

Chapter 4: Do The Right Thing

“Haah! Haah!”

Ryuaji barged into a hospital room, resting the side of his body against the door he had opened by supporting himself with his hand pressed on the shiny laminated wood. Sweat dripped down his chin and soaked his armpits as he carried his two infants—Haruko on his front and Mitsuko on his back, their little chests facing him.

“Aah!”

After taking a moment to catch his breath, he gasped and straightened his back.

There was Seina sitting on a stool by his wife’s bedside. She was quiet. Her face was firm. Even with all the noise Ryuaji made entering the room, she didn’t even flinch or turn her head towards him. She was focused only on her daughter laying in that white bed. Her hand had reached over the railing and was gently caressing her daughter’s pale palm with her thumb. Taiga’s little brother was sitting on Seina’s lap, silently watching his mother hold his sister’s hand.

“Ryuaji.”

Naru uttered firmly, greeting his son-in-law. He stepped between him and his wife, standing tall with his hands together in front of his waist as he faced the distressed man. Even though his complexion was softer than Seina’s, he remained stern and foreboding.

Ryuaji’s eyes moved from Naru’s face to his own wife’s calmly shut eyes. Being reminded of the days he’d spent in the hospital with her after she gave birth made him want to throw up. Creases had appeared below his wife’s tired eyelids. Her mouth was opened only a centimetre, moving slowly with her weak breaths. The hand that Seina was stroking wasn’t moving at all. He could imagine how cold it felt.

Ryuaji huffed in anguish and frustration. He turned towards Seina, his lips quivering.

“I-I’m sorry, I was careless. I just passed out, and—”

Naru raised his hand in front of him.

“My apologies, Ryuaji, but Seina doesn’t have anything to say to you.”

Ryuaji’s eyes widened.

“She’s putting her foot down on the agreement you two had. There’s no reasoning with her. You couldn’t hold your end of the deal, so this is how it has to be.”

Ryuaji peeked around Naru's shoulder. He spotted Seina's eye glaring at him from the side before promptly looking at her daughter again.

"Hey, look..." Naru took Ryuaji's shoulder, grabbing his attention. "I know I tried to show sympathy last time, but I need to put my foot down too. Taiga's well-being is my concern too, you know?" He rubbed his shoulder in an attempt to soothe him, but Ryuaji's distraught face didn't shift at all. "Trust me, Seina and I hate that this is happening as much as you do. We just want what's best for both Taiga and you."

Ryuaji's head fell as he let out a sigh, his face watching the plastic hospital floor and his bangs draping over his face. He shut his eyes and furrowed his brows. Part of him wanted to cry, but there was just no point. He bit his lip. Anything that came out of his mouth would be fruitless.

However, he at least wanted her to know what he truly felt.

"I did everything I could..." He said weakly. "I lost sleep caring for her. I made sure she got plenty of rest, took her medication, ate healthily... I helped her care for our daughters, and I did it all on my own." He sighed deeply before raising his head, his eyes still glued to the floor. "In the end, I let myself go and passed out. I couldn't help her when she needed me the most. That's why she's here."

Naru stood by his side and patted him on the shoulder.

"We hear you, Ryuaji. For what it's worth, Taiga's been quite healthy for most of the days you've had her. Perhaps now would be a good time for us to take Taiga and your daughters off your hands. Get yourself plenty of rest. You must still be exhausted," Naru said. His voice had softened.

However, Ryuaji couldn't respond to Naru's comforting words. The fact that he let this happen felt like a stab to the heart. He failed to look after his wife. He wasn't even sure if he was deserving of rest.

Ryuaji looked over at Seina.

"I'm really, really sorry, Seina-san. You were right. I'm really not worthy of caring for Taiga on my own. I got stubborn and arrogant. Even though I was begging to be by her side, I wasn't careful enough and let her get hurt."

The words tried to cling to the back of his throat, but he knew he had to let them out.

"Please, take care of Taiga and my daughters. I hope they can be safer under your care, and I hope you can forgive me for the trouble I've caused."

Ryuaji resigned. He didn't need to hear anything else from Seina or Naru. This was his admission of defeat.

Suddenly, the sound of a mature woman's voice broke the silence.

"It's not your fault, Ryuaji," Seina uttered. She finally looked him in the eye, her head tilted, resting her cheek in her palm and her elbow against the railing. "You took on more than you could handle on your own and it didn't end very well, but you did all that because you love Taiga, don't you?" Her fingers ran along Taiga's slender arm. "If she were awake right now, she'd probably yell at me for doing this. Then she'd punch you in the face for letting me do this."

Seina sighed before straightening her posture and looking at Ryuaji with her glowing brown eyes. She began to gently rub her son's head.

"But you're both young, Ryuaji. Even with your good intentions, you're going to make unwise choices. You might feel like adults, but you've only seen the start of it. That's why us elders still have to watch over you."

She placed her son on another stool before getting on her feet, bringing herself closer to Ryuaji's eye level.

"Of course, loving each other is far from a bad thing. In fact, I'm glad you're as worried for Taiga as I am. Despite how everything has gone since Taiga gave birth, I can't doubt that there isn't any other man that can take care of her better than you do," she said tenderly as she stepped forward. "That's why I want to hold onto her until you've grown more, Ryuaji. I'm sure that once you've had that time to be on your own, you'll return to being an even better husband to Taiga than before."

Once she was just a few centimetres away from her son-in-law's chest, she grabbed both of his shoulders and gave Ryuaji her motherly gaze.

"And the decision you're making now shows me that you are growing. Learning when to let go is a very mature thing to do," Seina uttered before giving him a light smile. However, with her seemingly kind words, Ryuaji's eyes fell to the floor again as he removed her hands from his shoulders.

"You don't have to let me down easy, Seina-san," he said. "It was wrong of me to take her away from you when you were as frightened as I was. You have every right to be angry."

"I'm not mad at you, Ryuaji. Not now," she told him before turning back to her daughter. "I'm more mad at myself for not stepping in before something like this happened," she sighed. "I've already made that mistake too many times."

Before he knew it, Ryuaji felt his hands get clasped together by Seina's warm fingers.

“You really were doing a great job while Taiga was under your care. I’ve read every update you’ve given me. Don’t let an incident like this discourage you from learning, even when you and Taiga are apart.”

“I... I understand,” Ryuaji muttered.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done up until this point. I promise to take good care of Taiga and your daughters. I’m sure that once she’s well again, you two can enjoy your lovely family life all on your own,” Seina said as she gently shook Ryuaji’s hands.

“I see. Thank you, Seina-san.”

Those little words left Ryuaji’s mouth like a puff of exhaust fumes. His shoulders and neck hung low. He didn’t have the energy to respond. It didn’t matter how much praise and thanks Seina gave him. She was going to be taking Taiga away regardless. He already knew it was over before she started talking, and as much as he hated it, he had to accept that this was better for his family.

Now, he just wanted their exchange to be over.

“K... K... Ka...”

Everyone in the room suddenly heard the scratchy sounds of a dry throat. The adults quickly turned towards Taiga in her hospital bed. They spotted her little lips twitching and quivering as little breaths of air left her mouth. Her eyelids remained too heavy to open, but the rest of her body seemed to be waking up.

“Katsu... Ko... My baby... Is she okay...?” Taiga said weakly.

Ryuaji suddenly felt a jolt inside his body. At Taiga’s voice, he had inched forward, and his mouth was about to open. He still wanted to be there for her. That urge was ingrained in his body.

However, he stopped in his tracks when Seina rushed to her bedside. She immediately bent down and placed her palms on Taiga’s soft cheeks, stroking the strands of brunette hair next to her face with her thumbs and brushing her supple skin.

“She’s okay, Taiga, she’s okay. The doctors are still looking after her, but once she’s well, you can hold her as much as you’d like. Just rest first, alright?” Seina spoke in a low voice to soothe her daughter. With that, Taiga gave her a small nod before falling back asleep, her head sinking into her pillow.

