

3 Years Later

In which Baba celebrates her birthday

"You really want to start from the beginning?"

"You wanted us to share, so why not?"

"Figures. Sure, go ahead."

A ray of sunshine invaded the awful hole I called my room and violently woke me up way earlier than I felt like I wanted to. The light burned itself onto my face and made my head hurt. Just a few more minutes, I wanted to sleep.

I turned around and buried myself completely under my thin, wooly blanket. I didn't want to wake up. Not another day of this.

I tried desperately to fall asleep again, to block out the world for a little longer, but a screeching alarm that went off soon after wouldn't let me. Without looking, I reached over to the nightstand to turn off the loud noises, but then realized in my sleepy state that it wasn't my phone that wanted me to wake up, but actually a clock that stood on my desk that was ringing away like some cruel monster. I rubbed my eyes and prepared myself to face the sun, which shone through a dirty window directly onto me.

It took me a moment to adjust to the brightness, but I managed to move my tired body to my desk and turn off the unholy noise. The clock dutifully told me that it was 7 o'clock in the morning through my blurred vision. A normal time, but somehow I felt much more tired than usual.

Must have been the laundry I had done the day before. That took longer than expected.

With my hand still resting on the clock, I looked around. The clothes from yesterday were scattered across the floor and were still wet and dirty, so I ruled those out. Plus, mom would be so mad if I wore those again. Especially on my own birthday.

Ugh.

As if that mattered. She never cared about anything but how I made her look in public. All those things in my room - dirty old electronics, the mirror, the wall scrolls - were only given to me to make her look like a generous mother. Most had stopped working or started to break down soon after I received them. Except my phone. That one held out for the longest, even though it had been in repairs for a while now. I missed it.

I sighed, went over to my wardrobe, and extracted my last set of fresh clothes from it. A tight red shirt whose colors were all washed out and a yellow pair of biker shorts - I had grown out of them years ago, but they would have to do.

I looked to my left and saw myself in the mirror. Kinda presentable, now that I was dressed, but my hair was still a mess. Mom wouldn't like that, so I quickly straightened it with an old brush that lay next to the mirror on the dresser and bound them together into two pigtails. While they now didn't look like my pillow had styled them, they still stuck out like two gigantic bushels of grass. Nervously, I reached over to a can of hairspray, and to my relief, there was still something inside.

After a lot of brushing and a generous helping of hairspray, I hoped these half-straightened, gravity-defying blue pigtails would be enough to avoid too much of a reprimanding.

Cautiously, I exited my room and made my way downstairs, into the kitchen. She probably expected me to make breakfast, as usual, so I was surprised to see her already fully awake and idly chatting away with a friend of hers. And even more unusual, breakfast had already been prepared.

How? She never made breakfast. She was nearly never awake so early, either.

I eyed the table from the stairs in disbelief as something caught my attention. My phone was on the table, right next to my mother's cup of tea! My steps became faster and the last few stairs were taken with a single jump out of excitement.

"Haven't I told you to not rush the stairs like that, Baba?" I heard immediately after I landed. "That's why your phone broke in the first place, silly."

You really didn't need to remind me, mom.

"Gee, Don't make me reconsider giving you your phone back. I really fear that same thing will happen again," she said with a heavy focus on every word. I always shivered during those kinds of sentences - it usually meant I was in trouble.

Her friend was silent during her lecture and just eyed me from the sidelines, so I was on my own here.

I braced myself for whatever was about to come next; my throat got twisted, and my stomach was turning itself, and not only from hunger.

"Buuut...", she continued, "because it is your birthday, I'm willing to overlook it just this once. Your phone is as good as new, and all the data you need is on it again. Promise to me that you won't endanger yourself like how you just did and treat this with care."

I froze up. "Yes mom, I will. Sorry," was all that came out of my mouth, slightly relieved that this is all what it took.

My mom took a sip of her coffee and looked pleased, with her stupid, ominous grin and her dominating face. "Good."

"Won't you tell her about the big news?" I heard her friend suddenly say, slightly concerned, but also expectant, like it would be something to excite me. I swore, if my mother got herself another boyfriend, I'd...

"Oh, right. Yes," my mother jerked up and her previous concerned expression reappeared. "It's just... it really bothers me. Baba. You're eighteen now. Legally an adult. That means..." she trailed off. I didn't know what she was after, but I saw her producing some crocodile tears for effect. She never cried for real. "...Baba. You've run away so often in the last few years. You gave me so much trouble, but I just couldn't let you go into the world all on your own. I still had to teach you so much, and I still need to," she said as she pointed towards the phone, probably referring to how I'd broken it with my own stupidity. "However, now that you're an adult, I can't hold you any longer. And I understand your wish to leave me alone, just... know that I love you."

