

Chapter 2: She's My Responsibility

She could've sworn she'd seen it—the light of heaven above. She couldn't recall where she was or what she was doing before that. All she knew was that she was lying down in a futon surrounded only by a bright white void. She could hear something echoing in her ear. It almost sounded like sniffing. She felt so light, it was almost as if she were floating. With her eyes peacefully closed, she had no will to move even a muscle. Wherever she was being taken, she just couldn't resist.

Waaaaaaa!

Her eyes shot open at the sound of a baby's shrill cry. Her head tilted to her side. There, floating beside her, was a baby. Their skin was a sickly pale and their face was wrinkled like a raisin as they cried with all their might. Their wails sounded strained, as if they were struggling to push their voice out of their tiny lungs. It looked like someone was carrying them, but that person had blended in with the void. It was only the baby that was visible in her eyes. Her heart ached at the baby's cries. Her lips trembled as she opened her mouth, but her throat was sealed shut. She needed to stop the crying. She needed to move.

“Taiga...”

Tears flowed down Ryuuji's cheeks as he continued to press Taiga's cold hand against his forehead. He clenched his jaw. His body jerked as he suppressed every urge to wail. “Oh... Taiga...” He whimpered. The grieving man could only hold on for so long. He slumped down and sobbed into Taiga's hand, his dark hair concealing his face. He slowly shook his head at how terrible the situation had devolved.

Ack! Hack! Agh!

Katsuko's little body continued to get rocked by Yasuko's motherly arms. Her father couldn't even bring his eyes to see her struggling sputters. Her back was getting patted as her throat got cleared. Her grandmother focused on her back, hitting each jab with intention. After her difficult journey out of the womb, she needed the support to recover from any ailments she had sustained along the way.

Ack! Haah! Haah!

Finally, with one last cough, Katsuko's airways were free. She took a few deep breaths until she had enough energy to unleash her voice upon her family's ears.

Waaaaaaaaa!

"Aaah!" Yasuko let out a little gasp as the ear-piercing cry made a wave of relief wash over her. She quickly flipped the infant on her back and witnessed her arms flail around and her face scrunching up to cry for its mother's nurturing.

"Oh, Katsuko..." The grandmother's voice quivered as she caressed Katsuko's pillowy little cheek. She leaned in and hugged the baby closer to her chest while tears streamed down her face. "Katsuko..." She clutched the baby as if she were holding a corpse. Under the cold wooden roof shielding the Takasu family from the raging storm, the agonising hour of delivery was over. It was time she resigned from her temporary role as midwife. In her mind, she pondered how well of a job she'd done. She couldn't tell if she was relieved that all her granddaughters were delivered safely, or in despair of what was lost.

In the end, she couldn't give herself any praise. It simply wasn't the time to do so. She could only let her tears drip onto the old tatami mat, and her son would do the same. At that moment, it didn't matter how many children came out fine and how many didn't. There was only one person that mattered to him—the one he cared for the most.

Taiga... Please... Ryuuji silently caressed Taiga's forearm over the cries of her newborn daughter. I'm here, aren't I? I never broke my promise. I was always by your side. Please... You can't leave mine, either... Because as long as we're together, everything will be alright... It has to... Everything was so cold.

"Haaa..."

A heavy wheeze reached Ryuuji's ears. His eyes shot open and he looked at the woman laying before him. He, too, would gasp.

Her eyes were as wide open as his were. They almost looked bloodshot. Her pupils were shaking as they stared at the dark ceiling. Her mouth stayed ajar and her lips twitched repeatedly as little scratchy sounds left the cave of her throat.

"A... A-ah..."

"T-Taiga!"

Ryuuji leapt towards her face and carried it gently with both his hands. He caressed her soft, moist cheeks with his thumbs. Even though she seemed wide awake, fear was still coursing through his veins. He panted as he looked at his wife's sickly face. However, she

wasn't looking at him. He turned to the direction her eyes were focused on. There was Yasuko, still holding a wailing Katsuko in her arms.

Yasuko shakily lifted her head to finally get a glimpse of what had become of Taiga after all the pains of her labour. But just like her son, her eyes lit up at the sight of her daughter-in-law's eyes looking straight at her.

"Taiga!" She cried out, her chin still dripping. But Taiga didn't say a word back. She couldn't. Every sound that came out of her mouth was inaudible. Every word that she uttered was cut to a single vowel. She was too weak to even speak.

Ryuuji turned back to look at Taiga. Her arms were trembling as they slowly rose from the soft futon she laid in. Her hands were spread apart as she prepared to hold something, but her drained body couldn't keep them there any longer. Her arms fell to her body while her hands remained in the same pose. Thankfully, even with her voice gone, neither Ryuuji nor Yasuko needed her words to understand what she was communicating.

Her husband immediately lifted her light back and stripped the bloody T-shirt from her body. He wrapped her in some clean futon covers that were sitting to the side. She wore them like a hospital gown. Her chest and tummy remained exposed for Yasuko to place the baby, her soft lips and Taiga's little nipple fitting together like a lock and key. Ryuuji shifted her arms around Katsuko's back to let her warmly embrace her. Taiga's eyelids were only strong enough to be held up halfway, but it was just enough for her to gaze gracefully at her baby, who had begun to feed. Her silent smile was full of bliss.

The Takasu family was complete.

Yasuko and Ryuuji watched Taiga where they sat. Her body was still while her baby remained attached to her chest. Haruko and Mitsuko, the first two to be born, were sleeping comfortably in the towels they were wrapped in. Ryuuji used his arm to wipe away the tears and snot on his face. He gave a single huff of relief.

"Is she going to be alright?" He asked.

"She looks too weak to move... And she lost a lot of blood... We need to get her to a hospital so she can recover," Yasuko responded.

Neither of them could take their eyes off her. They needed the confirmation that she'd still be there. Even though she was awake again, they couldn't rest now. She was still in an unstable condition.

However, through the beating of their windows from the violent storm, their ears picked up something faint. It was a high-pitched whir and it was growing louder and louder until it sounded like it was right outside their house; they were sirens. Following that was the

sound of car doors opening. Ryuuji and Yasuko turned to their front door as they heard a group of people climbing the stairs to their second-storey apartment. They were speaking into transceivers, and said devices were releasing scratchy audio that were definitely the voices of people on the other end.

Finally, they were greeted by a knock on their door.

Ryuuji never left Taiga's bedside in that dull white hospital room. She was laying in bed connected to a ventilator, with the hard transparent mask over her nose and mouth. She was too weak to even breathe on her own. Her eyes would stay shut and her body wouldn't move for entire days.

On the day Ryuuji's daughters were born, he'd be accompanied by his mother while he'd check his wife into a hospital to recover from her life-threatening delivery. An ambulance had arrived just after Taiga had woken up. They'd transport her there to assure her safety. Ryuuji and Yasuko were with her for the entire journey, even joining her in the back of the ambulance.

Once Taiga was in bed and her health was secured, the mother and son no longer had any reason to fear. They could only watch her rest motionless in that bed while they heaved from exhaustion at her bedside. Ryuuji sat on a stool next to Taiga's chest while Yasuko stood next to her legs. They were missing a few hours of sleep and dark circles had formed under their stressed eyes. Yasuko peacefully shut hers and sighed with a smile.

"She's safe now..." She said under her breath. She shook her son's shoulder. "Let's go home and get some rest, Ryuu-chan. We can visit her again tonight."

Ryuuji slouched forward with his elbows on his knees as he stared at his wife with his bloodshot eyes. He spoke sternly. "I need to stay here. I can't leave her alone like this."

