

Just be yourself

It was peaceful and quiet today in Lostlorn Forest, the sun starting to shine through the overgrowth as pokemon began to stir. You were just going for a morning stroll along the path, minding your own business as you relaxed and inhaled the fresh air, walking off the drowsiness in your mind. It was nice, being able to just take the time to do nothing but get some exercise and watch all the pokemon just doing their thing, waking up, picking berries from the many trees and bushes in the forest. So calm and peaceful.

It was surprising then to come across another person while walking. Almost nobody came out at this time of day... How odd. They just appeared to be standing there, motionlessly, looking out through the trees at something unknown, back turned to you, their face obscured by their long green hair. As you contemplated what you should do, a breeze blew past, rustling some leaves. The figure turned towards the source of the sound, and then to you. His face was that of a man, soft and gentle in its expression, but his eyes seemed to stare straight through you, a slight shiver running down your spine. There's a moment of pause before he beckons you over.

After a moment of hesitation, and despite your instincts telling you this was a bad idea, you reluctantly approached the man. "It's a beautiful day, wouldn't you say? Places like this, untouched by humans, they've become a rarity. Where pokemon are free and can be themselves, without needing to worry about trainers trying to harm or catch them" He would say, gesturing to the forest around him, smiling softly. "Is that why you like it here so much?"

"What are you talking about? I just-" before you could voice a protest, a finger would find it's way onto your lips, silencing you as the man continued to speak

"You don't need to hide away anymore. You're safe here, okay? I won't hurt you" He would say with a gentle voice, calmly taking your hand into his "You can be yourself, finally" Your hand would tingle as he held it, as before your eyes you'd watch your hand shimmer, shifting like mist in the wind, darkening as your fingers became red and claw-like. While you were stunned, staring at your transformed hand, he had already taken ahold of your other, gently lifting it up as this time you could see the dark fur spread across it, your fingers fusing together into a trio of hard claws. It felt... strange. You knew you should be freaking out. I mean, your hands just became paws! But... you didn't. You just felt... confused?

You weakly attempted to pull your hand free as he let go, letting you examine your new clawed appendages, watching your talons move as you tried to wiggle your fingers. They were real, it wasn't a trick? Then... What was going on? Despite everything, the man's expression still didn't change, but his eyes contained a glimmer of... pity? Why?

"You must be so afraid and confused. How long had you been hiding under that illusion? Pretending to be a human... I will help you. You don't need to be afraid... we can do this slowly... let your true form show itself, piece by piece" Despite how much you still wanted to run, his words... Calmed you, somewhat. They felt... genuine. You'd flinch slightly at his touch, but as he slowly ran his hand up your arm you couldn't help but just stand there and watch, watching and feeling the fur spread up, brushing against the underside of your shirt.

"Pretending? I'm not pretending! I... I am human, right? This is just some kind of trick!" You'd exclaim, backing up. A strong part of you wanted to run away, screaming danger. You couldn't stay here! This was wrong! People don't just turn into Pokemon...! but people can't just magically turn someone into a pokemon either... What if he was telling the truth? Had you really been lying to yourself all this time? You weren't... actually a pokemon, were you?

Your thoughts would be broken as you felt the man softly pet your head, stroking your hair. You could feel it thicken and lengthen, pooling down past your shoulders, but all you could focus on was their gentle touch, feeling your stress ebb, fear easing slightly as your breathing slowed back down to normal. "Don't be scared... please. Nobody here wants to harm you. My only intention was to try and help. Even if you aren't human, it doesn't change who you are deep down, does it? Wouldn't it be worse to keep lying to yourself? I don't want to see you hurting like this."

He'd placed his hand on your cheek as he continued to speak. You could feel your face tingle slightly as he did so, colourful markings appearing around your eyes and mouth as he smiled, your concerns seeming to lessen as he did so. "My Friend... Remember what I said? You're safe now. No more having to pretend to be human in order to protect yourself. No more hiding away behind your illusions. You can be yourself."

“You don’t need to trick others, pretend to be something, someone you’re not, for companionship. I will be your friend. We all will. You don’t have to be alone anymore” He’d pet your head again, coaxing your ears as they became pointed and moved to the top of your head, becoming covered in short grey fur, even as he gave them a gentle scratch. It felt so nice, right even. You couldn’t sense any malice in his actions, somehow, you just knew, he genuinely wanted to be friends with you, even if you weren’t a human. You felt warm inside, why did... Why did it make you feel so happy? This was just some kind of trick, right?

