself a name; someone else has to give one TO you. For example, that red jerk I saved you from goes by 'Scarface', for obvious reasons. I didn't give him the scars—well, not the ones on his face. He got them by being in tons of fights with other pokemon. He wears those scars like a point of pride, to show off just how experienced a fighter he is. Eventually that just became his name.”

“So, what's YOUR name?”

Zeraora paused, his expression falling as he averted his eyes in shame. “I... I haven't got one. Or if I ever had one, I don't remember what it was, and neither does anyone else.” Looking up towards a mountainside in the distance, he continued; “Years and years and years ago, I just... woke up, not remembering anything. I was on the side of that mountain there and lightning hit me. I mean, ordinarily, lightning isn't bad for us, but when it triggered the mountain to go 'boom'... anything that might have been before that is a big blank. As far as I know—as far as ANYONE knows—I was born that day, because no one has ever seen anyone else like me. So no one ever had a reason to give me a name, seeing as I'm the only one.” He turned to Tosh with a smile. “But now I'm *not* the only one. So maybe we can earn our names together, eventually; you can get yours to be a real pokemon instead of a pet, and I'll get mine to make up for never having one!”

Tosh thought about this, and smiled. He still had no intention of *truly* “going native”, but it was hard to turn down such an arrangement when it obviously meant so much to Zeraora. “Good idea. I'm game. But... for now, do you mind if I give you kind of a 'temporary name'? Until you earn the real thing?”

Once again, Zeraora's face lit up with joy. “Really?! You'd do that? What'll it be?”

“Hmm... for now, how about just 'Z'?”

“Z...” Zeraora muttered, looking down in thought; a few seconds later, he looked back up at Tosh and smiled. “Z... my name is Z.” The smile grew wider still, and soon he was leaping around again, thrusting his paws in the air. “Z! Z! Z! My name is Z!” Finally, he calmed down, though his grin remained as he held out a paw. “Nice to meet you, Tosh! I'm Z! Heheh! Come on, I'll show you where I live!”

Tosh smiled back, happy that Z liked the name—but a bit confused by the last sentence. “You have a home aside from the forest?”

“Well, the forest IS the home, but I have a den for shelter! Follow me!”

With that, Z took off in a sprint, forcing Tosh to follow. *At least I won't be alone out here, either...*

I smile and purr; Owner is scratching my head as we enter the room and Owner sits down in the chair. Three other humans enter, though I don't like two of them for some reason; my head feels funny and not in a good way when I see them, like they did something bad, so I hiss at them for a second...

“Zero-Two.”

I stare up at Owner right away, and stop hissing. I could never hiss when looking at Owner, who then looks at the bad humans and nods.

“Continue with your report.”

“Well,” One of the two bad humans says, “we've managed to gather a number of new subjects for testing, as requested. Not as many as we'd hoped; chasing Abrams and his friend put eyes on us.”

I flinch at one word in that sentence... 'Abrams'.... it feels like I've heard that name before. Yes, Abrams was a human, like I used to be before I got better, then I met Owner and now everything is great because I'm a good pokemon for Owner. But Abrams ran from the two bad humans and didn't get to meet Owner and be good like me. These two humans, they messed it up, that must be why I don't like them! They could have brought Abrams here so he could learn to be good for Owner too, but they were bad! Bad! I start to hiss again.

“Zero-Two.” Owner says sharply before turning back to the bad humans. “Why did you skip straight to fighting when you encountered them? In uniform, no less! You spooked them into running when you could've tricked them into coming of their own free will. Instead, you caused a scene that could have exposed us all.”

I stare up at Owner again and stop hissing. I'm so happy Owner is here. Owner is best human.

The second bad human looks at the floor. “Sorry, Director. We didn't expect them to be as effective with their new bodies so soon. Our mistake. It won't happen again.”

“It had better not,” Owner said. “In any case, you still caught ONE, and several more *potential* subjects after that. Besides the failure with Abrams, you've both been efficient enough to have earned a second chance.” Owner turns to the not-bad human; he's wearing a long white coat. “How many test subjects do we have right now?”

“Twenty, sir,” the not-bad human says; “Including the eleven we had been prepping for testing before we lost SN5.”

Owner pauses for a bit then responds. “How long will it take you to recreate SN5 at this rate?”

“Well, now that we have blood samples from a successful transformation, the process *should* be smoother, but frankly, that just isn't enough. The notes from the tests that created SN5 don't match up with our attempts to recreate the process, so the fact that SN5 works is likely due to an accident or mistake that we didn't notice at the time. And seeing as the vials that were spilled on Abrams was all we had of SN5, we really have nothing to go on except whatever clues we can get from Abrams's friend. And that may not be enough, considering that the security footage shows that only Abrams was directly exposed.”