Yasuko sighed deeply. She couldn't argue against him, so she simply bent down and hugged her son. Then, she gave him a long, tender kiss on his forehead before standing up and turning towards the door. "I'll come back with breakfast then," she said while ruffling his hair and walking away. The squeak of the doorknob turning and the sound of the door shutting reached his ears. After that, he was only left with the droning sound of Taiga's ventilator helping her breathe.

The private room was tiny and cramped. The little TV screen in front of Taiga's bed hadn't even been turned on because of how sudden her arrival was, though it stayed

unplugged as the hospital was trying to conserve electricity. Only the light above the door was on, allowing the darkness to creep in from the window past the white translucent curtains.

Ryuuji stood up and turned around to find two bassinets and one incubator, each container holding one of their triplets. He leaned over Katsuko's and watched her rest inside her glass box. Haruko and Mitsuko were born healthy, but Katsuko needed medical attention after Taiga struggled to deliver her. She had some thin tubing connected to her little nose. It seemed, like her mother, she needed help to breathe.

Ryuuji turned to his wife again, gripping the beam at the side of her bed. He clenched his jaw and glared down at the white covers. *How could I let this happen?*

While he remained alone with his thoughts, the darkness of the room began to brighten. Before he knew it, the room was lit up by the grace of the morning sun. His grasp of time had slipped out of his hands. At that moment, he realised how tired he was. His shoulders weighed him back down to the stool next to Taiga's bed. He couldn't spend the rest of his energy beating himself up, and he couldn't leave Taiga's side for even a moment, so he took her hand and silently caressed it. His thumb stroked the back of her palm in a circular motion. With each second, he completed one motion. Then the seconds turned to minutes, and the minutes turned to hours.

And just like that, Ryuuji's Tuesday had disappeared.

Yasuko would begin sharing the news of her granddaughters' delivery and Taiga's current condition to their friends and family. That news would be followed by hospital visits from multiple guests. Every guest that visited would be guaranteed to find Ryuuji sitting by Taiga's bed. He had received special permissions to stay with Taiga after visiting hours. None of them really knew how long he was there, nor could they remember whether he was wearing the same old outfit as the day before.

Yasuko herself was the most frequent guest, constantly checking on her daughter-in-law's condition. Every night, she'd be happy to hear that Taiga was steadily recovering, as Taiga would occasionally have short periods of lucidity. She'd attempted to give Ryuuji a change of clothes, but he'd never set aside time to change.

Ryuuji's grandparents were the second set of visitors. They were worried for Taiga's condition as well, but they were mainly there to check on their grandson. They gave him as much reassurance as they could, but their efforts were fruitless. They admired their newly

arrived great grandchildren before leaving. They only visited once throughout Taiga's hospital stay, just hoping for the best.

Minori was the third visitor. Seeing her best friend in that hospital bed, she was distraught, but she immediately put on a bright smile, not wanting to darken the mood. She felt even more at ease when she caught the little moments Taiga was awake. Even though she could only say a few words, that gave her confidence in her recovery. Being a supportive friend to both Taiga and Ryuuji, she'd visit four more times over the weekends.

Taiga's colleagues visited together once, many of them her close friends. He could barely say a word to any of them. The implication of Taiga being in that bed meant that she wasn't going to be able to work. That thought made him cringe. She loved that job, she loved her colleagues, and most of all, she loved supporting him and Yasuko. He covered his face with his hands. The pitiful sight told Taiga's colleagues to leave him be. He blocked this moment out in his mind.

Surprisingly, the next set of visitors were Aisaka Rikurou and another woman named Yuu, formerly Aisaka Yuu. Ryuuji could only count on one hand the number of times they've even been in the same room. Even though they were in a weird position where they ran away together and ended up getting divorced, but continued living together anyway, even with everything they had going on in their lives, they still had the heart to visit.

Taiga had been trying to reconnect with them on her own over the past year, and in her short periods of lucidity, she'd asked for them to visit. Things were still messy between the father and daughter, but Ryuuji was happy that he was concerned enough to visit. Yuu acted respectfully towards her and Ryuuji the entire time, despite the bad blood between her and Taiga in the past. Taiga's father only radiated dread. They'd come a long way to see her, but they didn't stay long.

A week had passed and Taiga was still recovering. Even though the moments where she was awake were more frequent, she'd need another week to be well enough to get discharged. Ryuuji's legs had atrophied from the hours he'd spent sitting next to Taiga's bedside. His eyes wouldn't move away from Taiga's pale face with visible cheekbones. He caressed her cold hand. Her arm had been reduced to bone as well. He could lift it as easily as a piece of paper. The sight made him let out a long sigh.

"Yo."

"Uwah!"

Ryuuji jolted from the sound of a young woman's voice and the feeling of her pastel pink fingernails tapping the side of his face. His frantic eyes darted up to the woman's face. His shoulders immediately relaxed when he realised who the woman was. *Oh, right. She's visiting now.*

"Wow, you look terrible," said Kawashima Ami, as blunt as always. "I don't think I've ever seen you this agitated."

Ryuuji huffed. His lack of awareness of his surroundings left him feeling embarrassed. He looked around to get a grasp of where he was. The afternoon sun was shining from behind the curtains. Yasuko was in the back of the room nursing Mitsuko while rocking her in her arms. Before Taiga gave birth, the two women had come to an agreement for Yasuko to help with the nursing in the event Taiga was too weak to do so. He could hear her chuckling as she tickled Mitsuko's marshmallow-like cheek.

"Hello? Ryuuji? You there?" Ami waved her hand in front of his face.

"Wh-what?"

Ami raised an eyebrow. "You've been in your own head a lot. Don't you think you should be resting yourself?"

"How do you expect me to rest when Taiga's like this? She doesn't even have any muscle left in her! There's no way I can relax while I'm seeing that..."

"Well, she might look quite bad right now, but I'm not going to start thinking she'll shatter at a finger's touch," Ami gazed at the girl in the bed. "Hell, she's even stronger than I thought, giving birth to triplets without any doctors around... It freaks me out seeing what she's capable of."

"You're saying that when she doesn't even have the strength to nurse her daughters? Aren't you worried for her at all?" Ryuuji grumbled, his ruffled hair sticking out from his head. Paired with his bloodshot eyes, he looked rabid.

"Of course I am! But you know Taiga. No matter what happens to her, she'll always come out on top. I'm sure she'll be back on her feet in a few months."

Despite Ami's words, Ryuuji's head slumped down.

"It doesn't matter whether she'll recover or not. She shouldn't be like this in the first place," Ryuuji muttered. "If I'd just had our girls delivered earlier... If I wasn't so calm about all of this... If I wasn't so irresponsible... She wouldn't be..." He gripped the handle of her hospital bed tightly until his hand trembled.

"Come on, there was no way you could've predicted this would happen," Ami groaned. "Besides, she's still here with us, isn't she?" She planted her hand on Ryuuji's

shoulder. “This isn’t a tragedy. Far from it. It’s a miracle she even managed to pull through. Right now, it’s like she’s just returned from a tough battle.”

How many miracles can we even get? How many more battles does she have to fight? Ryuuji clenched his teeth as he thought. *I’m not going to sit here and wonder if she’ll come out fine or not. She shouldn’t have to fight in the first place.*

Ami narrowed her eyes at Ryuuji. She could clearly tell he was in deep thought again. She chuffed at the feeling of not being heard. Even though it probably wasn’t the appropriate way to act, she was still getting seriously annoyed. “You know what? If I came home, barely able to move a muscle, and the man taking care of me did nothing but cry and whine, I’d be pretty ticked off!” She said with her whole chest and her arms crossed.

