

"Okay... just breathe calmly," I told myself while sitting in front of the computer, preparing to facetime with my mom after almost a whole year of not seeing her.

We would call each other all the time, and I'd give updates about how my career and living condition was going. Dad was never around for phone calls, but Mom said he always listened intently when she relayed everything back to him. In short, they were about as proud of me as any parent would be of their child making bank and changing the world.

Now to find out if they would still be proud after learning that I became a father at eighteen years of age to a netherfolk.

I just wished I didn't have to facetime with the same webcam that Ange used to cam with. Well, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Alright, Isla. Let's meet my mom," I said.

"Mom!" Isla repeated after me from my lap.

"No, not mom. *Grandma*. You're the grandchild, so that makes her your grandma!"

I clicked the call button which played a loud, whimsical tune for a few seconds. The music stopped abruptly, and my mom— well, her eyes and forehead— appeared on screen.

"Aki!" Mom's affectionate and slightly raspy voice, which had always lulled me to sleep as a child, came through a little staticky. "Can you see me?"

"I can see you, mom. Your camera's facing the ceiling. Might want to lower it a few inches," I said.

A shuffling whipped the camera in wild directions until it settled on her face, just above the shoulders. My 41 year old mom, Chisa Katagiri, had a crown of black hair at the roots that then became a bleached blonde. There should be another fifteen inches past the camera if she hadn't donated it yet. A half-finished cigarette was stuck out the side of her mouth.

"Mom... What did we say about smoking before I left for the States?" I sighed.

"Oh, shit." My mom ducked out of frame, presumably to put it out in an ashtray, then returned a moment later like a kid whose hand was caught in a cookie jar. "Completely slipped my mind! Look, I just got out of a sixteen hour shift at the hospital, getting puked on all day. Let me off the hook, yeah?"

I rolled my eyes slowly and deliberately so that she saw how disappointed I was.

Mom's appearance and habit were from an era of her youth she had put behind after having me. The style, mannerisms, and speech were all that was left. Even my name came from her childhood, after the same anime because she thought the character had the coolest bike.

"You know, you and Dad don't have to work anymore. We can all live pretty comfortably on my salary," I said.

"Work sucks, but sitting around and twiddling my thumbs is even worse. Besides, I like what I do. But enough about me. How are things going? What did you wanna call for?" she asked, leaning forward with her pierced right ear absent of any piercings tilted in my direction.

*Here it comes.*

I steeled myself for the revelation.

"Well... I—"

"Mom!" Isla jumped into frame from my lap.

"Mom? Oh, is that your new tenant a toddler? She's so adorable!" my mom squealed.

"N-No... Mom, this is Isla. It's a long story, but... Isla is my adopted daughter," I explained.

We had a long pause of silence.

"You're shitting me," she finally said as the cowl of excitement burst forth. "You're not shitting me? Oh, my god. I have a granddaughter? That's great! Isla's her name? Isla, baby! It's your grandma— shit... I'm a little young to be called a grandma, but screw it. Lemme get a closer look at her!"

I lifted Isla up. Her roots clung onto the edges of the monitor, and she began to rub her cheek against the screen where my mom's face was.

"Mom!" Isla giggled.

"She called me 'mom'. My heart is going to explode. Aki, how the hell did you find such a cute kid?" she asked, while pulling out a phone to snap pictures of Isla.

"Mom, there's a screen shot button on your keyboard—" As I pulled Isla off the monitor, Cresta and Ange poked their heads into my room.

"Did you say mom? I want to see your mom!" Cresta let herself in followed by Ange, who trailed behind with an uncharacteristic shyness.

"Hello, you two! I saw your interview on TV. It was great! Especially Aki's outburst—ahaha! Must have gotten that confrontational blood from me." My mom grinned.

"Please... I can do with wiping that from my memory forever..." I groaned.

It was going to haunt me forever, I just knew it.

"Hi, Akira's mom! Your mom looks badass. Can she fight?" Cresta asked me.

"I've left those days behind me. Nowadays, I'm the one stitching people up instead of sending them to get stitches," Mom said, then her eyes flicked to Ange.

Ange froze up, which was completely unlike her. My mom had seen plenty of her pictures before, including from the interview, but never face to face like this.

"You're my son's girlfriend?"

"Akira is always taking care of us." Ange bowed slightly. "He must get his kindness from you. I hope to one day return the favor, and—"

"No need to be so stiff! Aki's already got a kid. Now I'm waiting for you both to get married, and you'll soon be calling me mom, too!" She bellowed with laughter.

Ange's nervousness vanished, like the politeness switch had been flipped off.

"Your approval means the world to me, Mother-in-Law. I will be sure to provide you with many grandchildren, and siblings for Isla to grow up with!" Ange exclaimed.