One of the bad humans looks at me, then backs away a bit—I like that. Get back, bad human—then looks at one of the not-bad humans with fear in his eyes. “Wait, how sure are you that it isn't contagious?”

“If it *were* contagious,” Owner says, “Half the city would be Zeraora now, along with all of us in this room. Anything Abrams touched on his way out, the air he breathed, all of it would have been contaminated and we wouldn't have had any time to clean before someone else got hit and turned.”

The not-bad human nods. “Indeed, Director. The mechanism of transmission must be something less obvious, less conventional.”

Owner pauses again, then points to the bad humans. “WD, you're both dismissed from subject acquisition for the time being; we don't need the heat, and we have enough for testing now. Keep

looking for Abrams, but try and be more subtle about it from now on.” Owner nods to the not-bad human. “You, go and tell the other techs to set up the danger room and prep one of the subjects. Perhaps we don't need SN5 itself to make things happen, at least for now.” Owner looks down at me. “What do you say, Zero-Two? Want to help out?”

I stare up at Owner immediately on hearing my name, and nod happily. Owner rewards me by scratching my head again and I start purring again.

I don't really understand much of what's going on. But then again, all I have to do is what I'm told, and not think, and Owner will take care of the rest.

After a trip through the forest and over a small river (easily crossed via a series of rocks sticking out of the slow-moving water), Z led Tosh along a low cliffside until a hole appeared in the wall of dirt and rock. “Well, here we are!” Z said, waving his paw dramatically.

The hole was small—just big enough for two of them to enter through at the same time, if they crawled on fours. The roots of a tree crept over the edge of the cliff, creating a sort of natural doorframe as they extended on either side of the hole. Crawling in after Z, Tosh noticed that the interior was dug down a bit lower than the entrance, allowing them to stand while inside; a large pillar of rock and dirt dominated the center of the entryway, bits of root poking out that indicated the aforementioned tree being directly above. Ducking around the pillar, Tosh found the rest of the den surprisingly large, with more than enough room for ten or so pokemon of their size to sit together comfortably. The space was broken up a few times by several more dirt pillars, all carefully dug around to provide the maximum amount of space with the least sacrifices to stability.

“I dug it out myself,” said Z with pride; “It's taken me a long time—you should've seen how much smaller it was just a year ago—and I might even do more, just for fun.”

Tosh continued to look around the single large chamber; on the far right side from the entrance was a pile of grass and leaves on a slightly raised portion of earth, creating a soft surface—obviously bedding. On the left, there was a small pool of water bubbling up from a hole in the ground that Z explained was some sort of natural spring he'd found by accident while digging. At the very back of the chamber was a pile of berries, and in the center of the room, near the bedding, were several assorted pebbles and stones of various shapes and sizes, some of which had images of pokemon scratched into them by claw. Z eagerly showed them off as toys he'd carved to help stave off boredom. Throughout the tour, Tosh's host retained his excited demeanor, which was interrupted by the audible growling of Tosh's stomach.

“Heh, sorry, I haven't eaten all day...”

“I can fix that!” Z smiled warmly and moved over to the food pile, picking up two of the larger-sized berries and handing one to Tosh. “Here, eat up. You must be *starving*.”

Biting into the berry after brief hesitation, Tosh found himself taken aback by the flavor; it was juicy, juicy beyond compare, and had a mix of sweetness and tang that practically made his tongue light up in joy. It wasn't long before he was eagerly scarfing it down, something that elicited a chuckle from Z.

“Wow, you really *were* hungry. Did the humans never feed you berries even once?”

“No,” replied Tosh, gulping down a chunk of the berry and wiping the juices off his mouth with the back of his paw; “not like this, anyway. I really only ate human food. Prepared stuff.”

Z snorted in offense. “Man, you've been *deprived*. Stupid humans. They ruin all the best food; everything's better fresh.”

“I've definitely never had anything that tasted this good,” Tosh said; it wasn't even a lie. No human food had ever had this level of flavor, as far as he'd experienced. “Thanks for sharing it... *Hwwaaaaaa!*” A long yawn escaped Tosh's lips, and he felt himself stretching his entire body involuntarily.

Z approached and put a paw on his shoulder, the other one gesturing towards the bedding. “Hey, you've had a long, scary day. Go ahead and get some sleep while I finish eating. We can talk more in the morning.”

“Are you sure it's okay? I mean, this is your home—”

“And now it's yours, too.”

Tosh didn't quite know what to say to that, and in any event was too tired to think of anything more than a grateful nod as he walked over to the pile of leaves and grass; there was no blanket—obviously—but he supposed his fur was enough, and besides, it all looked plenty soft. Lying down and curling up, Tosh found himself quickly succumbing to sleep.

My home, too, huh? I guess it could be worse...