

The prestigious catwalk stretched itself into the dark horizon, leading the way towards a set of double doors. The gym was quiet; muted, even. That silence, combined with the gloomy absence of the multicolored neon lights, provided an atmosphere most trainers wouldn't ever be capable of witnessing.

For others, it was oddly melancholic. But for Elesa, that was just a sight she'd grown used to seeing every morning.

The elegant gym leader strolled around the stage, glaring at her Pokémon. The sound of hooves clapping against the floor echoed in her ears, sounding not unlike a soothing melody. Nearby, her Emolga gleefully soared around the gym, cautiously checking each deactivated spotlight. Flaws during the battles would be inadmissible, after all.

Elesa let go of her golden coat, which was nearly as expensive as the colorful headphones she wore on her head. Hastily, a Flaffy grabbed the garment, soon hurling it toward the backstage.

She brought a hand closer to her face. A yellow dot — her Joltik — gleefully traveled around her palms, jumping up and down in ecstasy. "Oh? Have you finished your task, little one?" she inquired.

The Joltik nodded. Elesa couldn't see it, of course, but its response hardly mattered. With a single meaningful glance, she could attest to the Joltik's earnest task. After all, the gym had been freed from all the litter left behind by previous Pokémon battles, all thanks to her hard-working Bug-Type.

Elesa cracked her fingers, readying herself for another day of work. In due time, countless trainers would flood the spacious building. Those youngsters would be harmoniously divided into two groups, consisting of those who merely desired to witness the battles to come, and those who wished to show their worth by challenging the magnificent Elesa.

Such were the days of a gym leader, and they had always been a double-edged sword of sorts. Elesa's busy days hindered her career as a model, but they consequently allowed her to spend some precious time with her lovable Pokémon. But despite her predicament, she'd accepted her circumstances long ago.

With her glimmering pupils, Elesa eyed the tidy gym. "All right, are we ready to begin?" She turned around, facing her passionate Pokémon.

They didn't respond. Not verbally, at the very least. Instead, they hopped up and down, throwing their paws in the air at the same time. Such specific movements were all the confirmation Elesa needed. Her Pokémon were ready to go.

Joyfully, she approached the spotlights, squatting down to turn them on when her movements quickly came to an abrupt, unexpected stop.

A clanking sound echoed in the gym.

Then another.

Then another one, louder and more intense than the two preceding it.

Someone was coming.

Elesa's body shuddered, momentarily refusing to move. She couldn't explain why, but a sinking feeling infected her stomach. It was the feeling Electric-Types get when they're about to be struck by a mighty Earthquake. It was the feeling of terror.

Ignoring the part of her brain that shouted at her, Elesa slowly stood up. Her slender figure turned around, faking a smile as she gazed at the horizon. A tall person stood in front of her — their features concealed by the treacherous shadows.

"I'm sorry," she spoke, clearing her throat as she regained her composure. Her hands still trembled ever-so-slightly, but she quickly hid them behind her back. "But the gym isn't open yet. Can I help you with something?"

The figure didn't reply, but their hands hurriedly moved. Without hesitation, the stranger retrieved a metallic object — a gun — from their pocket, apathetically aiming it at Elesa. The woman fearfully shrieked, unable to control her quivering legs. She was paralyzed by panic. Regardless, her Pokémon soon took notice of the fearsome sight, fiercely attempting to get Elesa out of harm's way before their defeat became inevitable.

But unfortunately, they failed. A dart speedily touched Elesa's arm, causing her to disastrously fall on the floor. She yelped, trembling while making a herculean effort to stand up. Her body ached, and she vigorously stretched her arm in front of her face, futilely attempting to reach the fleeing stranger.

The Pokémon hardly cared about the stranger. Without thinking twice, they rushed over to Elesa's side, hesitantly watching their trainer struggle to move. Her vision darkened, and the world spun around Elesa as if a whirlwind had enveloped her fragile body. Something wasn't right.