It didn’t even look like she knew she was in a hospital bed. Despite that, Taiga seemed so comfortable being held by her mother. The way she put her to rest so easily almost startled Ryuaji. In his eyes, Seina was far more skilled and trustworthy. The thought had put his urge to rest. Taiga was hers now.

"I can show you to the room that Katsuko's being kept in if you'd like," Naru said as he stepped to his son-in-law's side.

"I went there before coming here," Ryuaji muttered. "She's in critical condition, but the doctor assured me she was going to be alright. It would be nice relaying that to Taiga when she wakes up. She would've been devastated if anything happened to our little Katsuko."

Ryuaji sighed as he stared at the sight of Taiga's mother caressing her forehead as her face relaxed and she slowly fell into her slumber.

"But it looks like you two already have everything handled."

Once Taiga was snug under her white covers, Seina firmly faced Ryuaji once more.

"We'll be coming to pick up your daughters and Taiga's things tonight. Make sure they're ready before we arrive," she exacted.

Ryuaji nodded once.

Ryuaji silently stood behind the front door after locking it behind him. Taiga's shoes were left beside his feet. They had sat there idly while she hurriedly left the house to help her breathless daughter. The infants on his chest and back were sleeping comfortably, their little chubby legs dangling from their carriers while their little mouths were left open.

He stared into the empty air, his breathing so quiet that not even an ant could crawl by without being heard and his body so still that he could be mistaken for a wax statue. Without his mother or his wife at home, everything within the Takasu household had been brought to a standstill.

The sky outside was growing dark. It wouldn't be long before Taiga's parents would arrive. There was something weighing him down, keeping his feet stuck to the concrete beneath him. However, it'd be even more humiliating to disappoint Seina again and make her and Naru pack Taiga's things themselves.

Ryuaji inhaled slowly, then released the stale air through his nose. His eyes were set on his and Taiga's bedroom.

Haruko and Mitsuko were set down on their futon. Ryuaji had draped a soft blanket over them as they continued to slumber. After that, he was focused on only one thing. He rolled a light, empty luggage to the middle of his bedroom. Its casing was covered in

Bauhinia blakeana flower stickers—souvenirs they'd kept from their lovely honeymoon in Hong Kong.

After opening it and laying it out on the floor, he'd rummage through the closet in his room and pick out clothes from Taiga's side of it. He took out a massive pile of shirts, pants and underwear, the pile almost as tall as his own body, until the closet was nearly empty of anything that belonged to his wife. He sat down on his knees beside the open luggage and took a T-shirt from the pile. He folded it neatly before placing it inside.

Then he took another piece of clothing and did the same. And another. And another.

After what only seemed like ten minutes, Ryuji tried to reach for another piece of clothing, only to feel the flat tatami beneath his palm. The pile of clothes beside him had completely disappeared and one side of the luggage was filled to the brim with Taiga's clothes. His skillful folding made each article incredibly compact. With one side of the luggage occupied by clothes, he filled the other side with Taiga's essentials—prescribed medication, first-aid, baby care, and a soft pillow she always used to help her sleep, among other things.

Taiga's luggage was rolled towards the front door, sitting on the raised floor before it. His daughters' belongings needed to be packed next.

Ryuji took the massive duffel bag that had been sitting in a corner of Yasuko's dark room. Once again, in the middle of his bedroom, he zipped it open. It was going to be their hospital bag. All the supplies he, Taiga and Yasuko had packed together for Taiga's delivery were still there after the many weeks that had passed. Some of the things in there were still cleanly sealed in their plastic wrapping.

He only took out a few items to clear out some space for the babies' clothes and ointments, including Katsuko's own prescribed medication. On top of that, he also packed some of the babies' toys.

Squeak!

As he shoved one of the rubber toys into the bag, he'd accidentally squeeze it, making it release a high-pitch squeak. Ryuji paid no mind to it until he heard the sound of a little baby's whine behind him. He turned to the futon to find Haruko raising her hands up, her tiny fingers grabbing at the air.

"Oh, Haruko..."

After zipping the bag shut, he walked over to his daughter. The moment their eyes met, he witnessed a wide smile stretch across her cute face, her tongue peeking out of her

toothless mouth. He felt his heart skip a beat. An immense warmth radiated through his body the longer he looked at his baby's big brown eyes.

He couldn't contain the urge to scoop Haruko into his arms and cradle her. As she laid there beneath his chest, she gazed upwards with curiosity. Seeing her wide stare tickled Ryuaji until a little smile formed on his face. With that, the baby returned the smile with a squeaky chuckle.

The silence of the room blocked everything out. It was just him and his baby, gazing into each other's eyes with tranquility. The moment felt more worth than gold.

Ryuaji noticed Mitsuko in the corner of his eye, her chest rising and falling in her slumber. He acted greedily for the warmth he was feeling, lifting Mitsuko with his arm so she could join her sister under his chest. He rocked both of them, making Haruko giggle with the motion while Mitsuko continued to sleep.

Suddenly, he felt something pinch his shirt. Mitsuko, while sleepily smacking her lips, had gripped onto it with both her hands and buried her face in it. The sight of her comfort made him stop. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes seeing his two bundles of joy clinging to him so happily.

However, his body turned cold when he was reminded of his situation after he spotted the bag he had just finished packing.

Ryuaji hugged both his daughters close to him.

"I'm sorry, you two... I'll hold you two again soon..."

Bzzzzzt!

The buzzer at the front door rang through the whole household, putting an end to the familial moment. With Haruko and Mitsuko in their carriers on Ryuaji's body, and the duffel bag set beside Taiga's luggage, he approached the door. He slowly turned the door handle and pushed the door open.

There stood the anticipated guests.

"Hello, Ryuaji. Do you have everything ready?" Seina asked, right in front of the door and in his face. Ryuaji's eyes drifted towards the side and spotted Naru carrying a familiar petite girl, her arm over his shoulder.

"T-Taiga?" Ryuaji stuttered. "You're out of the hospital already?"

She had her face turned away to the street lamps illuminating the road.

“Fortunately, the collapse wasn’t as big of an emergency as it seemed, and she recovered rather quickly with rest,” Naru added. “Katsuko’s still in the hospital though. She’ll be discharged in a few days.”

“Taiga and I have already discussed our arrangement, so we just need to collect your daughters and their luggage,” Seina said clearly with her hands together in front of her chest. She peeked over Ryuaji’s shoulder. “Ah, great, you’ve already saved us plenty of trouble. Thank you, Ryuaji.”

“Mom...” Taiga said weakly. “Can you... take Haruko and Mitsuko for me?”

“Very well,” Seina said, absentmindedly taking the two infants off Ryuaji’s chest and back. Once they were on her body, she huffed. “Goodness, they really are quite heavy.”

Taiga let go of her stepfather’s shoulder and trudged towards Ryuaji.

“Huh?” Ryuaji was baffled by the sight of Taiga on her two feet again just after being discharged from the hospital. Naru and Seina went silent, just as confused as he was. Once she was right in front of her husband, her head hung low without a word, her hair covered her face. Her arms hung from her shoulders like vines.

That was when she made her move.

“ORAAAAAA!”

“Gyaah!”

Taiga suddenly threw a fist at her husband’s face, letting out a battle cry as she threw it like the end of a flail. Fortunately, Ryuaji managed to catch it. He clasped it tightly inside his hand and halted its trajectory.

“Taiga, what are you—”

She threw her other fist at Ryuaji, prompting him to catch it as well. Ryuaji leaned closer to his wife as he raised her entrapped fists above him.

“Hey! What’s your problem—”

Thunk!

“Ow!”

Taiga’s head had thrusted straight into Ryuaji’s nose, the impact causing him to reel back. He freed her hands from his grasp as he fell backward.

“Gyaah!”