“We...?” You’d manage to say as your mouth began to slowly push out into a pointed snout only to notice your surroundings. There were Pokemon. While the two of you had been talking, a small crowd of Pokemon had gathered around you. You’d never seen this before. Wild Pokemon almost never approached humans, and yet... here they were.

The Man would nod slowly, his warm and kind expression making it hard for you to voice any concerns “You’re in good company. Nobody here will judge you, force you to hide behind a mask. You won’t have to pretend to be somebody, something you’re not, ever again... You can be free to be yourself. But let’s take things slowly, everything will come back to you in time.”

Taking your paw once more, he’d lead you deeper into the forest, over to a nearby rock, the other pokemon following the two of you... ‘Other’ Pokemon? You weren’t... actually starting to believe his words, right? But you just... couldn’t find any reason why he would lie to you.

“Just sit down and take deep breaths. Let it all out” again, you couldn’t help but feel inclined to listen, and just relax. Something about his voice, his presence, made you feel at ease. Slowly, you’d take deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

“There you go. Just keep doing those breathing exercises. Take your time. Relax. Focus on the world around you. The world you deserve. Peaceful, Calm. Welcoming. Let it all soak in, undoing all those chains humanity shackled you with. No more pretending. No more fear. Safe to let the mask come off”

Their words made you feel fuzzy, and not just because of the soft grey fur starting to form across your chest and back. No. You found yourself being drawn into their words, eyes closing as you felt your awareness expand outwards. It was like your senses had suddenly exploded. You could hear the rustling of the leaves, the wind in the trees, the crunching of grass and dirt underfoot, as the pokemon you saw before slowly approached. You knew it was them, the footsteps were too small, too light. Your ears could even pick up the silent whispers between them, curious, yet cautious. Even though you couldn't understand their words, you could understand their meaning.

Your shirt would vanish into the spreading fur as your- the person slowly rubbed your back, massaging the fur, coaxing it out, as more and more of your stress, the worry in your mind, the weights on your back, started to come loose, as newfound peace and serenity welled up from within your soul, manifesting as a swaft of long dark fur that seemed to wrap around your neck and chest, like a cosy scarf, and yet, it was as light as air. It felt... right. And it was real. There was no way to fake the feeling of the breeze against it, and certainly not the gentle fingers combing it out. "You're doing wonderfully. Does it feel good? To finally let your true self out? To start to let go of those bindings those humans chained you back with? It must feel strange, with how long you've spent pretending to be one of them, to finally experience the world how you're supposed to."

You'd give a slow nod. You did feel good, really good. Your body felt lighter, more agile, in no small part due to your shifting form, mass vanishing from your torso while muscle grew and condensed, giving you a deceptively more sleek and streamlined appearance, hiding newfound power and agility. You could already see yourself dashing through the forest on clawed feet, flying from tree to tree. Keen eyes able to spot anything around you, Ears able to pick up even the quietest sound, nose able to sniff out any target. Your ebony fur allowing you to blend into the shadows to stalk your prey. A majestic Zoroark... a protector of the forest, wait... is that what you were becoming? A Zoroark... for some reason, you didn't feel fear, or confusion, only... pride?

You could feel your head slowly reshape, face slowly extending, shifting into a point while teeth sharpened, slowly growing closer to the vision in your mind. It wouldn't take too long until it was impossible to distinguish the two, as new scents and smells became known to you, not just imagined, actual scents, you could smell the sweet scent of the flowers around the glade, the grass, even the individual scents of all the pokemon gathering around you.

You'd finally reopen your eyes to find the world so much brighter and vibrant, and everything so much... clearer and precise, the forest seemed... almost magical now. It was almost like you were seeing the world through new eyes. Which of course you were, new piercing blue irises adorning your vulpine face, the eyes of a true trickster fox, a Zoroark. You were in awe of your new senses, how had you ever been content with those weak human ones? Barely able to smell the scents on the breeze, to hear the everchanging song of the land, to see the true colours and life of the world around you. It was barely even a question which you preferred. Again you'd feel the touch of your... your friend. You didn't flinch, instead leaning into their hand as they gently stroked your hair, which had since formed into a long majestic mane, now colored a fiery crimson, and that pooled slightly on the rock behind you