And here she started lying again. The reason I snuck out at first was that she took me out of school when I was thirteen and forbade me to meet my friends back then, out of a twisted fear I'd have friendships she wouldn't approve of. The "bad crowd," as she put it. "Boys" too. Or anyone else she deemed unfit or a bad influence for her "little troublemaker." She left me with no choice. Okay,

over time I began sneaking out to just get away from her constant bickering and berating, but surprise surprise, I was caught each and every time and promptly reminded how much she "loved" me. I still had a small, rather unnoticeable scar near my hips from one of her punishments a year ago.

But no one ever questioned her; everyone else just thought of me as an ungrateful daughter that made my mother unhappy, despite her best efforts.

All of this didn't stop her from making her rant overly dramatic. She simply enjoyed herself way too much to be humble about whatever she was doing at any given time. "I have made arrangements with the local researcher and professor, Dr. Wujisi.¹ He is willing to give you a job to support yourself while you travel to your heart's content," she explained.

Wait a moment. Was she serious?

"Just promise to call me," she ended her speech and handed me my phone back, which I accepted quickly.

"Okay," I appeased her. If she was lying, I could too. And I wasn't going to let *that* opportunity pass me by.

Freedom, here I come!

"I expect that you will not cause the doctor any trouble and to be on your best behaviour at all times," mom remarked when she saw my beaming eyes. "I have prepared a new backpack and a nice, white jacket for you to make a good first impression, so don't blow it."

Hah, even when she was doing me a favour she still only thought about herself. I confirmed that I wouldn't cause any trouble, grabbed everything she prepared for me, and exited the house with a smile and a wave.

But when the door closed behind me, I wasn't sure what to feel.

She wouldn't chase me, she basically said. I could just skip on meeting this strange nerd... but, oh damn, money. Yeah, I needed money to stay afloat.

So off I went. Hopefully he paid well.

¹ Professor Elm

"Your mother really sounds like a handful. She pulled you out of school?"

"She didn't like me interacting with anyone she couldn't control, I guess. She never liked me having friends on my own."

"What a bitch."

"Bitch is putting it nicely. You know nothing yet."

It didn't take long to find the professor's lab, as it was one of the bigger buildings in this village. However, with every step I took I felt more and more uneasy. Like I was surely about to be stopped. There had to be something, somebody lurking behind a corner, ready to get me. A creeping thought appeared inside my head that constantly told me to run, just run very far away in hopes of not being caught again.

What if this was a play from my mother? This could be her way of testing me, or something stupid like that.

But the closer I got to the laboratory, the more I realized that nothing was going to happen. I'd been walking for a solid thirty minutes and nobody was onto me. In fact, except for a few fleeting glares here and there, nobody bothered with me and those who did, probably were wondering why I was frantically looking around everywhere.

I was at a loss once I crossed the street that led to the lab; too many conflicting thoughts made it too difficult to grasp a single one of them. But I reasoned with myself that nothing could really be worse than spending any more time in that prison my mother called home, so I walked right through the big, double-wide door of the building and was immediately greeted by chaos.

Not just what she would've called chaos, actual chaos. Piles, no, mountains of paper, books, suitcases and who knows what else littered one corner of the lab, while some men in lab coats cleaned up the other parts. The bookshelves were bursting and creaking under the weight they had to carry as one of the men near me sorted some books.

I wondered if they were doing some kind of spring cleaning, then remembered that it wasn't spring. Regardless, I wandered into the main room and asked where the doctor was; I was promptly directed towards the end of the room, where a nearly bald guy was fussing with some of the wild paper notes on a desk.

"Uhm, hello?" I spoke up, which got me the man's attention.

"Huh? Oh, ohhh, hello! You must be Baba, right? I'm Dr. Wujisi, pleased to meet you," he said while he hastily got up from his seat to greet me with a handshake. Surprised by the sudden jump, I nervously accepted.

He just didn't stop, the words came out of his mouth like the wild torrents of water from the rivers near our village. "So glad to see you, I hope your trip was safe," he spoke without a pause. "You got here just at the right moment. I have a friend who wants something from me, but as you can see, we are extremely busy ourselves, and I wanted to ask you if you could help us out here. Research papers don't write themselves, so any assistance would be greatly appreciated."

When he finally remembered to breathe, he quickly went over to a desk on the other side of the room. I followed him and saw three Elf balls² in perfect condition sitting on top of a wooden table, each hooked up to a strange machine that stood in the back. I had seen this type of Elf ball a few times; they were brought to this country about seven years ago to replace the berry-made ones that were the standard here. They were even advertised in this village. "I know that the trip across multiple towns and routes can sometimes be dangerous, especially for such a young lady like you, so I'd like to give you one of my Elfs.³ Each one of them is something special, and I'll let you choose one. Here," he said as he grabbed some papers, "I've prepared some info on each of them, so feel free to look them over to make your decision."

I hesitated, still unsure of what to think about all of this. I'd heard a lot about Elf ownership from my old friends and from mother, and they all said that it was a lot of work to properly care for them. My former friends thought it was worth the effort, but my mother demonized it, as she never allowed any pets in the house.