“So don’t go wasting your time sulking. You’ve got a future to look forward to. We still need to settle *this*, after all,” Ami reached into her pocket and pulled out a shiny golden key. The key was so clean that the sunlight reflecting off it got into Ryuuji’s eyes. “We’ve only got a few meetings left with the contractors, and you better be on time for them. Don’t forget, my mom’s money is going into this,” she said, holding it in front of his face.

“Can’t we push those forward or something? Maybe when Taiga’s better? Throw me a bone here...” Ryuuji groaned.

“I had to get on my knees for my mom to even consider giving you this house, Ryuuji. You’re talking with one of the top contracting companies in the country! Delaying it would add to the cost, and it’ll come out of *my* pocket. Don’t you want this lavish house for you and your kids?” Ami threw up her arms in frustration.

Ryuuji couldn’t even look at Ami while he sat there in silence. His dreary eyes were only drawn towards his wife’s body. After the pause, the young woman sighed.

“I’ll... see what I can do.”

Ami turned away and began walking to the door. She passed by Haruko in her little crib. She was awake and their eyes had made contact. Ami smirked at the baby girl as she continued towards the door. After pulling the door open, she turned to Ryuuji again.

“Oh, Maya-chan and Nanako-chan are coming by later. I would’ve gone with them, but I wanted to see you first. Maya-chan’s also bringing Noto-kun, who’s probably bringing Haruta-kun...” Ami held her chin. “Well, I guess Maya-chan actually goes by Noto too. Can you even believe that? They don’t even make a good pair!” She chuckled before pulling the door closed. “Well, see ya! I think you’ve got another visitor coming right now!”

“Thank you for visiting, Ami-chan!” Yasuko exclaimed. Ami gave her a cheery grin before finally departing.

Ugh... How many more visitors are we going to get? Maybe it was just his grief taking over, but hearing Ami, his own friend, nagging in his ear left him exasperated. He wasn't sure if he wanted any more guests because of that. He just wanted to sit beside his wife in peace and silence, waiting for the day when his wife could stand next to him again.

Wait, who's coming right now?

The door swung open. The moment he spun his body to see who had arrived, he knew he wouldn't be having any more peace that day.

"Taiga!"

There was Seina, panting heavily in the doorway, her glasses crooked on her face. Nobody could fault her for running through the hospital corridors when she had just heard her daughter had been left bedridden. She dashed to her daughter's side with wide steps, her movements so vigorous that she had to stop herself from falling onto the bed by gripping the handle, jerking her upper body forward. She quickly pushed her glasses in and took her daughter's hands, clasping them together as she gazed desperately into her daughter's lifeless, exhausted face.

"Taiga, I'm here! Your mother's here! Please, say something!" Seina begged, but was met without a response. Seeing how grave her daughter's condition was, she gasped in resignation and let her face fall into the white covers. Seina's husband silently strolled into the room holding their son's little hand as they walked alongside each other. He stroked his wife's back to soothe her.

The sight of the distraught mother left an emptiness in Ryuuji's chest. It was only logical for a mother to break down at just the thought of losing her daughter, especially after how much she'd pestered him for not being careful enough.

"She isn't awake right now..." Ryuuji mumbled. The sound of his voice was able to catch the attention of Taiga's mother. However, when she lifted her face from the covers, he was struck by her fierce tigerlike eyes.

"You..." She growled.

"Gaah!"

"Seina!"

"Seina-chan!"

Seina had grabbed Ryuuji by the collar, pulling him up from his stool. Her fearsome face was right in Ryuuji's. She was close enough for him to see all her pores and wrinkles. The fair skin of her beautiful face had been creased by her veins popping out of her forehead.

The sudden altercation startled both her husband and Ryuuji's mother, who could only watch from the back as she had just begun nursing Haruko.

"I trusted you! I left my daughter in your hands and look what happened!" She shouted, her piercing voice ringing in Ryuuji's ears.

"I know! I know!" Her forebodingness made Ryuuji crumble. His neck had gone limp and his face pointed to the ceiling as little tears ran down his cheeks. "You were right! We were careless and Taiga almost lost her life because of that! I'm sorry!" He sobbed.

Seina gritted her teeth and dragged him towards the side of Taiga's bed, forcing him to look straight at Taiga's sullen, pale face. "It doesn't matter whether I was right or not! This shouldn't have happened in the first place! Look at her! She can't even open her eyes!"

Just seeing Taiga in that bed was enough to push the memory of Taiga's labour to the front of his mind. Hearing her cries as she endured the agony of childbirth, the warmth and moistness of her blood seeping from her body and the thought of losing her when she briefly lost consciousness after delivering their third daughter; the memory turned his drops of tears into waterfalls.

Seina threw Ryuuji back onto the stool like a little boy getting sent into a time-out corner. She glared at the white covers encasing her daughter while he was left on the stool to whimper. Neither Yasuko nor Seina's husband could step in. They didn't know if telling her to tone herself down was right, as she was rightfully outraged over her daughter, but they couldn't let her continue ripping into her son-in-law either.

"Taiga gets discharged in a week, right? There's no way she'll be completely fine after that. She'll need extra care before she can fully recover," Seina declared. "I'm taking her. Once she's out of here, she'll come with me."

"Wh-what?" Ryuuji gasped and turned his tired eyes up to her.

"I want her resting under my roof, in her own bed. Not in any of your crummy futons on your crusty floor."

"N-no... Please..." Ryuuji tugged on her shirt. "Don't take her. You can't..."

Seina slapped his hand away and spoke sternly. "I've left her to you for long enough! I'm going to protect my daughter, no matter what!"

"Please!" Ryuuji fell from the stool, making it tip over and hit the floor, as he grovelled at his mother-in-law's feet. "Give me another chance! I'll be more careful, I promise! I won't let anything like this happen again! Just don't take her..." His body trembled on the cold hospital floor. "Taiga is everything to me... I can't live without her... I'm begging you..."

He never wanted to imagine it—the months where he and his wife would be apart and the loneliness that came with it. He'd already experienced the distress of almost losing his wife. It felt like they hadn't even reunited yet and they were already getting torn apart again. He wanted to hold her hand and never let go.

Seina narrowed her eyes down at her pathetic son-in-law, but her husband finally stepped in, placing his hand on her shoulder.

“Seina... Let's just leave him be,” he said gently.

“Naru!?” Seina exclaimed in shock.

“The boy is clearly as scared for Taiga as you are. He even looks like he's been losing sleep over her,” Naru gestured towards Ryuuji, who was still on the floor. “Just let him have another chance. I'm sure we can figure something out while Taiga's in his care. You might break him if you take her away.”

Ryuuji raised his head at the kind, relaxed voice of Seina's husband. He watched the couple with desperation as they discussed his and Taiga's fate.

“But... I can't just watch my daughter get hurt and not step in! That's not what a responsible mother would do!” Seina pleaded to her husband.

“I know, I know—”

“Don't you realise how frightened I was?” Tears welled up in her eyes. “Taiga was dying while I was so far away, and I couldn't do anything about it! You can't expect me to live with that, Naru!” She slammed her fist against the railing of Taiga's bed during her rant. She breathed heavily as she waited for a response.

Seina's husband had his tongue tied again. He couldn't reject his wife's feelings. All he could do was let his eyes fall to the floor. Without a word back, the room fell silent. Naru and Seina's son, who was still a toddler, stood by Yasuko's side, clinging to her leg while she had Haruko in her arms.

Katsuko's little body began to toss and turn inside her incubator.

“M... M...” The silence was broken by a dry, scratchy voice. “Mom...”