Ryuaji tripped over the raised step by the entrance of his home. His back collided with the wooden floor. He held his neck and writhed as the stinging pain travelled through his spine. That night, he had made the painful discovery that, even while she was terribly sick, she still fought like the tiger she was.

“Nnnngh... What was that for!?” He cried out.

“How could you agree to this, Ryuji!?” Taiga yelled with all her might. Her legs and body swayed with each word as if she could faint at any moment. Seeing this, Naru took her shoulder to keep her on her feet.

“You knew I would’ve hated this, and yet you’re just going along with what my mother says!? I can’t accept this! Not one bit!”

“C-can’t you tolerate your mother for a few weeks!? We agreed to this a long time ago! It’s too late to go back on it now!”

“I won’t let anyone else care for me but you! That was what we promised, wasn’t it? What happened to that!?”

Ryuji sat up and groaned, still holding onto his neck. All his pain and resentment was rushing into his head from his wife’s pestering.

“I couldn’t do it, Taiga! I want to be the one to look after you, I really do! But I failed to do it right! I’m not good enough for this, and if I chose to be stubborn, you’d just get hurt! You need to be with someone better!”

“But you are better, Ryuji!” Taiga shouted over him. “How could you let this happen? How could you even say that about yourself?”

Ryuji clenched his teeth.

“How could *I* let this happen?”

He quickly got back on his feet, towering over his wife.

“Who was the one that went out and collapsed, huh!?” He shouted in Taiga’s face, his shadow cast over her. “Seriously, what were you thinking straining yourself like that?”

Taiga’s mouth was sealed shut hearing her husband’s shrill voice in her ears. Her eyes were left wide open. Seeing the look of shock, Ryuji withdrew and took a step back. His eyes fell to the floor.

“If I hadn’t passed out... If I had been there to help you when you needed me, this wouldn’t have had to happen!” He tipped his head up and clenched his fists as he shouted into the air. “That’s why I’m not good enough for you!”

His white flag was raised. He brought his head back down in shame and spoke like the weak man he was. “Your mother is much more experienced than I am,” he exasperatedly gestured his hand towards Seina. “She’s even better with kids too. Please, Taiga, just accept her care and leave me be.”

Taiga looked at her mother in disbelief, leaving a small pause of silence.

"I'm not working anymore either," Seina added. "I'll have all the time in the world to watch over you, Taiga. You don't have to worry about me."

She wouldn't stomach any of the ideas her husband and mother put before her.

"It won't even be forever. Maybe once you're well again, I'll be ready to look after you and our girls."

Ryuaji's eyes remained pitiful and pathetic.

"Ryuaji..."

Taiga's exhaustion showed in the scratchiness of her voice.

"I don't care about whether I get hurt or if I'm getting the best care or not. I just want my husband with me," she said desperately before firming her voice. "Do you even know how important the first few months of development are for our babies? Just imagine what kind of effect that's going to have when we're so far apart."

"They already have you, Taiga," Ryuaji muttered, his palm sliding against his neck and his eyes watching the dull wall beside him. "As much as I love being with them, the girls are better off with a parent that isn't such a mess."

The words seemed to just fall out of his mouth, without a single thought behind them. When his gaze rose back to his wife's face, he felt a chill run up his spine. Her brows were wrinkled with a downturned open frown. The fact that her own husband was saying all those things left her devastated.

"L-look, if it gets lonely, I'll visit! We can call each other over the phone, too. I just... I can't be with you right now..."

The image of Taiga in front of him repelled his eyes like a magnet.

"That just isn't the same..." She uttered weakly. "You know, I thought this family was something we both wanted. I thought we'd both put all our all into this no matter what happened. Even with how weak I've gotten, I've never stopped trying my hardest to be the best mother I can be."

Taiga sniffled, her sentences getting shakier the more she spoke.

"I was hoping you wouldn't let anything get between us, but... I guess you aren't as committed to this as I'd wanted you to be."

"Taiga, I'm more committed than anyone else. That's why I'm doing this! I'm just trying to do the right thing—"

"No, not another word," she interjected, her face turning away from Ryuaji once again. She spoke sternly. "If I really don't get a say in anything, then I'm not going to bother listening either."

She took a deep breath.

“If this is what you want, then I’ll...” Her head began to sway.

“I’ll make do...” Her voice quietened. “On my own...”

Her eyelids fell, followed by the rest of her body. She was on her way to hitting the stone hard floor, but Naru immediately caught her from under her shoulders. Her body jerked as her consciousness returned as soon as it left. Ryuaji flinched the moment he witnessed her head lowering, but stopped himself since Naru was already there to fill in for him.

“I-I’m fine,” Taiga mumbled as she stabilised her feet on the smooth floor. Finally, she uttered. “Let’s just go.”

Those were the last words from Taiga that would reach Ryuaji’s ears that night. While she trudged towards the staircase and supported herself against the handrailing, Naru walked in to take the luggage Ryuaji had prepared.

Seina placed a hand on his arm and looked up at him with a little smile.

“Thank you for cooperating, Ryuaji. You certainly won’t regret this,” she told him before following her daughter. She had her arm around Taiga’s back to keep her from falling. They waited for Naru, who was just walking out of the front door with everything in hand. He, too, would stop and place a hand on Ryuaji’s shoulder.

“Hey, Ryuaji, sorry for putting you through this,” he said. “I can’t go against anything my wife says, but I’ll try to help as much as I can. Seina and Taiga will be heading home, but I’ll still be in town to collect Katsuko and bring her back once she’s well, so you can still talk to me then.”

Ryuaji only nodded, his lips as tight as the seal of an envelope.

They all moved down the stairs together. Ryuaji stood on the edge of the staircase landing to watch their backs as the distance grew between them.

Then, something caught his eye.

Little Haruko, sitting in front of Seina’s chest, was peeking over her grandmother’s shoulder with her jewels for eyes. They were looking straight at him. Over Seina’s shoulder, she raised her chubby little hand over it, reaching desperately for her father. Her fingers opened and closed repeatedly as if she were trying to grab a hold of him. Nobody seemed to notice her soft whines except for him.

But what could he do? The decision was set in stone. The time away from his family, the time he constantly told himself he needed, began then and there. He watched from the top of the staircase as Naru packed all the luggage into the back of his car, which was parked on the road just outside the apartment.

Taiga entered the row of passenger seats, sitting between two baby seats that Seina had prepared. The grandmother would help fasten their miniature seatbelts over their small waists. Haruko had a seat facing the apartment. Even after the car door was shut, her eyes were still shining through the window. Once everyone was inside, the car drove off. Ryuaji stood there, holding onto the handrailing until he couldn't even hear the rumbling of the car's engine.

His ears were overwhelmed by the silent ambience of the night. The crispness of the leaves of the swaying Zelkova trees filled the air. The bangs of Ryuaji's hair danced with the gentle breeze. His sanpaku eyes stared down drearily as they hid from the grace of the tranquil moonlight. The choir of the night was left with an absence of a human's voice.

Ryuaji breathed in, before letting the air seep out like the cold breeze he was feeling standing from the second floor of that old, crusty building. He turned back into his apartment. It would be no different from the days before he'd met Taiga, where he'd be the only one inhabiting it during the lonely hours of dark.

The little sunlight leaking through his window illuminated his bedroom. Ryuaji tossed and turned in his futon, his eyelids still softly shut. His mind still wanted to continue his rest, but his body had already woken up. His hand was patting around the other futon next to him, expecting to feel at least a slender arm or a lock of luscious brunette hair, but all he could feel was the soft cushioning of the futon itself.

That absence brought him out.

Ryuaji sat up and scratched at his tangled hair, his eyes opening ever so slowly. He gazed at the empty futon next to him to let the fact settle in—his wife wouldn't be sleeping next to him for a while. He wouldn't wake up to his wife's annoyed groaning, nor would he be preparing any special meals to suit her needs.

