

The first time Keiko had been to this market, she'd been a lot... smaller. She could still remember it perfectly – if anything, the transformation seemed to have improved her ability to recall some memories, for better or worse. Back then, she'd just been a little girl, overjoyed at being allowed to stay up late to see the fireworks, excited by all the glowing signs and delicious smells of the street vendors. Her grandfather had happily bought her a snack, cementing taiyaki as one of her favorite treats for years to come.

Now... well, things were different, and yet, they weren't. Yes, she towered over the market, even without extending her long neck upwards, letting her see the entire street instead of having the crowds obscure her view. Her improved memory also recalled, in disturbingly perfect clarity, how dizzying it had felt to be so large, constantly looking down at the people and places around her as if standing at the edge of a roof. She had to step carefully and watch where she was going, too, as even though the crowds would part to make way for her, sometimes the most inattentive of pedestrians would be too engrossed in a conversation or too fixated on their phone to see the seventy-foot-long dragon approaching them. The taiyaki she used to love so much still tasted just as sweet, but were barely a morsel to her now. She could pick out every scent individually each time she inhaled, knowing exactly what was being cooked in the back half of every stall. And not only could she read every character of Japanese on the brightly-lit signs, even the difficult ones that had eluded her as a child, she could do so all the way from the far end of the market.

For the three young ones she was watching over, however, it wasn't so different. They stood at the height of an adult, though they had much greater overall size and mass with their wings and tails – and an appetite to match. Keiko envied them for being able to go from stall to stall and sample a little bit of everything; at her age, she could barely manage two or at most three such visits before she would have been stuffed. Assuming her parents would have even let her eat that much – these visits were a treat, and they couldn't afford to be too lavish. That wasn't a concern for the three juveniles, as the stall owners were happy to gift a little bit of food to their scaly visitors. On the contrary, they were waving and calling them

over, believing that it would bring them good luck if the dragon children liked their offering.

Keiko's ear-fins fanned out as she tilted her head to listen in from afar. The two Children of the Egg she was keeping an eye on, Sakura and Aotsuki, were her own offspring, conceived well after that fateful morning when she had first found scales on her cheeks in the mirror. It had to be decades ago, now; it felt like such a long time, and yet in other ways it felt like yesterday. She remembered every step of the transformation that she had undergone, and all of the support she had received from her family, her friends, even her coworkers. Even in the worst moments of it, when the pain of her body twisting and growing in inhuman ways kept her up at night, when she had vomited blood and lost the ability to speak – memories she often wished she did not have the ability to recall down to the last detail – they had been there for her.

The little ones had been spared all of that, hatching from eggs already as dragons in the outdoor shelter she and her mate had constructed with assistance from their families. First was Sakura, named for the cherry tree blossoms that had fallen all around the egg. Then Aotsuki, who hatched on a moonlit night just after the snow had stopped falling. Seeing them both exploring the market with the same excitement she had once felt made her proud, and brought a smile to her face.

The third of the trio, however, was not hers – as was obvious to anyone, for although he was a dragon, he was not the same type as the other two. While the Children of the Egg walked on four legs, Chakrii walked only on two, like how some of the dinosaurs in the movies did. Though his scales were jet black like the others', his were smoother, sleeker, more suited to the water. He lacked the wings of the Children, and where the Children had a single tall fin running down their backs, Chakrii had two shorter green fins running in parallel, all the way to the end of a thicker and more muscular tail. On land he walked slowly, but in the water he was already far more agile than the Children – and would grow even more mobile once he matured and the webbing on his hands and feet grew in.

And he, like her, had been human once. Originally from Thailand, he had been captured and sold into slavery, rescued and turned into a Dreamer –

or a 'Digger' as the immature Dreamers were called. How he had ended up under Keiko's care was a long story, one with many painful memories for him. Seeing him looking so happy as he explored with Keiko's children, talking with another visitor who had approached him, brought her more pride – they weren't related by blood, and he was quite a bit older than the other two, but she considered him part of her family nonetheless.

"Excuse me," a voice called out to her from below, and she looked downwards, keeping her ear-fins extended to listen in on her children, who were excitedly waiting for something to be cooked for them. At Keiko's feet stood a young couple, and the man bowed to her, deeply and respectfully, and she inclined her head in his direction to reciprocate the respect.