Seina gasped as she turned to her daughter in her bed. Her eyes were still shut, but her lips were shivering as she used all the energy she had to speak.

“It's... okay... Please... don't...”

The movement in Taiga's lips promptly stopped. Those words were all she could muster. Even with such little said, Seina understood. She could cry about how scared she was for Taiga while she was under Ryuuji's care, but she couldn't go against her own daughter's words either. However, the maternal part of her was still resonating inside her heart. She

couldn't fully trust her daughter's words. In the end, she was left at a standstill. She'd lost the energy to be angry.

Waaaa... Waaaa!

Suddenly, a muffled wailing could be heard. Everyone looked at the transparent incubator holding Katsuko, who had begun crying. Before they knew it, Taiga's eyes had slowly opened as well. Seina could hear her breathing grow heavier. The sound of her infant's cries seemed to have woken her up as her eyes were tilted towards the glass box. Her mother could just tell what she was saying from the way her body tensed up as the wails went on.

"Oh... She's crying. I need to get a nurse..." Ryuuji said tiredly.

A few minutes later, with some help and assessment from the medical staff, Katsuko was allowed to be removed from her incubator and feed on Taiga's chest. Her reddened body, which was larger than the average infant, laid beside her mother's thin torso. Taiga's breathing had eased and her eyes had peacefully shut again. Ryuuji leaned over to stroke her hair while she went back to sleep.

From the moment the nurse arrived to the moment she left, Seina had been watching from the side. She couldn't take her eyes off the scene of her daughter and her husband carefully nurturing their own child. She continued to battle the thoughts of whether getting in the way of this bond would be worth keeping her daughter safe. She clenched her fist. Regardless, her maternal instincts stayed strong.

"Ryuuji," Seina uttered firmly, immediately getting his attention. "I will give you one last chance. Even if the work of raising your family gets difficult, I expect you to handle Taiga's recovery with utmost care." She held up a finger authoritatively. "And if I hear of even one incident involving her, that will be the end of it. I won't be listening to you or Taiga's pleas. Do you understand?"

Ryuuji bowed his head down. "Y-yes, I promise. I'll be careful."

After putting her two granddaughters back to sleep, Yasuko stood beside her son to bow alongside him. "I'll do everything I can to support our children, Seina-chan," she delightfully declared.

"I'm glad I can count on you, Yasuko," Seina added. "But please do me a favour and be harder on your son."

Yasuko nodded. Seina and her family began to take their leave.

“We’ll drop by again some other time,” Seina’s husband, Naru, told Ryuuji reassuringly while patting him on the shoulder. He held Taiga’s little brother in his arms while following Seina to the door.

“Thank you for having us,” Seina uttered before leaving the room with her family. After the sound of the door clicking shut had reached their ears, they were met with a still silence once more. Ryuuji returned to the stool he had sat in for the entire week of Taiga’s hospital stay, slumping beside his wife’s bed. He let out one last sigh. Thankfully, that would be the last of the troublesome guests they’d get.

Taiga was discharged from the hospital after two weeks of stay. Under the care of her husband and mother-in-law, she returned to the old two-floor apartment. She was just stable enough to no longer need the hospital’s support, but she was still bedridden as all the energy in her body had depleted.

Every morning, Ryuuji would wake up next to her in their futons to find her still asleep. Her body would rarely move, only once in the afternoon or at night. She looked as pale as a corpse. When mealtimes arrived, Ryuuji would sit her up so he could feed her. She wasn’t allowed solid foods as her body couldn’t digest them. For weeks, she’d rely on soups, broths and juices for sustenance.

As for their infants, they’d sleep in the same room as their parents, resting together in a large futon of their own. They would’ve let them sleep in their new cribs—which were still in storage—if they weren’t already planning on moving. Ryuuji would always be the first to hear one of them cry in the dead of night as he laid next to them. Their cries could be heard from across the living room, prompting Yasuko to wake up to comfort the babies as well.

Katsuko still needed extra medical attention. As a result of the ailments she’d sustained during her delivery, she became the most troublesome to care for. She struggled to fall asleep and woke Ryuuji up the most often, and getting fed by Yasuko or with formula would upset her stomach, causing a lot of spit-up and discomfort. It became routine for Katsuko to only feed from her mother while Yasuko handled her sisters. On top of that, the ill mother and daughter needed to take their own strange medications.

“There, there...” Ryuuji would speak to Katsuko in his gentle, husky voice as he tucked her beneath the futon covers while she fed from her peacefully resting mother. The bright morning sunlight was seeping into the bedroom.

“Ah... Those two are so cute together...” Yasuko whispered, looking over Ryuuji’s shoulder. She held little Haruko and Mitsuko in her arms, rocking them gently. “Ryuuji, can you help me burp Haruko?”

Ryuuji promptly took his first daughter into his arms. The mother and son rested the two infants against their shoulders, rhythmically patting their backs like little drums. Haruko was resting her chin on her father’s shoulder, her mochi-like cheeks squishing onto his hard muscle.

“Aah... Feeding time just knocks these two out, doesn’t it?” Yasuko said casually while Mitsuko clung to her arm, which acted as her soft pillow. “Hmhm... All this is making me feel... Oh, what was the word... Nostalgic?” A smile stretched across the blonde woman’s face. “It’s just like when I was feeding you when you were a baby, except these girls are a little stronger and bigger...” She began to ramble. “Now that I think about it, I’m not even forty yet. I could still have another kid of my own.” The thought made Ryuuji roll his eyes. “Well, I guess these girls are no different. I just never thought I’d be feeding my own grandchildren like this, too,” Yasuko chuckled, but hearing this made Ryuuji look at the baby girl in his arms with a small frown.

“I had a feeling it would come to that, but you’re doing it way more often than I’d hoped. I want Taiga to feed her own daughters like you are,” he uttered. “But she’s gotten so sick that letting her own daughters feed from her would irritate her...”

“I suppose it's only natural, right? Haruko and Mitsuko were very healthy when Taiga gave birth to them. Now that her body is more sensitive, she can’t handle their strength.”

“Yeah, but... It shouldn’t have to be that way,” Ryuuji’s frown sank deeper. “None of this should’ve happened in the first place.” Even under the tranquility of being with his whole family in that room, the dark circles under his eyes remained and his gaze was weighed down by the gravity of his wife’s condition.

Yasuko could see how much this whole ordeal was tearing him apart. She bit her lip before resting her hand on her son’s shoulder. “You know, I really don’t think it was your fault,” she said gently. “We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“We wouldn’t have been if I were just more careful,” Ryuuji muttered while he looked gravely at the tatami floor.

Seeing her son still acting gloomily, she brightened her smile like the sun on a clear summer's day. "At least she made it out okay! Hahah!" She exclaimed cheerily, pumping her fist and laughing haughtily. "The landlady was a big help getting the ambulance to our house! Plus, the roads are clear now, and the skies have never been brighter! I think we've got something amazing waiting for us moving forward!"

"Yeah... I suppose so..." Ryuuji's gaze shifted to his sleeping wife. He stared intently at her scrawny face. "We were given another chance. We can't lose out on it. We need to care for her properly this time," he uttered sternly.

I'll make sure she never gets hurt again. Ryuuji etched the promise into his mind as he focused on his wife's weak and quiet breathing. Yasuko only tilted her head with the blissful smile on her face. Her son seemed to have regained his energy, so she was content. Ryuuji jolted when Yasuko suddenly came in for a hug, nuzzling her face against her son's chest. He sighed and returned the embrace while the two infants slept in their arms.

Waaaaaaah! Waaaaah!