He turned to the place his daughters would usually sleep, but rather than seeing three big, adorable babies with puffy cheeks and chubby legs, kicking about or crying to be held, he was met with the plain white fabric of the mattress. The fresh diapers in his closet would sit untouched. There wasn't a single neon-coloured toy strewn about in that bedroom either. He'd given everything to Seina.

"Ugh..." Ryuaji's head hung low. His knees were up and his arms rested atop of them.

Life should've gone as normal for him. If anything, the burden of work would be even lighter. He was able to take a shower and get changed like normal. Yasuko was returning later

that day, so he prepared meals for himself and his mother like normal. There was a mess of things in the living room, so he was able to tidy it all up like normal.

Nobody needed anything more from him. He could even get more rest than he did before. It should've been the most productive he'd been in weeks, and if he could keep that up, he might even be ready to start caring for his family again.

And yet, laying in his futon with all the free time he had couldn't have felt any more lonelier. Not even the singing of the birds or the laughs of the neighbourhood children coming through his window could soothe him.

On top of the neatly folded covers and the well-fluffed pillow, he could only stare at the dreary ceiling above him. Maybe there was something else he could do. Perhaps there was an errand he'd forgotten about. It would probably be a good idea to get a part-time job then. But none of that work sounded fulfilling in the slightest.

He got on his feet again and eyed every corner of his room. There had to be something he'd forgotten to put away. His desk came into view. He realised he hadn't organised his drawers yet. He remembered the countless times he'd opened that drawer and had to rummage through all the junk inside just to find what he needed. With a new task to take on, he marched towards his desk and pulled the drawer all the way open.

Tsssss! Tsssss!

The hiss sent a shock through Ryuaji's ears. The force of the drawer being pulled made a baby rattle roll into his view. Spotting that toy caused his body to freeze. He had forgotten to pack it along with the rest of his daughters' toys. He gently picked it up, grasping its handle tightly.

The rattle had a cute little cartoonish tiger's head on the end of it, with a big open smile as it bore its sharp white fangs. The handle had a black and orange stripe pattern going along it. There was also a little button just on the side of it. Ryuaji pressed it with his thumb.

Gaaaoo! Gaaaooo!

It sounded like a woman's silly imitation of a tiger's roar coming through a speaker inside the tiger's head. Hearing it made him chuckle, but he could only wonder what it was doing inside his desk drawer.

The memories he'd made with this toy came rushing back to him.

“Gaaah!”

They were shopping together at a baby store. Taiga was still pregnant then. Her belly was large enough for her little brother to hide underneath it. The ankle-length maternity dress

she wore was exposing her bare, tired knees. She constantly had her hands on her lower back and she was tilted back wherever she walked. Even though Ryuaji was the one carrying all their shopping and belongings, she was carrying a heavier load of oversized triplets.

“Nnngh... Ryuaji, there isn’t anything good here! Let’s go! My feet are dying here!”

“Hold on, I just know there’s something that’ll calm them down...”

Taiga was sweating bullets trying to endure the discomfort of her daughters tossing and turning inside her tummy. With how large and strong they were in relation to her petiteness, even just a single movement to one side would shift her hips along with it.

While Taiga was standing there with her legs trembling, trying not to collapse, Ryuaji was eyeing the shelf of baby toys in front of them. He’d look at each toy closely, occasionally taking one and adding it to the massive clump of colourful toys he was carrying with his arm. He’d grabbed enough toys for the clump to grow up to his head.

“They’re getting impatient here!” Taiga yelled painfully.

“Hm... Alright, I’ve got enough,” Ryuaji said to himself.

He approached his wife with the gigantic stack of toys in his arms. Its shadow cast over Taiga’s short stature. He carefully took one toy from the clump and held it next to Taiga’s round belly. The first one had a button that played jaunty music from a cheap speaker inside of it, with colourful lights flashing all around it.

“Feel anything different?” Ryuaji asked after pressing the button.

“Not at all... Haah...” Taiga said through her struggling breaths.

Ryuaji shrugged and placed the toy to the side. The next toy was a plushie that was just bigger than Ryuaji’s hand. He held it next to Taiga’s belly and squeezed it, making it release a loud squeak, before waiting quietly for a response.

“Nothing?”

Taiga vigorously shook her head without a word, flinging her sweat everywhere. Her face was red and scrunched up as she grimaced from her irritation.

Another toy returned to the shelves. Seeing his wife look like she was about to pass out, Ryuaji hurriedly took the next one. His hurriedness caused the clump to shake. He held a toy in the shape of a parakeet next to Taiga’s belly once more and, with the press of a button, played the sound of the bird’s incessant squawking.

“Nngaaah!”

“Aaah!”

They both shrieked as one of the babies in Taiga’s belly performed a furiously strong kick, knocking the toy out of Ryuaji’s hand.

“Are you trying to kill me!? It felt like Katsuko was about to burst out of me!”

“I didn’t think she’d react that way!”

“Gyyiih! Look what you’ve done! They’re all angry now!” Taiga cried out, her hips unable to stabilise as her babies tossed about even harder. “Oouuughh...” She bent forward, holding her pregnant belly tightly as she felt the discomfort grow.

“T-Taiga? Are you alright?” Ryuubi asked, the toys in his arms as shaky as his wife.

“Nnnnng...”

Her husband’s heart began to race.

“I-Is it time!? Do we need to go to the hospital!?”

The pain worsened and worsened until finally, it was all brought to an end.

“GUOOOUUGH!!”

Her babies dealt the finishing blow with a powerful kick in the very front of her belly. Ryuubi jumped back as the massive bump protruding from Taiga’s womb extended in his direction. Taiga let out an agonising groan, her face completely dazed as if she’d just gotten hit in the head.

“Ouuuugghhh!!!”

The protruding bump remained for a few seconds, stretching the skin of Taiga’s belly out. Finally, it receded, leaving her feeling faint from the attack she’d just sustained. Her head was left swirling.

“Oooh... I can’t... take it...”

Taiga’s legs finally gave out. Her arms had gone limp. She collapsed on her knees, then her back fell to the floor. Her limbs were spread out and her whole body was laying flat as if she were about to make a snow angel. In this tough and treacherous battle, the Palmtop Tiger had lost the match against her own cubs that hadn’t even left the womb yet. One could expect a referee to step in, tap the floor three times and go *You’re out!*

“TAIGAAA!!!” Ryuubi shrieked. “Gyaah!”

The clump of toys gave out as well, falling out of Ryuubi’s arms and piling up at his feet. But he didn’t mind the mess at first. His arms needed to be freed. He lunged onto the floor beside his wife to check on her condition.

“Taiga! Are you—” But upon closer inspection, he immediately realised he had nothing to worry about.

“Hooh... Hooh... Ooohh... They just won’t calm down...”

Taiga was relaxing on the white shiny floor as if she were taking a nap, all while she continued to feel the discomfort of her babies still shifting about. Her breathing was soft, her

mouth had formed a little frown and her brows were furrowed. She looked like a child resting in bed with a fever. That was the only way she could catch a break at that moment, as her babies never planned on giving her one.

Ryuji sighed with relief, but quickly noticed the mess of toys he had just created. Then, his eyes widened as he spotted onlookers giving them strange glances. He anxiously shook Taiga's slender shoulder.

"T-Taiga, you can't lay here! It's dirty, and we're making a fool of ourselves!"

"Nuh uh," Taiga gently shook her head. "You'll have to carry me... I'm not moving a muscle..." She mumbled. "Also... Keep away all those toys... The new ones are all too pricey anyway..." She pointed at the mess of toys before dropping her arm back to the floor. Ryuji could've sworn he'd heard her start to snore.

"B-but..." He looked back and forth between his wife and the mess, before settling and looking at the floor with shame. "Fine, I'll put them away."

"Fwooooh!"