"Do you need me to move?" Keiko inquired.

The man shook his head and held up his phone; she knew where this was going before the request was made. "May we please take a picture with you, Great Dragon?"

"Yes, you may," Keiko replied, and the man's ladyfriend gave an excited squeal, holding her hands to her mouth. Keiko lay down flat on the ground and brought her head down to the same level as the humans, able to divide her attention between the couple posing for their selfie, and the Children down the street waiting for their food. She gave her best smile – having long since learned the best way to smile without baring her many sharp teeth in a way humans found intimidating – and remained still for the picture.

After that, she allowed the two to briefly place their hands on her snout, and with many words of gratitude, they bowed to her again before departing. Hearing Sakura and Aotsuki remarking about the taste of the okonomiyaki they had just devoured, she rose to all fours and took slow, careful steps forward to make sure they wouldn't get too far ahead of her. Chakrii was following after them, too, having finished his conversation, and Keiko caught up to them as Aotsuki stuck his head into the air and sniffed around, using his nose to gauge where he wanted to go next, while Sakura wandered ahead of them.

"Cherry Blossom, do not get too far from your nestmate!" Keiko called out to Sakura. The chirps, growls, chitters and other sounds of the dragons' language would catch the juvenile's attention far more readily than Japanese, and sure enough, Sakura stopped and turned her head to look back at her mother.

"I am coming, egg-bearer!" Sakura called out, turning abruptly in place to come back, but as she did her tail swept behind her and knocked over a few people who were close to her. Realizing her mistake, she turned around again reflexively, causing more chaos.

Keiko quickly but carefully made her way along the street, grateful that the other pedestrians moved to the sides of the road to make way for her, passing by the other two juveniles along the way. "Stay still, Cherry Blossom!" Keiko called out, and Sakura obeyed, allowing her mother's long strides to catch her up in moments.

The young Child knew she had done wrong, and she had her head lowered, her ear-fins drooping and her spinal crest flattened against her back, her tail curled closely around her legs, a strong emotion-scent of guilt emanating from her. "Is anyone hurt?" Keiko asked the crowd, but thankfully it seemed the worst outcome of the whole incident was a few dirty pants and skirts.

"You must be careful when you are turning," Keiko gently chastised her daughter. Behind her, she could hear the sound of Aotsuki and Chakrii's claws scraping on the flagstones as they caught up. "What do you say to the people you knocked over, Sakura?"

Sakura stretched out her front legs, lowering her upper body until only an inch separated her chin from the ground, in the best approximation a Child of the Egg could make of a human bowing. "I am very sorry," she apologized to the crowd around her.

"It's fine," a man who was still brushing dirt from his jeans replied. Others around him joined in: "You're okay," "It was an accident," "I'll be fine," and so on.

Sakura slowly rose back up, sitting on her haunches, her ear-fins and spinal fin still lowered, but not quite as much. An elderly woman approached her

and Sakura turned her attention to the lady, who reached out slowly with one hand. Lowering her head slightly to silently permit the touch, Sakura let the woman place a hand on her snout.

"There, there," the woman consoled Sakura, "My grandson caused a bigger ruckus than this last Tuesday!" Keiko tilted her head to one side slightly, unable to stop her body emitting a scent of skepticism, but merely listened as the old lady went on, "It's no good for a guardian dragon to be sad. Let's see a smile."

Sakura made her best attempt at a smile. Even though it was a toothy smile full of pointed teeth made for rending meat, the woman took it in stride and chuckled. This seemed to help cheer Sakura up, and as the woman stepped back Keiko leaned in slightly. "Thank you."

"Oh, it was nothing," came the reply. "Kids will be kids, even among dragons."

Fanning out an ear-fin, Keiko could hear Aotsuki and Chakrii already investigating another potential source of free food. "Yes, they will," she agreed.

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The park was a welcome break for Keiko; as much as she enjoyed the market, it was very cramped for someone of her size. Though there were even more stalls, food trucks, and other attractions set up in the park, there was still enough space for her to stretch out a little bit without blocking the way. Sakura and Aotsuki were playing in an open section of the grass, while Chakrii—

"Chakrii!" Keiko roared out when she saw him hopping around in the fountain, "Stop that!" Unlike Sakura and Aotsuki, he was unable to understand the dragons' language, so she had to shout in Japanese.