A month passed since Taiga returned to the Takasu household. Taiga was laying in her futon when her eyes shot up at the sound of her babies' cries. Her head tilted towards them. Haruko and Mitsuko were wriggling about, crying from hunger, as her maternal instincts told her. Taiga had been recovering steadily. In times like these, it would usually be either Ryuuji or Yasuko who'd answer the babies' wails while Taiga rested. Fortunately, the time she'd spent awake had lengthened until it was as long as the time she'd spend asleep, giving her the opportunity to tend to the babies herself.

However, moving her body remained a challenge.

"Nngh! Hnngh!" Taiga grunted as she pulled herself out from under her futon covers.

She used her forearms to support her upper body while her legs only shivered from her struggle to move them. She was still as thin as a twig, and the effort she'd need to even lift an arm had increased tenfold compared to before she gave birth. Her legs had wasted after being completely immobile for so long. Pulling herself along the floor was her only way of getting around the house on her own.

"Gyih! Haaah!" Taiga panted, her unbuttoned pajama top revealing her bare chest hanging from her body. She stopped once to catch her breath before continuing to pull herself towards her babies. After a few minutes, she was finally with them, her head at their little feet. She'd reached just in time to see Katsuko scrunch up her face and join her sisters in their

crying fit, though her wails were not as loud. Taiga wrapped her slender arms around the body of Mitsuko, who happened to be laying right in front of her.

“Uugh!” Taiga grunted as she lifted her daughter’s body not even five centimetres off the floor. Had her daughters been born with average sizes and weights, she would’ve at least been able to lift their heads. However, their abnormal heaviness would require more energy than she could give. “Baaah! Haah!” She fell beside her daughter’s body and laid between Haruko and Mitsuko on their futon, panting heavily as she regained what little strength she had.

In the end, she opted to lay on her side while she let Mitsuko feed from her chest. “Nngh... Gnngh...” Her face wrinkled. The baby she was nursing, the baby that came straight from her womb, had far more strength than she did. Her pain tolerance had withered to the point that even the touch of a baby’s lips—even without any teeth—against her sensitive chest would sting. Her entire body shivered the longer Mitsuko fed from her mother’s bosom. Despite that, Taiga never pulled her baby away.

Haruko and Katsuko hadn’t stopped crying. The noise attracted Ryuuji, leading him towards the room and sliding the door open.

“Ugh... Taiga...” He sighed at the pitiful sight of his wife wincing on the floor as she endured the discomfort in her chest. “You know Yasuko’s just in her room, right?” He said while approaching her. He picked her up with his hands behind her back and under her knees. Mitsuko laid atop her mother’s chest. Her baby’s weight pressed onto her lungs, causing her breathing to grow heavier.

“You can’t strain yourself while you’re recovering, Taiga. You need to rest,” he told her gently before putting her back into her own futon and tucking her under the covers. Then, his hands wrapped around Mitsuko’s body.

“N-no...” Taiga mumbled as her baby was pulled away from her chest. She lifted her arm and tried to reach for her baby, who had begun crying again. However, Ryuuji only looked down at her while he rocked Mitsuko’s body.

“She’ll be fine. Just let Yasuko handle her. Feeding her is still too painful for you.”

“But... My baby... I want to feed her...” Taiga grumbled. Her voice was too weak for her husband to hear the desperation in her voice. She was overpowered by the screeches of their babies.

“I know you do. You can do it when you’re better,” Ryuuji tried to tell her reassuringly. He’d walk towards the babies’ futon to put Mitsuko down and pick Katsuko up.

While he was turned away, he wouldn't notice the look of disbelief Taiga was giving him as her arm fell to the floor.

When I'm better... She used her remaining energy to clench her fist. Her lack of power caused her arm to tremble as she struggled to hold that pose. She felt the urge to throw a punch at her husband boil up inside her, heated by both her frustration of her maternal instincts getting disrupted and her outrage at her husband's ignorance. However, with most of her body feeling sore and numb, her punch wouldn't even be felt by a child.

Taiga's animalistic rage began to fizzle out when Ryuuji placed Katsuko on her chest. She couldn't bear to display her anger while one of her babies was under her care. He tucked them into the covers as usual, stroking her forehead to soothe her. Once Katsuko was comfortably feeding, he left the room with a crying Haruko and Mitsuko in his arms. Her anger being met with Ryuuji's gentle care had left her body confused.

Taiga's weak eyes gazed down at the baby on her chest. Katsuko's mouth was much more tender compared to her sisters, but that wasn't because it was in her nature. Taiga had failed to deliver her as easily as she did with her sisters, and because of that, she was weaker. She couldn't breathe properly, she couldn't eat normally, nor could she sleep as easily. She was the runt of Taiga's litter. The fact made Taiga scoff. *A weak baby for a weak woman...* She thought. Her arms brought Katsuko in closer as they shared each other's body warmth. *I'll show him what I can do...* Taiga pouted weakly.

"You're doing well, Taiga, just a few more steps..."

Ryuuji spoke tenderly as he guided Taiga along the living room towards their bedroom. She was on her feet, her wasted legs shivering with each small step they took, all while her husband was holding her by the hands. Her chest heaved as she took deep breaths, preparing herself before she moved her legs forward.

Another month of recovery had passed. Taiga's eyes were fuller and her skin's colour was warmer. As her body slowly got closer to its healthy state, Ryuuji was helping her conduct physical therapy after being in bed for so long. Eventually, Taiga had managed to walk into their room with his help.

Their triplets were littered around the tatami mat floor. Haruko and Mitsuko were on their tummies, wriggling their bodies excitedly as their parents got near. They were developing slightly faster than average, which their parents found to be a good sign. Katsuko,

however, was left on her back in her cushioned futon, sucking on the back of her palm alone. She was still recovering from her own complications.

“Alright, I think that’s enough for today,” Ryuuji said before laying Taiga onto her futon. Taiga sat up and looked at him with furrowed brows.

“What? But I said I could go on for longer!” She pounded her fists against the cushioned mattress beneath her.

“I think you’ve done good enough,” Ryuuji responded while happily pulling the covers over his wife’s legs. “If you keep your rest up, you might be able to stand up on your own.” He pulled the covers until it became taut and its creases disappeared. Even though Taiga was feeling much healthier than before, she still needed to take a few naps throughout the day to maintain her energy.

Taiga crossed her arms and pouted.

“I could be standing up right now if you’d let me practise more.”

“You’ll hurt yourself if you do that,” Ryuuji said nonchalantly. He carried Haruko and Mitsuko into his arms. They had wide open smiles and cackled while they gently slapped their father’s face. “Besides, I can’t help you while I’m handling lunch.” He placed the infants back onto their cushioned mattress before leaving the room.

Taiga clicked her tongue.

Ryuuji entered the kitchen with his apron hugging his waist. He stood over the breaded pork cutlet sizzling inside the hot oil of a cast iron pan sitting atop a blazing stove fire. He flipped it over with some wooden chopsticks to fry the other side before turning to the pot next to it. Inside it was yellowish white congee with strands of chicken and some herbs and spices mixed into it. He stirred the pot before scooping up some congee and pouring it into a little bowl. He set the bowl aside, letting the steam coming from the surface of the bowl disappear into the air.

Taiga heard the door slide open as Ryuuji walked in with the bowl of congee and another bowl of white rice topped with the pork cutlet he had made earlier.

“Meal time!” Ryuuji exclaimed as he handed the bowl of congee to Taiga. He sat at his desk while he began digging into his own meal. “The congee isn’t too hot, is it? Oh, are Haruko and Mitsuko hungry yet? I can get the formula heated up if they are...” He said obliviously with his eyes on his bowl of rice and fried pork. He placed a clump of rice into his mouth. Taiga, however, hadn’t even broken the surface of her congee with the spoon Ryuuji gave her. She only glared at the viscous porridge swirling around inside her bowl.