Ryuji huffed and puffed as he trudged through the store with his heavily pregnant wife in his arms, on top of all their shopping hanging from his shoulders. It was his turn for his face to turn red from carrying the heavy load. Their daughters never stopped kicking either. They'd even occasionally touch his chin. His face puffed up as he tried his hardest to stop himself from dropping Taiga onto the floor, all while she was comfortably pressing her cheek into his shoulder, arms around his neck, and taking a little nap.

However, Ryuji spotted something that made him stop.

"Oh, hey, I know that one."

Taiga opened her eyes and looked in Ryuji's direction. There was a huge container of secondhand baby toys being sold. She promptly stepped out of Ryuji's arms to let him take a closer look at what he had his eyes on. She bent forward and rested her arms on the edge of the container, letting her belly get pulled down by gravity while her babies continued to throw a tantrum, so she could watch Ryuji take one of the toys from there.

"Yasuko bought this for me when I was a baby," he said, holding the tiger-themed rattle, carefully viewing it from every angle. Remembering all those days Yasuko had spent nurturing him, and considering how much everything had changed, he chuckled with a little smile on his face. He turned to his expecting wife and held the rattle next to her belly.

Gaaaoo! Gaaaooo!

Taiga's eyes widened. She stood up and felt her belly. Something changed. While carrying that heavy load around was never easy, she seemed more relaxed than before. Her body still looked like it could crumble at a moment's notice, but her hips were stable. Just that realisation filled her with elation.

"Did it work?" Her husband asked.

"It did... It really did! They're so calm now," she responded excitedly, rubbing her belly from top to bottom. She chuckled at how amazingly it worked. "I think that might be the one! Let's get it, Ryuji!" She looked up at him with sparkling eyes.

Ryuji seemed just as happy as Taiga was, but after inspecting the rattle closer, his smile faded.

"Hm... Most of the whiskers are missing and all the colours are faded. The sound isn't really that good, either. I guess that's why they're basically selling this for nothing..." He muttered. "I don't know about this one, Taiga."

"Maybe we could buy a new one?"

"These toys are really old. You wouldn't find this selling anywhere these days."

"Then we'll just buy this one," Taiga exclaimed. She placed her fingers around the rattle while her husband was still holding it. "We'll sanitise it, change its batteries, whatever will make it work for our girls. I don't really care how it looks, as long as it's what makes them happy, it's good enough for me."

Taiga took it from Ryuji's hands to inspect it closer as well. She shook it to listen to its rattling. Her excitement for such a delicate thing couldn't be contained, and witnessing it completely melted Ryuji's heart. He just couldn't go against her words seeing that.

"Alright, let's head to the checkout counter then. The girls are definitely going to love all the toys we've bought for them," Ryuji said with smiling eyes.

"Yeah, let's go!"

Ryuji began walking past his wife towards the checkout counter, but her feet stayed planted to the floor as she looked at him with befuddlement.

"Wait, Ryuji," Taiga called out. "Aren't you going to carry me?"

"Huh?"

"I'm still tired, you know!"

Ryuji huffed.

Tsss! Tsss! Tsss! Tsss!

"Tee hee hee..."

Taiga was giggling to herself while Ryuji, with a deadpan look on his face, trudged towards the checkout counter with his heavy wife in his arms and her belly in his face. While she sat comfortably with her knees in one of his hands and her back in the other, she kept shaking the rattle on top of her belly and continued to stroke it. After every shake, she'd giggle again.

"You really like that rattle, don't you?" Ryuji asked tiredly, but sincerely.

"Yeah... Every time I shake it, I start to feel really warm inside."

Ryuji sighed again. He was starting to feel warm, too.

"Shake it as much as you'd like."

Tsss! Tsss! Tsss! Tsss!

They couldn't move around much at just a few weeks old, after they were brought home from the hospital. The only form of entertainment they had was that rattle before they started playing with their other toys on their own. It seemed that Ryuji had forgotten all about the old toy after the babies got bigger and stronger. He eyed the drawer that he'd found it in. It was only over a month or two ago, but the way he remembered the babies' first week in their apartment made it seem like an eternity.

The girls had a particular cry when they were scared or uncomfortable. Though he didn't know them that well, it became the one thing he could recall and recognise after all the times they'd wake up in the middle of the night, scared and confused by the cold darkness, without the warmth of their mother.

Back then, Taiga was too weak to wake up to their cries, but Ryuji had been spending many nights on his computer searching for all sorts of things. He'd ask about ways to cope with their situation, the best way to care for his wife, and all the different needs she had. He also interacted on forums to receive advice. He'd stare into the screen until his eyes would turn red and dry. It was exhausting and irritating, but in that time of fear and uncertainty, seeking knowledge was just one way he sought comfort.

It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for Haruko or Mitsuko, or even both of them, to wake up in the middle of the night while Ryuji was on the Internet. Katsuko, being severely weak at the time, was in a sleep as deep as her mother's, while her sisters would cry loudly and disrupt the silence of the night.

That was the reason Ryuji kept that rattle in his drawer. Every time it happened, he'd pull it out and start shaking it, occasionally playing the tiger's roar for them. They'd almost

immediately fall back asleep, returning the night to peace. And every time that happened, Ryuji would smile at his daughters.

Where did all that joy go?

A tear fell from Ryuji's eye and landed on one of the remaining whiskers of the tiger rattle. It left a wet trail across his cheek. His legs gave out and he fell to his knees, making a loud thump when they hit the floor. His back slumped to the side and his head looked like it was about to fall from his neck. His hand holding the rattle dropped to his side as he sat there quietly sniffling to himself.

All his excitement for his new family, all the love and care he'd given during Taiga's pregnancy, all of it was for naught. He was the idiot that sent his family away. It was all his fault. In this moment of despair, he kept going back to the thought that if he had just been more careful, if he hadn't let his guard down, none of this would have happened.

But his mind quickly slipped away as well. It didn't do him any good thinking about what could've happened. There was only the "now", and right now, he didn't have the will for anything. There was nobody he could care for. He was undeserving of that mantle and had it taken from his hands.

There wasn't anything he could do.

So he just sat there, sobbing quietly.

His sniffles occasionally released into the air.

On the night Taiga left the Takasu household with her parents, Seina would complete a 4-hour drive. They had dropped Naru off at a house belonging to one of his relatives, which was also where they had left Hiroto to be taken care of while they picked up Taiga and her daughters. Taiga herself would move to the front passenger's seat while Hiroto sat between his two baby nieces in the back. Everyone besides Seina would fall asleep for the whole trip.

It was half past midnight by the time they arrived in Seina's home town. Before reaching her house, where Taiga would be staying for who knows how long, they made a pitstop at a 24-hour family restaurant in the area. The place was barren, with only one or two lonely salarymen seated amongst the sea of pale yellow tables.

Taiga was breastfeeding Mitsuko while stroking her head, with fabric covering her chest and her baby's face, while Haruko sat in a baby seat to the side, still asleep. Seina was stroking Hiroto's little head as he slept in his mother's lap. His whole body stretched across his chair and his feet dangled from it.

Taiga would lean forward to feed herself a spoon of minestrone before returning to stroking Mitsuko's head. Seina had ordered herself a plate of carbonara, with Hiroto's half-eaten garlic bread on her plate. After munching on the crispy but stale bread, Seina looked up at her daughter with a calm grin.

"What do you think?" She asked. "We went here when you were staying with me after that mountain trip fiasco you had in high school, remember?"

"Yeah. I never liked the food here," Taiga answered scornfully. "The soup has no flavour at all, and all the vegetables are overcooked and mushy."

Seina rested her elbow on the table with her cheek in her palm.

"Well, the pasta's nice. Maybe you can try it when your digestion's better."

"Ryuji could make a better one," Taiga muttered.

"You never told me he could make Italian dishes."

"He doesn't. But I know he could if he tried."

Seina's face straightened out. "Right," she said. "Maybe I could take a swing at it. Minestrone made by yours truly. How does that sound?"

"Sure. I'll eat whatever," Taiga said sarcastically without even glancing at her mother.