He looked over to her for a moment, then went right back to sprawling out in the fountain and splashing around, sending water every which way.

"Chakrii!" Keiko called out again, more sternly this time, starting to rise to her feet; seeing she was serious about it, this time he climbed out from the

fountain and slowly walked back to her, water dripping from his scales as he did.

The crowds around her had gone temporarily quiet at her outburst, but gradually returned to what they were doing. "Why not?" Chakrii asked her when he reached the spot where she was relaxing.

"It is not meant for playing in. You were getting water on all of the people nearby, too," Keiko explained patiently. Even though he was an adult, his rough childhood gave him more than a few rough edges here and there, which wasn't helped by him being a Digger – from what she understood, not only did they physically mature much more slowly, but they had a tendency to be stubborn.

Conceding with a grumpy chuff, Chakrii turned his head to look around, appearing thoughtful. Keiko followed his gaze towards some of the food trucks. He'd had plenty to eat already, so she guessed that he was considering what kind of drink he wanted to get, but both of their musings were interrupted as someone came running over to them. It was a native Japanese human girl whose mother was trying to chase after her, and the girl had her left hand tightly clutching the string of a balloon in the shape of a Child of the Egg – if a bit cartoonish in its proportions, and much less spiky in many places.

"Great Dragon, Great Dragon!" the girl was calling out excitedly, coming to a stop in front of them both. "Hello!"

"Hello, little girl," Keiko replied, as Chakrii looked at the new arrival with curiosity of his own. "Your mother is calling for you."

The girl ignored her, focused on Chakrii. "I'm Emiko! What's your name?"

"Chakrii," Chakrii replied, moving his head backwards as the girl leaned in much closer.

"How come you're green?" she asked, pointing to his spinal fins, "And how come there's two of them?"

Her mother finally caught up to the group, and took hold of the girl's shoulder. "Emiko, don't run off like that!"

"But I wanted to talk to the Great Dragons!"

Emiko's mother glanced up to Keiko, who gave the other parent a sympathetic look. "She's okay, no harm done," Keiko told her.

"See? It's okay!" Emiko agreed, then turned her attention back to Chakrii. "How come you don't have any wings?"

"I—"

She didn't let him answer, continuing to bombard him with questions, much to his confusion. "Why do you stand like that? How come your tail looks weird?"

"My tail doesn't look weird," Chakrii insisted with a huff. "I am a Digger!"

"What's that? And why are you so small? And—"

"Emiko, slow down," Emiko's mother reminded her daughter. "Let him answer your question before you ask another one."

Keiko gave a knowing smile, lifting her gaze to check on what the other two were up to. Sakura and Aotsuki were bounding around and roughhousing a little bit; Keiko watched them for a moment to make sure it wasn't anything too serious, but it mostly seemed like they were playing by darting forward and touching the other on one of their forefeet, then hopping back before the other one could grab them. The deep throaty noises they were making were drawing some concerned looks from nearby, but Keiko was well-used to the sound of her children's laughter.

"Do you go to school?" Emiko asked as the latest in her onslaught of questions.

"Yes," Chakrii answered. "I'm going to university."

"Wow! How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Do you play sports?"

"Sometimes, in the water. We have a big floating ball and I can hit it around to try and get it in a net!" He leaned back a little bit, raising his arms up and making a swiping motion with them at the air.

Emiko giggled and raised her hands, making the same motion, but when she did the balloon string slipped from her grasp. It immediately began floating up and away from them rapidly, and she let out a gasp, futilely jumping up with an arm outstretched. "Oh no! My balloon!"

Her mother began to console her, and Keiko reared up to try and grab onto it, not quickly enough. The motion caught the attention of her children, however, and both Sakura and Aotsuki crouched down before launching themselves upwards. Even at their size, they sent a rush of air past Keiko, Chakrii and all the humans nearby; had Keiko taken off like that, many people would have been knocked to the ground.

"Bring it back carefully!" Keiko called out as the two juvenile dragons chased after the balloon, seemingly in a spontaneous race to see who could get to it first. Aotsuki had always been the more nimble one of the pair due to his narrower wings, and he had little trouble catching up to the balloon. Grabbing onto it was the hard part, but after failing to snatch the string twice he simply turned his head to the side and closed his mouth around the string, dipping down to make his descent.