Taiga turned to her husband. “Hey, toss me a piece of your pork.”

“No way,” Ryuuji said while the crispy breading of the pork crunched in his mouth.

“Come on, Ryuuji! I’ve been eating nothing but soups and porridges for almost three months! If I continue eating like this, I might throw up! I’ve gotten healthier, can’t I have just *one* piece?”

“You can’t risk upsetting your stomach with fried food, Taiga.”

“Aaah! Geez!” Taiga grunted before slurping her congee from the edge of her bowl. Bumps ran down her neck as she took big gulps.

“Hey! Don’t eat too fast! You’ll puke it up!” Ryuuji shouted. Taiga took another big gulp after that, prompting Ryuuji to put his bowl and chopsticks down and rush to his wife’s side. He tipped her bowl downward to slow the flow of congee into her mouth. Taiga pulled her lips away from the bowl and moved it out of Ryuuji’s reach.

“I seriously can’t do anything, can I?” Taiga snarled at Ryuuji scornfully.

“I’m just making sure you don’t hurt yourself! Why are you being so difficult?”

“I’m tired, Ryuuji! You’ve been bugging me for weeks and I’m getting totally sick of it! I want to start doing things without you nagging in my damn ear!” Taiga shoved Ryuuji backward with her elbow.

“Me? Nagging!? I’m just making sure you’re getting proper care! It’s what the doctor recommended!” Ryuuji furrowed his brows over his scary sanpaku eyes. The irritation of the woman who couldn’t even walk on her own only left him confused.

“You’re always talking to that doctor while I’m asleep, huh!? Well, I’d like to listen to him with my own ears! And when I do, I’ll punch him in the face for giving you such stupid advice!” Taiga planted the bowl of congee on the floor and raised her fist in front of her husband’s face. It shivered the entire time it was up as her lack of energy made it a struggle to keep it clenched. Ryuuji took her fist and pushed it back down.

“Taiga, this is for your own recovery! Isn’t that what you want?”

“Not like this! I’m done laying in bed and sleeping all day! It’s about time I start getting around on my own, even if it hurts me!”

“No way! I promised I wouldn’t let you get hur—”

Waaaaaaaaaaaaa!

The couple’s bodies suddenly stiffened at the shrill of their babies’ cries. They turned towards the futon where their three infants laid. All three of them were flailing about, their faces red and scrunched up as they cried loudly. Before they knew it, the two parents were yelling in each other’s faces.

Ryuuji sighed deeply before walking over to their daughters. He picked little Haruko up into his arms and began rocking her.

“Whatever. I don’t want to argue in front of our babies. It’s not good for them to hear us shouting at each other,” he spoke softly.

In her futon, her legs still immobile, Taiga turned away and rested her head in her pillow. “I care a lot about the babies too, you know,” she said with a weak, husky voice. She huffed with exasperation. “But you won’t even let me nurse them myself.”

After Haruko had stopped crying, Ryuuji put her down and took the crying Mitsuko into his arms, beginning to rock her as well.

“I don’t think that’s a problem,” he said. “There’s still many more ways you can be intimate with our daughters.” He caressed Mitsuko’s pillowy cheek with his thumb as her tiny face relaxed. “After all, you still get plenty of skin-to-skin contact.” He smiled warmly at the sight of his daughter smacking her little lips together as she fell asleep in his arms. Finally, after putting Mitsuko down, he would rock his last daughter, Katsuko. Her cries were only half as loud as her sisters’.

Ryuuji looked at his wife’s back, putting his smile away to speak to her firmly.

“Nursing Haruko and Mitsuko is just too painful for you. You aren’t even strong enough to carry them. You’re better off leaving them to Yasuko. You don’t need to do anything difficult, so just settle down and rest.”

With her back still facing Ryuuji, Taiga scoffed.

“Who the hell are you, telling me what’s too painful for me? I’ve given birth three times in a row, and now I’m terribly sick, but nursing my own daughters is too much?”

“You weren’t supposed to go through all of that in the first place!” Ryuuji was shouting again. Katsuko wouldn’t stop crying even while she was being rocked. Her wails only got stronger. However, instead of getting louder, she started coughing from the strain. Ryuuji quickly softened his voice and focused on rocking Katsuko. *Oh... Don’t cry...* When Katsuko calmed down, he told his wife gently.

“I don’t want you to hurt anymore, Taiga...”

“Then stop pulling my babies away from me,” Taiga said. “It hurts more than anything, and it’s even worse that you’re the one doing it. I hate it.”

Ryuuji opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out of it. He just couldn’t decide whether it was right of him to let Taiga struggle while she attempted to perform her motherly duties or keep her away from that pain while suppressing those maternal instincts in turn. Taiga got hurt either way. It was beginning to feel hopeless.

“Aaaghh!” Taiga suddenly grunted. She sat up again, facing her husband, and roared. “And you know what!? I don’t want Ya-chan feeding my babies anymore! And I don’t want them drinking formula! I’m fully capable of feeding them my... self...”

Her body began to sway from exhaustion as her words trailed off. Her eyes couldn’t focus on Ryuuji anymore. It seemed the sudden burst of energy had left her feeling faint. Unable to hold herself up any longer, her upper body fell forward, leaving her elbow to support it on the floor while her head hung low.

Ryuuji huffed and set Katsuko down after she had stopped crying. He went to Taiga’s side and knelt beside her before taking her shoulder.

“Listen, Taiga. Whether you like it or not, you need to understand that this is all for your own good. The best way to recover is with plenty of rest, and sometimes that means having to give up a few things until you’re better,” he tried to talk to her calmly, but an ache was forming in his chest as he gave her this tall order.

“I’ve already given up so much when I fell sick,” Taiga groaned. “I can’t move, I can’t eat, I can barely stay awake... I can’t even do the things a mother is supposed to do... And I hate all of it... At the very least... I just want one of those things... I just want to feel like a mother for once...” She whimpered.

“Trust me, I want all of those things as much as you do,” Ryuuji rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “I want to see you holding your babies, and I want you to nurse Haruko and Mitsuko. But until you really can stand on your own two feet, you’ll need to stay like this, resting, away from harm.”

He tried to push Taiga back into the futon so she could lay down comfortably. However, at the same time, Taiga gritted her teeth and grabbed her bowl of congee.

Splash!

“Uwaah!”

Ryuuji shrieked and his eyes shot open. Taiga had thrown the congee all over Ryuuji’s clothes. The yellowish white lumpy mixture was spread all over his body and across the tatami mat at his feet. Little pieces of green onion and sprinkles of pepper were littered all over his shirt, while the strands of chicken laid flat on the floor. He took a step back and felt the soft, mushy grains of rice getting squished beneath his feet. His upper lip twitched at the mess his wife had made.

“Gaaaah!” Ryuuji roared as he snatched the bowl and spoon out of Taiga’s hands. The force of his grab made Taiga fall back to her futon. She turned away before drawing the

covers over her head and hiding underneath while Ryuuji was analysing his soiled pants, which were dripping with soggy rice.

“I can’t believe you! I can’t believe you at all!” Ryuuji shouted and threw his arms up in frustration. The lack of response from his wife under the covers made him grunt. “Ugh! You’re totally acting like a child!” He said while shaking his head. He stomped towards his closet to get a fresh pair of clothes before storming out of the room, grumbling with his look of frustration.