Seina's mouth briefly sank to a frown. She returned to her carbonara, bringing the restaurant back to silence.

After finishing their meal, they continued their trip with a short drive to Seina's home. Taiga and Seina sat in the car without saying a word to each other. Taiga leaned against the door, looking out the window at all the street lamps and houses. She'd already gotten plenty of rest at the hospital, so she couldn't fall back asleep.

Seina pulled into her home's driveway and parked the car. The old woman helped bring all the sleepy children, including her own daughter, into the house. Her two granddaughters were strapped to her chest and back, while he led the sleepy Hiroto by the hand to their front door. Finally, she draped her own daughter's arm over her shoulders to ease the strain on her brittle legs. With what little free hands she had, she unlocked the front door. Together, they entered the basic single-storey house with a grey-tiled roof.

Seina turned on the lights upon entering, leaving Taiga to rest on a chair by the dining table while she walked ahead to the bedrooms to switch on the lights there as well. Taiga scanned the layout of the living room before her. They had a white sofa with rounded edges—a modern design. In front of the sofa was a flatscreen TV on its stand made of

laminated spruce wood. Everything almost looked brand new, but after she'd already visited a few times, she couldn't feel surprised.

"Taiga," Seina gently called out to her daughter, ensuring not to wake the children. Just after pushing her groggy son towards his room, she pointed towards a doorway she was standing in front of. "Over here."

Seina entered the room. Taiga followed, trudging along the walls with her twigs for legs. There, she found a single bed with smooth white covers and fluffed-up pillows placed in a neat stack. But what really surprised her was the three cribs at the wall in front of the bed. Seina was placing Mitsuko into one of them, draping a little blanket over her. When Taiga looked over the crib, she found that it was filled with soft pillows and little animal plushies. It was the same for the other two.

Taiga couldn't look away from Mitsuko sleeping so soundly in her crib. She had always anticipated the day she'd move her daughters from that plain futon into the lovely new cribs she'd purchased with her husband.

Seina took Haruko off her chest to tuck her in like she did with her sister.

"You... Did you buy all this just for us?" Taiga stammered.

"Of course," Seina said happily. "I got these just for your girls. Now, once they're grown up, I obviously won't have a use for these, so I'm planning on giving these away once I'm done with them. I know plenty of young ladies about to become moms in the area."

"You didn't have to..."

"Oh, Taiga..." Seina rubbed her daughter's head. "I'm just making sure you and your daughters are all comfortable. I know how troublesome it is being so far from home, but I really want you to rest easy. It'll make the recovery much faster."

Seina turned Taiga towards the tidy white mattress.

"How about you try the bed? See if it's to your liking."

Taiga approached the bedside, gazing at its smooth and even edges. She sat on the side and felt its softness beneath her rump. After that, she laid her whole body onto it, hugging a pillow to her chest. It had been years since she'd slept in such a soft bed, not to mention the air-conditioning blasting the room with pleasantly cold air. Even though she wasn't tired at all, she felt like she could fall asleep then and there.

"How does it feel? Better than your husband's apartment?" Seina asked smugly.

"Sh-shut up," Taiga said, her voice muffled through the pillow. "Just let me sleep."

“Alright,” Seina said as she turned the light off on the way out of the room. “Let me know when you want to take a bath. I can put in the hot water for you. I’ve got plenty of soothing soaps I want you to try.”

“Mm.”

Seina shut the door, letting Taiga lay in darkness. She pulled the covers over her body and closed her eyes. But before she could fall deep into her slumber, a sliver of guilt lingered in her heart. It really did feel better than staying in her husband’s home. She could rest well knowing that her daughters would be safe and comfortable too, which made her even more guilty after she’d tried so hard to reject the proposition of her staying in this lovely house.

However, no matter how comfortable she was staying in her mother’s abode, there was just one thing missing, and she just couldn’t settle with its absence. But having all this pleasure to herself made her wonder if what she wanted was even reasonable in the first place.

“Ryuu-chan! I’m home—Uwah!”

Yasuko hopped forward out of her shoes after almost tripping on a broom handle as she burst through the front door. She stuck the landing on the wooden floor and looked around after stabilising herself. Even though the Takasu household usually had its lights off in the middle of the day, everything felt darker than usual. Perhaps the black mold had finally defeated Takasu Ryuujii and had taken over the apartment.

Suddenly, Yasuko spotted something that glistened through the darkness. It had a shiny silver interior with an illustration of a potato-themed character on its exterior. There was no doubt that it was an empty packet of Calbee’s spicy potato chips, and that wasn’t the end of it. Crumpled candy bar wrappers were littered in the doorway between the kitchen and living room.

“Ah, was Taiga-chan snacking again? Ryuu-chan hasn’t cleaned up after her yet...”

Yasuko took a step forward.

“Wait, Taiga-chan’s too sick for that!”

She leapt forward towards the living room. She had leapt so far that she had to stop herself on the side of the doorway to keep herself from falling onto the floor. Finally, she shouted out into the living room.

“Taiga-chan! You can’t start snacking yet! You’re still...”

But Taiga wasn't there at all.

"Oh... Ryu-chan?"

Instead, Yasuko would find her son sitting in the dark in front of the TV. All the floor cushions were piled up under his back. His legs looked like they had gone limp as they were left stretched out across the floor. One hand held the remote while the other reached into a tiny box of miniature chocolate biscuits. He threw a few pieces into his mouth, crunching so loudly that Yasuko could hear from where she stood.

"Hey, Ryu-chan. What're you doing?" She asked as she stepped around all the crumbs and wrappers scattered across her tatami mat floor. She knelt at her son's side and noticed his sunken eyes. "Are you taking a break? Have the girls been fed yet?"

"The girls aren't here," Ryuji bemoaned as he took a chip from an open potato chip bag on the floor and ate it. He spoke with the crumbs in his mouth. "Seina took Taiga and the girls. She's taking care of them now."

"H-huh!? When did this happen?"

"Last night," Ryuji muttered while shaking his box of chocolates over his mouth to get every last piece out.

"Oh no, did Taiga get hurt? Is it serious?"

Ryuji's eyes drifted away from his mother.

"Something was wrong with Katsuko... So she took her outside all on her own and fainted. They were taken to the hospital and Seina wasn't happy when she found out..." He sighed. "It was my fault. It all happened while I was asleep. Taiga's fine now but it shouldn't have happened in the first place. I had to let Seina take her. What if something even worse happened?"

Ryuji had drifted so far that he wasn't even looking at the TV screen anymore. His head tilted until his whole body fell off his little hill of cushions.

"Uugh..." He groaned like a dying frog.

"I see..." Yasuko nodded slowly.

She took the TV remote from Ryuji and switched it off.

"So what are you doing snacking like this?"

"Oough... I don't know... I thought eating would take my mind off of things but I couldn't bother cooking... Uugh... I can't bother doing anything... There's no point now that she's not here... But if you're hungry, I already heated a meal for you on the counter," Ryuji slurred his speech as if he were about to pass out.

Yasuko picked up one of the snack packets. “This is the first time I’ve seen you binge eat like this.”

“Taiga used to do it all the time, even while she was pregnant. Now that I think about it, I probably should’ve stopped her... I feel like a pile of rocks right now.”

“Hmm... I really wish Seina-chan had called me about this earlier...” Yasuko mumbled as she pondered with her hand on her chin. “Alright, I understand,” she exclaimed as she pounded her fist in her palm. She took a cushion and slid it under Ryuaji’s head. Once he was comfortable, she skipped to the bathroom and came out in the apron that her son would typically wear. She took the broom and started sweeping up the living room.

“What are you doing, Yasuko?” Ryuaji asked tiredly.

“It sounds like Ryuji needs a break from being an adult, so I’ll work harder to take care of my little boy!” She exclaimed as she swept the wrappers together with determination.