"You know, your mane is quite a mess. But that's to be expected. Human's almost never grow out their hair this long, so you probably didn't even think to brush back there. Plus without your bangle to hold it in place, it's a miracle you never even noticed something was off. Why your hair always seemed to be messy, why it always took so long to dry out. Did you truly never question why that was? Or were you just... scared. Scared of what the answer might be" You thought back, feeling slightly embarrassed, you did recall thinking those things, why even with a blow dryer it always seemed to stay damp. Maybe you had always known deep down, and were just not wanting to think about it. Your friend would continue to softly run their fingers through your mane, before stopping "Don't worry yourself. That's in the past now. I understand it would be rather difficult to tidy it up yourself, so I'll do it for you. Don't worry, you aren't nearly the first. A lot of my friends enjoy having their fur brushed. It's a good way to show care"

Your friend would take out a comb, and start running it through the length of your mane, straightening out all the messy and tangled fur, tidying it up, while the bristles also massaged your scalp rather pleasantly. And even though you didn't want to admit it, your expression immediately gave away how nice it felt, as they chuckled in amusement "Do you enjoy having your fur brushed that much? Well then, I suppose I should continue. You deserve this, for enduring so much up until this point. Just don't immediately ruin all my hard work once I'm done, okay?" He'd say with a slightly joking tone. It was hard to pick up, but with your new ears, you could tell the difference. While he continued to brush your hair, a rather courageous cottonee would drift close, staring at you as it let out a chirp. It would drift away slightly as you raised a taloned paw, before coming in close to let you touch it. It's fur...? Was extremely soft, softer than anything you'd ever felt before, even your own fur!

As you tuned back in, you realised you were actually petting it, or rather, it was letting itself be pet by you? And it seemed like this action was enough for the other pokemon to also come introduce themselves to you, as soon your little rock was surrounded by excited pokemon "I told you right? You're welcome here. All of us want to be your friend. Plus, most of my friends have never met a Zoroark in person before. I don't doubt they're curious about you too." Your new friend would say as they untangled yet another pesky knot in your hair, slowly working their way down to the darkened tips of the mane.

Once the first couple pokemon realised they could get close to you, it didn't take long for the others to follow suit, a Lilipup leaping up onto the rock to sniff and give you a friendly nuzzle, before lying down on your lap, while a Pidove and Tranquil landed to give a greeting chirp. While the older pokemon, a Lilligant and Leavanny, attempted to calm down and manage the unruly creatures, their efforts were mostly in vain, as it didn't take long until even the rock was swarming with varying pokemon, eliciting a slightly smug chuckle from the person more than likely responsible for your predicament.

Your feet, one of the last remaining parts of your human disguise, would finally start to come loose, unbeknownst to you as you sat there, practically buried under pokemon as they all vied for your attention and affection, much to the amusement of your friend. Toes would curl and fuse as your nails sharpened and lengthened out, forming a trio of new scarlet claws, while the now all too familiar dark grey fur spread across the rest of your shifting feet, as it's very structure changed, heel raising up, making it so you'd be walking on only the front of your feet, and having to rely more on your new claws for traction while moving about. Meanwhile your legs would also gain a generous coating of fur, while new muscles came into being, and existing ones were strengthened, thighs reforming into powerful haunches, as the fur met up with the fur on your hips, leaving not a single portion of your body human.

Eventually the brushing would stop, as too would the swarm of curious forest pokemon, giving you some breathing space, while your friend gently removed the more attached ones, setting them down on the grassy floor. Now you'd finally see the changes to your legs, staring at them curiously while you flexed your new hind claws.

“Would you like to give them a test? It’s pretty obvious you haven’t done anything as a Zoroark for quite a while, so you might need to start movement over from the basics. Let me help you down” Your friend would say as they landed off the rock, gently helping you down, while you leant on the rock for support as your new feet touched the ground, legs bending slightly to brace against the earth as you adjusted your balance. They weren’t wrong, years acting like a human, thinking like a human, and in this case, moving about like a human, had certainly taken their toll. It was like you were kit again, learning to walk for the first time. Compared to a human’s, your legs felt so light, so powerful, but also requiring far more precision than the inelegant ones humans were shackled with.