Everyone below in the park had stopped what they were doing to watch, hundreds of them staring upwards together, many pulling out their phones to take pictures and videos. Aotsuki flared his wings as he came back down to the open spot he and his sister had taken off from, and he carefully touched down with his back feet first, then his front feet, trotting over towards Keiko looking and smelling very pleased with himself. Sakura landed moments after him as well, radiating defiance; for her, it was just another game that she had lost... this time.

"Thank you!" the mother said gratefully as Aotsuki lowered his head towards her. She grabbed onto the balloon near the top of its string, allowing Aotsuki to open his mouth and release the rest of it.

"Ohhh, thank you!" Emiko echoed excitedly, reaching out with both hands.

Settling back down on the grass with her children, Keiko recommended, "You should tie the string around her wrist so that she doesn't lose it again."

"That's a good idea," her mother agreed, and had Emiko hold onto the string as she tied it for her.

Keiko watched them, paying little attention to the crowds of people watching or filming them. Retrieving the balloon had been such a simple thing for Aotsuki, but it made the girl so happy. Keiko growled some pleased words of encouragement towards her son, which intensified his satisfied demeanor, his head held high as he sat on his haunches.

Once the string was secured by her mother, Emiko moved her arm experimentally, pulling the balloon downward a bit before looking back to Aotsuki. "Thank you, Great Dragon!" she called out cheerfully.

"It was nothing," Aotsuki boasted, prompting Keiko to give him a little nudge with her tail. "You're welcome," he quickly added more politely, and Emiko and her mother both waved to them before the mother began ushering Emiko away.

It was clear Keiko wasn't going to get any rest, though. Others were coming forward for better pictures or to ask questions after seeing her son fly, and among all of the people with smartphones there was a young woman in a suit with an expensive digital camera waving and trying to get Keiko's attention. "Excuse me, Great Dragon!"

"Can I help you?" Keiko asked, lowering her head a bit, turning it to the side to keep the woman out of her blind spot.

"Can I please get a picture of all of you together?"

Keiko wondered silently for a moment if the woman was some sort of news reporter, or if she worked for the market – a dragon patronizing them would be good marketing, no doubt. But she decided that it didn't matter and replied, "Only if you send me a copy of it," in a friendly tone.

"Of course!"

With her children distracted by the crowd, Keiko raised her voice slightly and called out to them in the dragons' speech, "Cherry Blossom! Blue Moon!" then added "Chakrii!" At first they continued to chatter, but the second time she called out they turned their attention towards her. "This

female two-legs is going to take a picture of all of us. Please come close to me."

It proved to be easier said than done. Aotsuki stepped on Sakura's tail by accident, and then Sakura's wing ended up in front of Chakrii's face. He gave her a little shove with his shoulder and she shoved him back harder, and the only thing that stopped it escalating further was Keiko putting one large foreleg down in between them and growling at them both. She had almost corralled them together for the picture when a moth flew directly past Aotsuki's snout and he turned to chase after it, and while Keiko was ushering him back into place, Chakrii got an itch and started scratching at his side with a back leg, almost falling over.

At last, though, Keiko was able to get them all into place and to look towards the camera. It would have been nicer if Keiko's mate had been present too, but he was taking a well-deserved rest back at home and the picture would make a nice memento to show him. The woman snapped a few pictures, retaking the one where Sakura sneezed at just the wrong time; as soon as she declared she was done the kids crowded around her to try and peer at the screen to see the pictures.

"Step back, step back," Keiko urged them so that the photographer could approach her.

"Do you have a computer, Great Dragon?" the woman thought to ask as she held up the camera to show the preview image to Keiko.

"No, but my family can print it out for me," Keiko explained, giving her an email address she could use.

With profuse thanks, the woman excused herself, but now it was Chakrii demanding Keiko's attention. "Look, look!" he said, pointing to one of the nearby food trucks, "They have melon soda there!"

Keiko took a deep breath and began to rise to her feet. A mother's work was never done. "Very well, I can buy one for you," she told him. She was fairly sure they would give it to him for free, though. Dragons like her were respected and revered throughout the whole country. She'd heard that in western countries, they were treated much more harshly, and she couldn't begin to imagine that.

But at least she would never need to see it for herself. She had everything she needed to be happy right here.