Suddenly, her eyes lit up. She faced her son with excitement. “Oh! I just had a wonderful idea!” She started bashfully pushing her fingers together. “So, I can’t do anything about Seina-chan taking Taiga-chan and the girls. She’s a good friend of mine, you see...” She gave Ryuaji a bright smile and pumped her fists. “But she’ll definitely bring Taiga-chan back once she’s well again, right? How about I treat you two to a nice vacation after that?”

“Huh?” Ryuaji mumbled with befuddlement.

“Yes! We can take the babies, too! It’ll be a wonderful family vacation with the six of us! Goodness, my family’s gotten so big I have to count on more than one hand!”

“Taiga and I don’t have any vacation money saved up right now...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I said it was my treat, didn’t I? I’ve got plenty saved up already! I can book us into a really nice hotel in Sapporo, or maybe you can decide where we’ll go. Either way, let’s have fun together, Ryuji!”

Ryuaji sat up. “Didn’t you say you were saving up to bring your parents on vacation?”

“I’m sure that can wait. It’s not like they’re going to kick the bucket tomorrow, so don’t worry about it!” Yasuko tilted her head with a cheeky, toothy grin.

Ryuaji got on his feet and faced his mother.

“Yasuko, you really don’t have to. My family is my responsibility. This whole ordeal is my issue,” he couldn’t help but grunt. “You know what? Pass me the broom. I’ll... I’ll clean this silly mess up.”

He reached out his hand, but Yasuko inched back and tightened her grip around its handle. She tittered before placing her hand on Ryuaji’s shoulder.

“My family is my responsibility too, Ryu-chan,” she spoke tenderly. “You and Taiga-chan matter to me as much as my parents do. So please, let me take care of you.”

She continued sweeping all the crumbs at her feet. Ryuji watched her and remembered what Seina had told him. He couldn’t let this incident stop him from growing. If he gave up now, he’d be proving to Seina that he really was unworthy. He couldn’t let himself go like that again no matter how devastated he was, especially since Taiga and his children weren’t the only ones that were under his care. Ryuji began picking up the many snack and candy wrappers he had left behind in his fit. Seeing him pull himself out from his snack binge made his young mother smile.

Waaaaah! Waaaaah!

Back at Seina’s home, Taiga was laying in her bed with Haruko wailing in her arms. Laying between her legs was Mitsuko who was wriggling about and crying as well. Taiga had her chest exposed and was laying her baby atop of it, sharing skin-to-skin contact, but no amount of warmth or rocking would calm Haruko down.

“Wh-why are you crying? I don’t understand...” Taiga whined. She had her daughters’ toys strewn all over her bed. She reached for one and started squeezing it, making it release a loud squeak. But after squeezing it a few times, it felt like her babies’ cries were only getting louder.

“You’re not hungry, you don’t want your toys, your diapers are clean... What’s wrong!? What am I not getting!?” Taiga held Haruko up by her shoulders and observed her with frustration. She pressed her forehead against her baby’s chest in resignation. “Please... What am I supposed to do?”

She felt like crying, too.

Knock! Knock!

“Taiga? Is everything alright in there? Please unlock the door, I can help!” Seina said, her voice muffled by the wooden door standing between her and her daughter.

“I-I’m fine! I can handle this on my own! Leave me alone!” Taiga yelled. However, she immediately regretted it as Haruko cried even louder. “No, no, no! Please, I didn’t mean to shout in front of... Aaaah!” Taiga laid flat on her bed, letting Haruko flail her arms around and throw her little tantrum on her chest.

“Do you miss your dad?” Taiga asked. Somehow, though it could’ve been coincidence, Haruko’s sobbing softened. “I miss him too. I miss him very much. He should

be carrying you like I am..." Taiga began stroking Haruko's little back, but the tears just wouldn't stop streaming from her baby's cheeks. Mitsuko was still wailing like a siren too.

Taiga felt herself becoming deaf from the babies' cries. Having to handle them on her own tired her out more than walking around on her two feet. Her head tilted towards the door. Amongst all the wailing, she sniffled.

"Taiga..." Seina spoke again. The distressed mother couldn't take it anymore.

She laid Haruko and Mitsuko beside each other before staggering towards the bedroom door. She unlocked it and sluggishly opened it. She was immediately greeted by her mother looking down on her with a smile of relief. Taiga glared up at her mother with her half-open, sunken eyes.

"Ah, thank you, Taiga."

Seina calmly strutted towards the bed with the two crying infants. Taiga leaned against the doorway as if she could collapse at any moment, and watched her mother from afar as she leaned over her two daughters with a wide grin and soft voice. She couldn't make out what exactly her mother was doing, but strangely enough, the crying from her daughters quietened the more time she spent with them.

"Ooh, you're a cute one, aren't you?" Seina said in a cheeky voice to Mitsuko. "And you're a really pretty one, you look just like your mother," she said to Haruko. The babies responded with giggles as she pecked them on their puffy little cheeks. Seina lifted the two babies into her arms.

Taiga witnessed her daughters gaze at her mother with open smiles. She felt her heart ache at the sight of it. What was she missing that her mother had? All the effort she put into her role as a mother felt all for naught. She couldn't calm her own babies down. With her burning envy and resentment, Taiga's body slid down the wall and she hid her face in her knees. She sighed deeply.

Seina stood over her daughter, keeping up her pleasant smile for her granddaughters.

"Are you alright, Taiga?" She asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing, mom..." Taiga groaned. "I thought I had everything under control, but... I'm just not good enough..."

"It hasn't even been a year since you've become a mother, Taiga," Seina spoke tenderly. "You won't be good at it that quickly."

"What kind of mother can't even stop her babies from crying?" Taiga shook her head.

"Mmh..." Seina pondered. She knelt beside her daughter. "You'll learn to do it sooner or later. You'll only get wiser, you know."

“I don’t want to get wiser,” Taiga said. “I need to *be* wise.” She huffed. “I was so terrible towards Ryuji... I guess it really was my fault that I ended up here. He was only trying his best and I made it so hard for him. I’m nothing but a burden now.”

“I think a perfect partner would’ve been able to care for you regardless,” Seina uttered. “Don’t think of yourself that way. You’re still growing, that’s all.”

Taiga sniffled.

“I want Ryuji,” she sobbed. “I hate doing this on my own.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have me, huh?” Seina exclaimed. Taiga looked up from her knees, revealing her tear-soaked cheeks. Her mother greeted her with a big toothy grin. She handed Mitsuko to her, and she took the baby into her slender arms. The instinct to rock her baby naturally came to her.

“I’ve been a parent for years, so I’ve got plenty of experience and less room for mistakes. You don’t have to worry about anything, Taiga. Just focus on recovering and you’ll be on your way to becoming a mother even better than I am.”

Seina stroked her daughter’s back. Taiga stared at her baby’s calm and joyful face as she continued to rock her. At the end of the day, one of the things she wanted the most was for her children to be raised the best way she could, and to do that, she needed all the help she could get. With that fact, she sighed at Ryuji’s absence once more.

“If it’s what’s best for my daughters...”

Seina’s smile widened. She, too, was filling the shoes of a mother.

Ryuji slid his bedroom door open rubbing his eye while he pushed his bangs out of his view. The faint morning light poured into the living room. The moment Ryuji peeked his head through the doorway, he raised his eyebrow after he caught a scent of something aromatic. He stepped into the living room to find his mother in front of the stove.

“Yasuko?”

She turned to face him, the sizzling pan of grilled mackerel coming into view.

“Ah, Ryuji. Breakfast will be ready in a minute.”

“Breakfast?” Ryuji asked as he approached his mother.

“When did you start cooking?”

“My mom has been showing me the ropes,” Yasuko informed. She turned to him with smiling eyes. “Isn’t it great? Having your own mom cook for you.”

“Y-yeah...” Ryuji scratched his head. “I guess you don’t really need me to prepare meals for you now, huh?”