After Ryuuji shut the door behind him, the room was quiet. With the softness of her covers wrapping every inch of her body and her typical fatigue weighing her body down, Taiga began to doze off. But before she could fully sink into her slumber, her brows wrinkled. Maybe she was being too childish with Ryuuji, she thought, especially after all the trouble he was being put through to care for her. However, at the same time, she was still mad at him for the way he’d been treating her for the past few weeks. In her condition, she was too exhausted to be thinking about all of it, so she shut her eyes tightly to force herself asleep.

In his fresh set of clothes, Ryuuji was rinsing his soiled ones inside a small tub. He gritted his teeth while he vigorously rubbed his clothes with the soapy water, splashing it around while cleaning off all the rice, spices and strands of chicken sticking to its fabric.

“Aaaaagh! She’s so uncooperative! I’m doing everything I can, and I’m trying to do it right! I’m being even more careful than before! That’s what her mother wanted, wasn’t it!?” He shouted to himself. Even though the walls were thin enough for sound to vibrate through them, nobody was awake to hear his words.

After roughly moving his arms to clean his clothes for a few minutes, he needed to stop after his arms had gotten sore. He huffed and puffed while his arms dangled from his shoulders, his hands resting inside the cold foamy water. He let out a long sigh, slouching over the tub of water. Amongst the little bubbles, he could see his face in the reflection on the surface of the water.

“I knew it was going to be tough, but…” His eyes were shut. “I never thought Taiga herself was going to be a challenge…”

A moment later, Ryuuji was standing by the kitchen sink on his own, washing the utensils and kitchenware he’d used for lunch earlier. Taiga remained tucked in her futon, getting her afternoon rest. The floor had been cleaned of the congee that Taiga had flung.

Yasuko was busy at work that day, leaving the couple to watch over their babies, who were napping like their mother was. With most of the household asleep, everything had stagnated. The living room was almost silent, only filled with the ambience of Ryuuji splashing water around in the sink and clanking pots and bowls together.

Bzzzzzt!

Ryuuji turned to the front door after hearing the buzzer. The Takasu household wasn't expecting any guests that day. Ryuuji dried his hands before calmly beginning to approach the door. Maybe Yasuko was returning from work early. Perhaps the landlady needed to relay another noise complaint to them.

"Coming!" He shouted. Either way, unless it was Taiga's mother, he never usually had to worry about who was visiting. He gently pulled the door open to see who was on the other side, letting the bright autumn sunlight pour into the corridor.

"A-ah! Hello, Ryuuji-san," the young woman standing before him greeted. Ryuuji took a moment to look through his memories to see where he recognised the woman's bright and healthy hair in that bob cut. Her height was no different from Minori's, but her posture was small and humble. While this person wasn't personally associated with Ryuuji, his confused face suddenly lit up at the realisation of who the woman was.

"Oh, Ogawa-san! What brings you here today?" The visitor was none other than a woman named Ogawa Aiko, one of Taiga's colleagues she had gotten close with. A friend of Taiga's was a friend of Ryuuji's, so his voice lightened up when he recognised her.

"Just here to check up on Taiga-chan, that's all, hehe..." the woman bowed her head and fidgeted with her fingers as her voice came out shakily.

"Right! Please, come in," Ryuuji stood to the side to let the woman pass through the front door. She was biting her lip into a frown while she quietly stepped amongst the shoes sitting by the entrance. After pulling her own shoes off, she followed Ryuuji to the living room, gripping the strap of her sling bag hanging from her shoulder with both hands while she kept her head down. When Ryuuji turned to her, she'd lift her head and give him a reassuring grin.

The host and guest sat at the short living room table. Behind Ryuuji was the bedroom that his wife and children were sleeping in, while his guest sat with her back facing the kitchen. He poured her a glass of iced barley tea he'd been keeping in the fridge.

"Taiga's resting now, but you can stay until she wakes up," he told his guest.

"Oh, don't worry, I... I can't stay long, anyway," the woman answered. "How is Taiga-chan's condition? Is she recovering well?"

“Her recovery is going fine, but she has a long way to go. She’s too weak to do a lot of things and she’s prone to fainting, so I’m making sure she rests as much as she can,” Ryuuji said while his guest sipped her tea.

The woman wrapped her palms around the cold glass. Even though her eyes were on Ryuuji, her face was looking down at the cup. “It must be tough for you two. Is your family okay financially?”

Ryuuji reassuringly raised his hand. “We’re doing just fine. As strange as it sounds, we’re running on my mother’s salary for essentials. I used to do part-time work, but I quit to become a full-time parent.” Then, with dark circles hanging from his eyes, he looked at his guest confidently. “And if you’re worried about how we’re going to handle moving out, don’t be. We’ve already got a friend to settle all of it, even the cost.”

“That’s nice...” The woman mumbled. “What about all the money that Taiga had been earning? What have you been doing with that?”

“Oh, that?” Ryuuji softly flicked his hand and chuckled. “All of Taiga’s savings have basically dried up from all our big spendings.” He began to count on his fingers. “We purchased furniture for our new house, we’ve spent a lot on Taiga’s hospital care, and we used a good portion of it on equipment for our babies as well.”

“I... I see,” the woman mumbled to herself.

“And what about you, Ogawa-san? How has everyone at work been? It must’ve been a long time since you and your friends have seen her... well, awake,” Ryuuji added.

“Yes, it has been a while,” the woman said while running her finger along the edge of the cup. “Seeing her in that hospital bed was quite a shock, and we were happy to hear that she got discharged and was recovering, but...” Her hands holding the cup fell to her hands. “Everyone at work misses her a lot. She brought a lot of energy to the office, and we weren’t happy with how long it had been since we’d actually spoken with her. The last time we’d seen her was when she was hospitalised.”

The woman set the cup down and held her bag to her stomach. “Everyone’s hoping she’ll return to the office, healthier than ever, and...” She let out an exhausted sigh before opening her bag to reach into it. “Well, that was what I needed to talk to Taiga-chan about.” The woman pulled out an envelope and handed it to Ryuuji. “Management wanted to send it by post, but I wanted to give it to Taiga-chan personally. However, since she’s asleep, you can just pass it on to her when she’s awake.”

Ryuuji felt the smooth, thin and light paper envelope in his hands. The envelope was a bright pink colour. “What is it?” He asked, but by the time he looked up from the envelope, the woman had already stood up and begun adjusting her clothes.

“Uh... Let Taiga-chan open it and see for herself,” the woman faced Ryuuji. “Thank you for the tea, but I must take my leave.”

“Already?” Ryuuji looked at the woman with confusion. His guest bowed before turning towards the kitchen. “You can come back when Taiga’s awake,” he told her reassuringly. She peeked over her shoulder.

“Sure. I’ll visit again sometime,” the visitor said softly. Silence fell upon the Takasu household once more as she prepared to make an exit.

She only took one step toward the kitchen.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by the sound of a sliding door hitting its frame after being pulled open. Ryuuji and the guest veered their eyes towards its source. The guest jolted back and the man quickly stood up as they witnessed the woman standing in the door. It was Taiga, standing on her two twig-like legs while she supported herself with her elbow against the edge of the door. Her chest heaved as she panted heavily.

“Taiga-chan?”

“Taiga!?” Ryuuji yelled, shocked by the sight of his wife, the one who only had the strength to crawl around on the floor, standing on her own two feet. He was too shocked to even move to his wife’s side to catch her if she fell.

Taiga’s panting softened, allowing her to look up at the guest and smile. “O... Ogawa-senpai? Did you want to see me?” She said weakly.

The visitor could only stare. “I thought you were asleep...”