She attempted to stand up, refusing to give up. However, as soon as she took control of her aching legs, an unrecognizable sensation rippled throughout her body. Elesa couldn't understand why, but something was occurring in her feet.

Hurriedly, she glared at her feet, unaware that she'd soon meet with a haunting sight. Elesa's toenails had begun to expand, growing longer as they engulfed her feet. More and more keratin appeared in her body, darkening as her mutated feet began to retract.

Instinctively, Elesa yelped. Such reaction soon caught the attention of her frightened Pokémon, which promptly gazed at her soon-to-be hooves. Their glimmering pupils widened, and the Pokémon quickly started to repeat their own names, conversing in a way Elesa couldn't comprehend.

Regardless, her body continued to mutate. Her feet ached as the keratin engulfed them, flattening at the base while achieving a circular — nearly disk-like — shape. In due time, Elesa's feet inexplicably transformed into dark hooves.

She tried to stand up, quivering during her nonsensical attempts to reacquire her disappearing humanity. Her legs trembled as soon as her upper body ceased touching the ground, causing Elesa to once again fall to the floor. This time, however, she instinctively launched her arms in front of her, quickly standing on a quadruped position. It felt degrading but far more pleasant than the alternative.

Elesa's Pokémon continued their inquisitive murmuring. Somehow, she could understand the emotions flowing through their voices, even though they were merely repeating the same words over and over.

Her Flaffy and her Emolga seemed to be panicking, nigh incredulous at the changes happening in Elesa's body. But at the same time, her Zebstrika spoke curiously, as if it had noticed something the others hadn't.

Regardless, a tingling sensation tormented Elesa's body, growing more intense in the blink of an eye.

If the gym leader had to make some sort of comparison, she'd most certainly compare the sensation to the poke of an overly-sharp needle — but multiplied by a thousand. Although such a piece of information provided no comfort, the reason why soon became apparent.

Strands of fur began protruding from her skin, forming a furred cuff around her ankles. The pelage was dark and thick, serving as the perfect protection from the harsh winter — which had yet to arrive. Nevertheless, the tingle climbed Elesa's legs, allowing the fur to appear wherever the sensation attacked next.

The fur color changed, however. Its dark coloration did a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, shifting to a pristine white as it continued to grow. Black, white, black, white. The indecisive pelage repeatedly changed its coloration, enveloping Elesa's legs in contrasting colors.

But once the strands touched her thighs, other changes occurred. Once again, Elesa's legs wobbled, quivering as if they feared their inevitable mutations. Muscle mass was slowly but surely produced in her thighs, causing her lower body to thicken uncontrollably. Her eyes teared up as her widening legs fought against her shorts, eventually ripping the cloth to shreds.

At the same time, her backside extended, forsaking its previously human appearance. Before long, Elesa's lower half started to resemble that of an equine.

"O-Oh z-zeb — Arceus..." she spoke, mispronouncing her words at seemingly random intervals. "A-Am... Am I strik — becoming a Zebstrika...?"

Her bones snapped, causing her joints to shift size and position. Elesa's otherwise plantigrade stance morphed to that of an ungulate, further altering her anatomy. Soon after, the dark fur enveloped her thighs, infrequently allowing white stripes to decorate her body.

A twinge of discomfort infected her spine, intensifying as a lump appeared above her rear. Elesa helplessly closed her eyes, feeling her tailbone protrude from her body. Inch by inch, her spine grew further, creating a new appendage. It momentarily spammed; nerves appearing throughout it as a white coat surrounded it, forming a disorganized tuft on its tip. Needless to say, Elesa had grown a tail.

She moved her newfound tail from left to right, nearly enjoying its peaceful movements. However, the pleasant sensation abruptly came to a stop. In between her legs, something started to lengthen, growing unexpectedly before a fully-functioning manhood started inhabiting Elesa's body.