"That's the spirit!"

"It's still way too early for children! Anyway— Ange, Cresta... Can you guys wait outside? I still need to talk to my mom about something," I said.

They left after saying bye, leaving me and Isla alone with my mom again.

"What's wrong, Aki?" Mom sensed it right away.

"It's about Isla. I'm worried because she has to leave for Weyera for a month. I can't give too much information, but long story short, there's a chance she might not come back."

The shift in mood didn't go unnoticed by Isla. She settled quietly back into and patted my cheek with a hand.

"I used to be scared, too. Of you leaving Japan and never coming back," my mom said after a pause.

"Really?"

"Yeah!" She nodded. "Did I prepare you enough to live on your own? Was there more I could have done? What if you like the States so much that you won't ever visit again? I asked myself these questions all the time, but only because I wasn't used to the whole parenting thing yet. Eventually I realized it's not my place to doubt you. My job has always been to cheer you on no matter what. Isla needs that from you now more than ever. Isn't that right, you sweet little plum tree?"

"Family!" Isla waved flower pom poms to show her approval.

I'd been letting my concern get the better of me and consequently brought down Isla, too. This girl, though really young, was really sensitive to the emotions of people around her. The way her leaves and petals react were proof of that. Just like my mom was strong for me, I needed to be strong for Isla.

"Thanks, Mom. I needed that pep talk. Next time I visit, I'll bring a couple of the tenants. Don't think I can bring the whole dorm though," I said.

"Isla and Ange for sure. No compromise." Mom smirked.

We ended the call, and I was already feeling much lighter than when it started. Glancing down at Isla, everything still felt surreal and weird about having a daughter. But as she took her eyes off the screen and looked at me expectantly, all I wanted was to ensure a proper future for her.

I carried Isla out of my room and walked into Val, who appeared to have been waiting for us to come out.

"I've come to a decision: when Isla goes to Weyera, I shall accompany her," Val declared.

"You... will?"

"Your obligations are here, taking care of the dormitory. I will not have Isla undergo the trial on her own. At least in that way, you may rest assured someone shall be there to watch over her. Do you object?" she asked.

"No, that sounds like a great idea! I think more than anyone, Isla wants you there, too." I passed the bouncing plant girl into Val's arms. "If you two are leaving for a whole month, then we're going to have to send you off with a bang. Irapesha did want to have a barbecue..."

It gave me an opportunity to fire up the grill. Though, I wasn't exactly versed in barbecuing.

"Don't forget the pakarian wyvern," Val reminded me.

"I haven't forgotten the damn wyvern..." I muttered.

Half the dorm came with me to the supermarket to buy food and supplies for the barbecue. I planned it for the coming weekend so that we could invite as many people as possible. Feeding dozens of people was going to be the greatest undertaking of my life so far.

"All aboard the shopping cart express!" Ivory exclaimed, transforming into a shopping cart.

"First stop— the butchery!" Cresta grabbed the handles to the Ivory-cart.

As soon as Tamara hopped into the bed of the cart, Cresta sped off into the building and veered them into an aisle.

"Excuse me! No netherfolk racing in the store!"

Several employees chased after them.

"I'll not miss their energy while we're away," Val said.

We grabbed a shopping cart of our own and put Isla in the infant seat, then went around collecting all that I needed for a barbecue. I entered the canned foods aisle for some peas and corn when something chucked into the cart made it rattle. The first items to hit the cart were four large bottles of ketchup.

Val folded her arms, glaring me down from asking. "This is not for the barbecue. It is for me to take back to Weyera."

Once we gathered everything, and I corralled my Nascart mimic to behave, we lined up to pay for our stuff. Isla had her attention on the balloons floating listlessly above the candy between each checkout lane.

"You want a balloon, Isla?" I asked, picking a vibrant holographic one for her.

"Balloons? More balloons!" Isla exclaimed. She snatched the one from my hand and extended her roots to grab balloons from neighboring checkout lanes.

"I think that's too many balloons," Tamara warned.

"Isla, no!" Val and I shouted, reaching for her too late.

The horde of balloons carried her out of the cart and up to the ceiling. Our giggling plant girl waved joyfully from above. Ivory and Cresta teared up from laughter. Shoppers watched on in horror, and the employees seemed to have given up caring.

I suddenly recalled my mom's words.

"Come down, Isla. We have to pay for those if you want to keep them!" I called.

A long root stretched down to find purchase on the shopping cart. The troublemaker reeled herself back into the seat, still holding onto the many balloons. She handed one of them to me written with the words, 'Best Dad'.

"Papa!" Isla beamed.

I brought my free hand up to my face.

"How am I supposed to be angry with you?"