You’d stand on unsteady paws, not used to your new digitigrade legs, your body instinctively hunching over slightly, using your mane as a counterbalance. You’d take a cautious step forwards, stumbling slightly, before your friend came to help, holding your claws as he followed by your side. Step by step, you grew more steady, your steps quicker and lighter, no longer disturbing the grass, or leaving imprints on the dirt. Slowly but surely, you’d adapt to your new method of movement, as the useless human instincts and muscle memory grew faint and distant. Because you weren’t a human, and you certainly weren’t pretending to be one any more. Soon, you would no longer need the help of your friend as you switched into a sprint, your body seamlessly transitioning onto all fours as you bolted through the trees, feeling the air rush by you as you brought that vision, that dream within your mind, into reality. Dashing through the forest, utilising your senses and instincts to seamlessly dodge and weave through the foliage and trees with newfound exhilaration and... freedom. This was freedom, you realised. And with that, the final chain was gone. Nothing was weighing you down, nothing was holding you back. No fears of being judged, of being ostracised, no need to hide away, or pretend. You were a Zoroark, through and through, free to make your own choices, to go wherever you pleased, to be who you wanted to be, with no-one to force you otherwise. But you did still have one last thing remaining to do. You’d make your way back to the clearing. To see your friend, your saviour, the person who made this all possible.

You’d find him still there, having barely moved from his position by the rock, talking to the forest pokémon, before turning to face you as you transitioned back to bipedal motion, approaching them. You felt a bit awkward, everything had gone so fast, and you weren’t entirely sure what you wanted to say. How could you even begin to express your happiness, relief, guilt, and above all else, gratitude?

As you opened your mouth to speak, he'd raise his hand, placing it on the side of your muzzle "Ah, no need to say anything. It's rather obvious you want to thank me, but you don't need to, your expression says it all. And that happiness is all I need in return. I'm not expecting you to pay me back, just that you live your life freely, and make your own decisions. Be true to yourself, and help others be true to themselves as well. Then again, you are a Zoroark. Lies and Trickery are second nature to you, so I suppose I can forgive some untruthfulness from you." He'd grin, lowering his hand as he stepped back

"I am on a quest to discover the truth of this world, and to save any pokemon I find who are suffering under humans, such as yourself. Now that you are free, I'm to leave, and continue searching and helping. You can come with me, if you want. But I do understand, you've only been yourself, your true self, for less than a day. You're probably full of questions, unsure how to be a pokemon. Needing guidance from more experienced members of your kind. Everyone will be staying behind in this forest, they can teach you everything you need to learn. I am but a mere human. I cannot educate you on how to be a pokemon, let alone a Zoroark. But if you come with me, I can show you the world, I can show you my ideal world, where pokemon are free, where humans and pokemon truly understand one another. But I will not force you to take either decision. Do not feel guilty picking one or the other" He would say with a slight smile. He was kind, perhaps too kind for his own good. Before he even said anything, you knew you wanted to be there for him.

You open your muzzle to answer, only to be taken aback as a growl leaves your throat, the man, no, your partner, chuckling "Was it really that surprising? The Human Language is for humans, and you are no human. You stopped pretending to be one, remember? You're a Zoroark now. But don't worry, I can still understand you. I can tell you want to come with me. Someone like you is rare. Normally pokemon are too scared to leave their lives behind to join me on my quest, but I suppose you didn't have much of a life to leave behind to begin with. That doesn't make you any less of a true friend however... Very well then, you can come with me. Someone like you, who knows what it's like to be both human and pokemon... someone like you would be perfect in helping me understand this bond trainers speak of. I'm sure with you, we can finally achieve our ideals"

Today had been a mixture of emotions, of truths and lies, ups and downs. You were still processing half of what had occurred, but what you did know was that you were free now, and that you had a friend you could truly trust to be there for you, and that's all that mattered. Even if he didn't expect anything in return, you were going to give him the same kindness and care he gave to you, and support him in his goal in any way you could. Neither of you would have to wander the world alone anymore.

Stories of a Green Haired Trainer and their Zoroark Partner would ripple across Unova, talk of them helping injured pokemon, rescuing them from abusive or neglectful trainers, and most well known of all, when they defeated the champion and obtained the power of one of the Dragons of Legend, before vanishing. Whether they are the very same, or mere coincidence, only you truly know, but regardless which is real, it's safe to assume the rest of your life was a happy and free one