Taiga’s head began to move, prompting the visitor to quickly turn her head as well. They were both focused on the envelope in Ryuuji’s hands.

“That envelope... It’s for me, isn’t it?”

“T-Taiga-chan, I...”

Taiga’s legs tremored before finally giving out. Ryuuji leapt to her side before she could collapse, slowly kneeling and setting his wife down to her knees. The visitor stepped forward, wanting to help, but she reeled back. Taiga’s fingers touched the envelope.

“Let me read it,” she uttered before taking it out of her husband’s hands. The visitor gripped the strap of her bag as she watched her friend tear apart the seal under the flap and flip it open. She pulled out a neatly folded piece of pink A4-sized paper. After unravelling it, she began to read the paragraphs of text written on one side of the paper. The visitor’s

breathing grew heavier with each word that Taiga focused on and each sentence her eyes went along. She bit her lip, waiting for her friend's response. Ryuuji had shuffled back, leaving the content of Taiga's letter out of his view.

Taiga calmly closed her eyes and folded the letter back into its envelope. She set the envelope on her lap and bowed her head.

"I understand. Thank you for bringing this to me, Ogawa-senpai," Taiga spoke firmly.

"B-but—" Aiko stuttered. "Are you really okay with this? You haven't even been working here for that long! You just got promoted last year! You were so excited about it, too! You were one of the most hardworking and valuable people there!"

"Not much I can do now, heheh," Taiga snickered. "What good is a woman that'll just spend her work hours sleeping?"

"Taiga-chan..." Aiko got on one knee in front of her friend. "You were much more than the work you gave. Across all departments, you were what kept all of us motivated to keep working and keep moving forward!" She grabbed onto Taiga's slim and withered shoulders. "Without you around, the office just wouldn't be the same!"

Taiga kept up a reassuring smile for Aiko.

"Everyone at work will manage. I know what they're capable of—"

"It's not just that!" Aiko shouted. Tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Even if that were true, it still isn't fair! It can't happen like this, it just can't!" She sniffled as she wiped her sleeve against her wet face. "We threw a party for you before you went on maternity leave... None of us would've thought it'd be the last time we'd see you in office! This isn't fair to you, or anyone at work!"

Taiga felt a warmth emit from her chest as she watched the tears drip from Aiko's chin. She lifted her arm and caressed her hand against her friend's moist cheek.

"You're right, Ogawa-senpai," she said composedly. "It isn't fair at all, but... that's just life, isn't it?" They held each other's hands. Taiga's head tilted down. "I've had a lot of bad things happen to me in my life, and this is just one of them. After giving birth, I fell sick, I was constantly in pain, and I lost a lot of freedom."

Taiga pulled Aiko's hands closer to her chest and gazed up into her friend's glistening eyes. "But I also had a lot of good happen to me as well! My husband's been taking good care of me and making sure my recovery is going smoothly. My mother-in-law has been supporting us through and through. And on top of all of that..." She turned to the open bedroom door behind her, her eyes on the infants sleeping in their wide mattress. "I've got three little bundles of joy sitting with me at home."

Aiko's sniffing slowly stopped. Her eyes, which were strained from crying, began to relax and soften.

"So don't you worry, Ogawa-senpai. I may no longer be the office girl you know and love, but that just means I can focus everything into becoming an awesome mother instead! This isn't the end of Takasu Taiga, you here!?" Taiga shook Aiko's hands and gave her a toothy grin so wide, her teeth could reflect light. Her eyes smiled tightly until she looked like a happy and silly little seal.

Aiko wiped her tears away one last time, her nose and cheeks left rosy red. "But... You'll come back, right? Everyone at the office... We'll get to work with you again, right?"

"Definitely," Taiga nodded strongly. "When I'm back in shape, let's work our hearts out together."

"How are you going to do that?" Aiko whimpered. "Now that you're a mother... Will they even let you return?"

"If they try to turn me away, I'll just tear everything down until they *have* to hire me," Taiga roared softly. "And if that doesn't work, then get everyone at the office to back me up, alright?" She cheekily tilted her head at Aiko.

"Hahah..." Aiko couldn't help but chuckle. "Alright, I'll tell everyone that."

The frown on Aiko's face had faded away and was replaced by a calm smile. Taiga's grin widened as she gave Aiko one final hug before she'd take her leave. Aiko rubbed Taiga's slender back and stroked her hair while Taiga buried her face in her friend's chest. Her husband simply watched the tender sight from the side. She dropped the letter to the tatami mat floor to wrap her hands around her friend's back as well.

Ryuuji picked up the envelope to read its contents for himself.

... termination of employment due to being medically unfit to work...

He could already tell from the discussion his wife was having with her friend, but seeing the words for himself made his eyes widen. He remembered the day Taiga got promoted at work, and how overjoyed she was to be able to buy him and Yasuko nice things and take them out to nice dinners using the fruits of her own labour.

Part of him had hoped that, assuming the delivery went smoothly, Taiga would return to work after recovering as if nothing about their lives had changed at all, the only difference being the three wonderful additions to their family and the new house they'd be living in.

But that wasn't what happened at all. Taiga had to sacrifice everything to fulfil their dream of having a family. She had almost lost her life, she had given up her health, and now, she was out of the job that she was so proud of.

And then, there was Ryuuji, the fulltime househusband and stay-at-home dad. What did he give up to have this family? He was cleaning the house and feeding his wife and mother. In the end, he didn't have to change anything. No, Taiga only had to lose everything because he was allowed to be careless. If he hadn't let his wife go into labour at home, if he had just scheduled the C-section earlier, Taiga wouldn't have had to lose anything.

Ryuuji was gripping the letter tightly. He looked up at the two women hugging each other. Taiga's chin was now resting on her friend's shoulder. Aiko didn't seem to notice the look of desperation Taiga had, with her tightly shut eyes, furrowed brows and clenched jaw. He could only look at his wife with dismay.

"Come by again some other time. It's been a while since I've sat down and had tea with you," Taiga said while Ryuuji carried her by the arm. Aiko was by the entrance putting her shoes back on. She turned the handle of the front door and pushed it open. Before she left, she looked at Taiga one last time with a big smile.

"Sure will!" She and Taiga gave one last little wave to each other before she left and began making her way down the stairs outside. Ryuuji shut the door behind her, leaving the Takasu household in peace at last.

Ryuuji softly opened his mouth.

"Taiga, I..."

"Ryuuji."

Taiga interrupted.

"Put me back to bed, please."

Ryuuji saw the tired frown on Taiga's face, with her eyes left half open.

"But what about..."

"It's fine, Ryuuji," she uttered before taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. "Just let me get some rest. I need it."

Ryuuji could only gaze at Taiga's exhausted face as if it were a painting in a museum. Knowing what Taiga had lost, he could only imagine what she was going through. He'd wrap his arms under her shoulders and press his chest against hers, giving her a warm embrace. In a moment of cold like this, all he could do was try to keep her warm. Taiga stared drearly at the ceiling as she took it all in.

After a moment, Ryuuji placed one hand on Taiga's rump and the other across her back. He lifted her up, her legs spreading around his body while her arms wrapped behind his neck. Her face rested against his shoulder. After accepting the warmth of her husband's body,

her palms and fingers felt the soft fabric of his shirt. She closed her eyes and let Ryuuji carry the weight of her little body.

Taiga felt the little vibrations of her husband's footsteps against the floor and the crunching of the tatami mat beneath his feet. Finally, she felt the fluffy softness of her futon engulf her entire body as she was laid to rest. Slowly but surely, her mind slipped away bit by bit as her body was overcome by fatigue and she fell into a deep slumber.

It all went dark for her.