He didn't hesitate before voicing his understandable concern. "W-What? H-How did this happen...?" Elesa's Pokémon rushed over to his side, shouting at each other at the same time.

Ignoring his emotions, the transformation apathetically progressed. Elesa's torso bulged, pushing forward as it thickened. Throughout his upper body, muscle mass was created, strengthening his body at an overwhelmingly rapid pace. At the same time, his chest flattened, further disintegrating Elesa's feminine appearance.

The fur proceeded with its growth, traveling towards Elesa's waist. While the black pelage continuously contaminated his body, white stripes made a stark contrast against the dark fur, nearly resembling lightning bolts as they appeared. Although the tingling sensation was once unbearable, the former human quickly grew used to it. He had no choice, either way.

Elesa shook his body, sensing the warmth of the fur enveloping his belly. It felt strange — bizarre, even. Mere minutes ago, he was enthusiastically talking to his Pokémon, readying himself for the inevitable challengers to appear. But thanks to a single unexpected event, half of his body quickly became completely foreign to him. It didn't feel fair.

The changes proceeded to Elesa's shoulders, where white fur encircled them. At the exact moment that black strands protruded on his arms, his upper limbs morphed. Elesa ground his teeth while his arms wobbled, threatening to give out at any moment. As expected, they soon began thickening, growing as more and more muscle mass appeared on them, altering their appearance to better support Elesa's newfound equine anatomy.

The changes in his hands were inevitable, and Elesa knew that. Tears ran down his face once his fingers began to retract, painfully shrinking back into his quivering hands. Flesh, bone, and skin ceased to exist, dissolving away at a snail's pace.

But his nails survived. In fact, not only did they survive, but they thrived as well. A dark coloration infected them, allowing them to grow as more and more keratin was produced on Elesa's not-hands. The keratin engulfed them, forming a flat base at the same time. In response, the former gym leader stomped his hooves on the ground, allowing a mix of anger and confusion to flood his body.

He wanted to yell, but he couldn't. He couldn't speak, and he couldn't breathe. Elesa urgently gasped for air, quickly realizing his inability to do so. His neck had been afflicted by the changes, and recklessly, it stretched, thickening at the same time.

Elesa grunted as the changes occurred, hastily breathing in and out as soon as his neck ceased growing. While the fur climbed towards his face, he glanced at his surroundings. His Pokémon were fearfully speaking to one another, but something was different. Their previously meaningless words slowly but surely mutated, nearly resembling English.

He couldn't comprehend why, but Elesa could understand his Pokémon.

"W-What are we going to do?!" shouted the Emolga, vigorously flapping her wings in fear. "How is this even possible?!?"

The Flaaffy scratched her chin, rationalizing the situation. "It has to be because of the stranger... right?"

The soon-to-be Zebstrika hardly cared about their conversation. Atop his head, his dark hair mutated in varying ways. For starters, its color shifted to a familiar white, at the same time that certain strands receded into Elesa's scalp. But his hair didn't disappear completely. Part of it lengthened, connecting to his neck and consequently making a descent towards his tail. On his scalp, his hair also grew upwards, forming two horn-like structures.

His costly headphones fall onto the ground, acknowledging their futility. Elesa's ears had begun to mutate, allowing blue fur to infect their insides at the same time their shape shifted. The cartilage morphed, rearranging itself and consequently widening ever-so-slightly. At the same time, its tips stretched, obtaining a triangular appearance.

Elesa closed his eyes, feeling an overwhelming ache spread throughout his skull. It far too intense for him to properly react, restricting his movement as the torture grew more intense.

His nose dissolved, widening while its coloration darkened. Soon after, the former human's skull cracked and lengthened, causing his jaw to relentlessly stretch. Elesa's face grew longer with each passing second, giving birth to a thick, equine snout.

The transformation ended.