² Pokeballs

³ Pokemon

I shook my head and reminded myself that this could be the ticket out of my mom's control, so I accepted the reports from Dr. Wujisi. I focused on the pictures - ignoring the complicated text that looked like nerd speak - and a cute mouse called Rided⁴ instantly stood out to me. I liked it.

"What about this one?" I asked the doctor and held up Rided's info.

"Oh," he remarked, "that one's clearly the best! Do you like him?"

"Yeah, he looks cute!" I answered truthfully.

The doctor smiled in a kinda creepy way. "Very well then." He grabbed Rided's Elf ball, loosened a few hinges and pushed some buttons to unlock it from the machine, and lightly threw it to the ground, where the mouse Elf immediately jumped onto me once it was released. I had massive trouble keeping him in my arms as he excitedly wiggled around, he even tried to climb on top of me as he sniffed me up and down. When I finally managed to keep him somewhat still, I noticed that his warm, soft fur was so calming to hug. I had never felt something this comforting before.

I made up my mind. I just couldn't pass up travelling with this guy. "Ok, I'll take the job!" I said.

"Great, thank you Baba. Do you want to give him a nickname?" the professor suddenly asked me.

A nickname, then... I looked deep into the eyes of the hyperactive little guy. He was still moving around like crazy and I could barely keep hold of him. "Heh... well, I'll call him Best then!"

He was the best, according to Wujisi after all, I reasoned with myself. So that's what he should be called. Best seemed to agree with my choice and let out a happy cry.

"Excellent," Dr. Wujisi said as he moved back to his desk. "Alright, now to business. As I said, a friend of mine wants something from me. A maniac who always comes around with unusual things regarding Elf culture or nature, so we started calling him Elf Grandfather.⁵ This time, he tells me he found something

⁴ Cyndaquil

⁵ Mr. Pokemon

truly amazing, but we lack the time to meet up with him. I want you to go over to his house on R30⁶ and see what the fuss is all about."

As he spoke, he arranged another stack of papers and handed them to me in a small folder. "These are the directions. You can't miss it. Also, my phone number is inside, if you need to call me. And don't worry, your mother already gave me your number, so if I need anything from you, don't be surprised if I give you a call. Also, there's some money for you to buy food on the way and to book a hotel room if need be." I opened the folder - no small task with the energetic mouse in my arms - and saw everything he had mentioned. Luckily, the direction were filled with a lot of pictures and mentions of important landmarks to guide me, so I was sure to be able to follow them.

I decided to recall Best inside his ball before he caused any trouble - like messing up the neat stack of books next to Wujisi's desk - and clasped it to my backpack. I gave the folder another look and then stored it away as well.

"That should be everything you need. If Best needs any healing, I have a machine that can heal Elfs in a matter of seconds. Use it whenever you want. Now, go! It should be about a day's walk to his house and back to at least the nearest Monster Center⁷ to rest, and I wouldn't like it if you wandered around at night," Dr. Wujisi noted and sent me on my way.

This Wujisi was an interesting man. Overly eager, very enthusiastic about his work, a lot of energy, and probably the most important thing, he was friendly. A lot more friendly than my mother, to the point where I wondered how these two ever could have exchanged any words with each other. Additionally, he seemed to be honest about what he did, as nothing in this laboratory looked like it was out of place. I swung the backpack onto my back and headed towards the exit, but was stopped by an assistant of his.

I looked at his face and glasses thicker than my fingers obscured his eyes. It didn't help that they reflected the lab's lights so heavily, too. "Excuse me," he said, "my name is Daji, and I work here with the professor basically around the clock. I'd like you to take something with you." He handed me a few bags with differently-colored candy that he took out of his dirty lab coat. "This is Elf food, sweets to be exact, but it can also be eaten by humans. We usually send Wuji's

⁶ Route 30

⁷ Pokemon Center

friend this stuff regularly, but due to the increase in workload we've been neglecting our duties. Would you be so kind as to deliver it to him as well?"

"Uh, I don't see why not," I answered and let him store them inside my bag. They weren't particularly heavy, but with the sheer amount he had given me, I definitely felt my backpack dragging me down a bit. Who needed this much candy?

As I waved both of them goodbye and exited the building, I still had this strange feeling that something was amiss. My mom didn't hate me all too much of a sudden, even let me go outside. In fact, she had actually kicked me out. Not that I was against it, but it was so... out of character for her.

Maybe the police got tired of her antics? Maybe they actually can't force me back against my will and she decided to not cause drama?

And what about the doctor and his assistant? They seemed so nice overall, but how did they come into contact with my mother, and how did they convince her to let me go?

Eh, whatever it was, I felt like freeing Best from his ball again as I wandered off towards R29. Watching my newfound friend running around me, totally excited to go on an adventure, cheered me up enough to stop caring about my stupid mom and her antics.

"What a bunch of sweet talkers."

"Tell me about it."

"At least Best was innocent and happy. They weren't complete monsters."

"Wuji's work. He had control over the research and was very nice to them."

"Don't make me feel bad about stealing the other Elf from him."

"Nono, you made an okay decision..."