Dizzily, Elesa opened his blue eyes. The world spun around him, and for a few seconds, all he could

see was a blur of various tones. Pink, yellow, and even black flooded his vision for a second, eventually mutating into recognizable shapes. The shocked expressions plastered in his Pokémon caused his eyes to widen.

"I... Why —" he tried to speak, barely acquiring the strength to do so.

"Elesa!" Yelled an unrecognizable voice, belonging to a Flaaffy. "A-Are you alright? How are you feeling?"

His other Pokémon hurried over to his side, except for his Emolga, who seemed to be distracted by something. "I-I'm far from alright!" he shouted, glancing at his body. "This... This doesn't feel right!"

His words were desperate but truthful. From the warm fur enveloping his body to the instinctive wagging of his tail, none of those sensations were familiar to him. Elesa had been trapped in a body he didn't belong, with seemingly no way of escaping.

The other Zebstrika gracefully glanced at him, unhurriedly opening her mouth. "It'll be fine," she said, slowly and methodically. "I'm sure you'll get used to it. And if you don't... Well, we'll try our best to fix this situation."

Elesa smiled, but he didn't quite understand why. The Zebstrika's words ranged in his ears, sounding like a pavlovian bell. A warm, comforting sensation spread throughout his body — the first, since the beginning of the transformation. Was he in love?

He shrugged. Whether or not he had caught himself falling for the Zebstrika, it didn't matter at the moment. "I... I hope so," he explained, attempting to sound as confident as possible.

The other Zebstrika smiled back, but her mouth soon mutated into a shocked expression. Another voice echoed from the gym — its tone of desperation causing Elesa's eyes to widen. "H-Hey, over here!" shouted the Emolga.

All the Pokémon dashed towards the Electric-Type. Elesa quickly followed suit, staggering the first few times he attempted to move his limbs. He wasn't accustomed to a quadruped — let alone an ungulate — stance, but his adaptive mind soon allowed Elesa to move with pure grace.

Without thinking twice, he curiously shouted at the Emolga. "W-What's wrong?!"

Her response was simple, yet effective. "There's a note on the ground!"

And indeed, there was. A crumpled piece of paper lied on the ground, where someone's shoddy handwriting showcased an unexpected revelation. Names were written on the note. Names that Elesa instantly recognized.

The first on the list was his own, but the letters were scratched out. The other names were intact, and they all belonged to Elesa's friends — or at the very least, acquaintances.

The Flaaffy hesitantly spoke, reading the words out loud. Elesa wasn't even aware that Pokémon were able to read, but that wasn't the right time for him to voice his ignorance. "Skyla, Roxie, Iris... Those are all..."

"...Gym leaders... A-And the champion!" he completed.

"So, this is a checklist of sorts..." The Zebstrika's thoughtful words momentarily hung in the air, granting Elesa a few seconds to think.

She was right. There was no other explanation for the note, even though the only one available seemed so outlandish. Whoever that stranger was, they most certainly had a wicked plan in mind. Their goals and motivations remained a mystery, but one thing was clear: Elesa's friends were in danger.

For the first time since the transformation, Elesa proudly lifted his head, gazing at the Pokémon with determination, not unlike how he used to stare at his partners when he was about to win a battle. "I'll go warn them."

The other Zebstrika didn't hesitate before protesting. "You can't go alone, that'd be foolish."

"W-Why?"

"You'd just be putting yourself in danger!" explained the Emolga.

"Yeah, they're right!" agreed the Flaaffy. "We'll go with you!"

Elesa didn't respond. Instead, he nodded, thanking the Pokémon in a non-verbal manner. The former gym-leader didn't know what fate had in store for him, but deep down, he knew he wouldn't be alone in whatever misfortune time might bring. The Pokémon surrounding him weren't his partners anymore. They were his friends.

"Let's go!" As soon as he said those words, the group of friends rushed towards the double doors, focused on their noble mission.

Their joyful shouts echoed twice in the gym, but there was no one inside to hear it.