“Oh, Ryu-chan, your meals are always better than whatever I make,” she said before pursing her lips for a moment to think. “But if you’re ever feeling tired, then I can be the one to feed you for once! Woohoo!” She hopped. Suddenly, her nose twitched as she caught a whiff of something smoky. “Uwaah! The mackerel! D-don’t distract me, Ryu-chan!” She quickly took the fish off the pan to keep it from charring.

Ryuji stepped away to let Yasuko start grilling another seasoned mackerel. He watched her carefully place the fish’s body into the sizzling oil using her chopsticks. Her eyes were focused on the piece of meat as hot bubbles popped underneath it. After grilling one side, she carefully used her chopsticks to flip it over. Ryuji was left pleasantly surprised. He’d never seen his mother that skillful behind the stove.

There was a moment etched in his memory of Yasuko serving him a terribly burnt chicken cutlet. Its breading was mostly black and bitter, but he tried to eat as much as he could. Even before elementary school, he already knew not to waste food. That was where his distrust of his mother’s cooking began, but seeing her so confident grilling a piece of fish left him in awe. He could assume she seasoned everything on her own too. She even already had stir-fried vegetables at the side.

“Ah, Ryu-chan,” Yasuko suddenly caught his attention. “How about you take a bite of the fish and tell me how it tastes?”

“Okay...” He approached the plate of cooked mackerel and, after taking another pair of chopsticks, slowly lifted it. Light reflected off its oily surface, making it glisten. The meat was cooked to a deep brown colour. He opened his mouth only slightly, taking a small bite out of the fish. He chewed carefully, letting the flavour settle on its tongue.

“What do you think?”

“It’s... It’s really good.”

It tasted no different from his grandmother’s cooking, but the fact that something this palatable came from his own mother who worked so hard to learn how to make it somehow enhanced the flavour. He put down the fish and reached for a piece of stir-fried cabbage. After chewing and swallowing, he nodded.

“Yahoo! I did it! I made a lovely meal for Ryu-chan!” Yasuko hopped like a bunny as she celebrated. She immediately returned to the stove to focus on her grilled fish.

“Don’t eat anymore, Ryu-chan! Not until I plate this!”

Ryuji sighed with relief and stepped away from the kitchen. He sat at the living room table and watched his mother happily continue cooking with his chin resting on his palm. At first, he smiled at the amusing sight, but that smile faded when he came to a realisation. Both he and his mother were already grown-ups. They both knew how to care for themselves and for each other. If he wasn't around, Yasuko would probably be able to thrive. She had become independent enough to cook and clean without him.

It became clear that he wasn't needed.

After having his mother's hearty breakfast, Ryuji straightened out his futon and tidied up the rest of the room. Once he was done, the room looked like nobody had even been living in it. However, looking at the clock, he noticed that it had only been an hour since the sun had risen. When he went to the kitchen, he found the sink completely empty. Yasuko had already taken the initiative to clean all the dishes. One by one, he took a dish from the drying rack to see if she missed anything, but they were spotless.

Ryuji stepped into his bathroom, thinking the toilet needed a clean, but he was immediately reminded by the toilet's shining white glow that he had already scrubbed it the day before. He pushed the empty dust bin aside to search for any black mold hiding in the corners, but it seemed the Takasu stick had left it traumatised, as it had been days since he'd seen a single speck of mold anywhere in that apartment.

He looked into Yasuko's room. She had left for work earlier and he was surprised to learn that she had started tidying up her own room. He tried smoothening out her futon covers and refolding any clothes that seemed sloppily folded, but besides that, her room was clean from corner to corner. He stepped out and scanned the living room. Everything was in order. All the floor cushions were neatly placed. There wasn't anything he needed to change or fix. The place was clean enough to start welcoming guests in.

Ryuji sat by the living room table atop a cushion and faced the TV. The fridge was full with groceries. The only clothes that would need washing would be the ones he and Yasuko were already wearing. He didn't have any more errands left that day. What else could he do? He was tempted to reach for the TV remote and laze around, but he didn't want to let himself go like he did earlier.

In a moment like this, he thought hard about what he'd usually do when he was free of work, but he quickly came to a dead end. He struggled to remember a life where he wasn't worrying or caring for someone. After Taiga gave birth, it felt like a part of his mind had shut down. Maybe he could read another magazine about interior design, but when the idea came

to him, his stomach turned. Right, he'd already read many magazines to get inspiration for how his family's new home would look.

His family.

That was what he was missing.

That warm feeling in his chest when he was holding his daughters—he wanted that more than anything right now. Anything else would just feel like he was killing time, but his daughters were growing by the minute, and Taiga was getting stronger and healthier with each day. He wanted to be there every step of the way.

But he sent all of that away. He knew how much of an idiot he was for doing that. And yet, he was itching for it. He knew he wasn't deserving of that warmth, not until he could prove that he could really care for all of them on his own.

Just this once, he wanted to be greedy. Taiga would probably blow up in his face if he had the gall to call her after he was the one to turn her away, but he needed to hear from her. Hearing her yell again would be better than the droning silence of his apartment. Seina was probably taking good care of her, but what if there was something she needed from him? He at least needed to confirm that.

Ryuaji reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellphone.

Bzzzt! Bzzzt!

He held his phone up to his ear and felt it vibrate in his hand as he waited for his wife to pick up his call. He nibbled on the middle of his index finger as the itch to hear his wife's voice lingered. Finally, a shock ran through him once he heard it.

“Ryuaji?” Taiga’s voice came through the phone.

“T-Taiga!” Ryuaji stuttered. “H-hey, how... How are you doing?”

“Uh... Fine,” she responded.

“So what are you up to now?”

“I’m just resting on the sofa... with Mitsuko.”

Sure enough, Taiga was sitting alone in the living room of Seina’s home. Mitsuko was sitting in her arms, fiddling with a toy with her chubby little hands, her big brown eyes glued to the colourful thing. She was so huge for an infant that she could be mistaken for a baby seal, especially in relation to her mother’s petiteness.

“Haruko’s sleeping, but I still haven’t heard back from Naru about Katsuko.”

“I see... So how’s it like living at your mother’s?”

"It's pretty great. I've got a nice bed and my mother got cribs for the girls. I'm quite comfortable right now."

"Have you been eating well?"

"Yeah. My mother's food isn't bad."

"How has she been treating you?"

Taiga leaned her head back, watching the ceiling as she rested against the sofa.

"She's alright, I guess. She's always following me around, making sure I'm getting plenty of rest. It's annoying sometimes, but she's always there when I need her."

Ryuaji flinched. "So it's not so different from when I was looking after you, huh?"

"You could say that," Taiga sighed.

With his phone in his hand, he sat at the table and stared. His wife seemed really comfortable living somewhere else. In a way, Seina was just doing his job but with better resources than he could provide. What could he even say to that? Taiga was left holding her phone up to her ear, listening to nothing but a subtle static in the phone's feedback.

"Ryuaji?" Taiga broke the silence. "Was there something you needed to tell me?"

"H-huh?" Her voice broke his trance. He shook his head. "O-oh, no, I just... wanted to check in, maybe hear your voice again."

He took a deep breath and almost smirked before asking.

"Is there anything you need from me?"

Silence.

Ryuaji was piqued by his wife's lack of response.

"T-Tai—" But he was interrupted before he could call her name.

"No, not really."

"Oh."

It felt like his throat had turned dry in less than a second. His mouth was left open, but only stale air came out of it. As Ryuaji's voice had ceased, Taiga was left with another period of silence from her husband's side of the line. It was like telepathy, the way she could tell from over 300 kilometres away how her husband felt.

"Ryuaji," she said tenderly. "The one thing I really, really need from you, is for you to be here with me and our babies. I want us to be together as a family."

Taiga stroked Mitsuko's soft little head.

"But after the last few days, I have a feeling it's not going to be that way for a while."

Ryuaji's shoulders grew heavier. His body relaxed and his elbows rested on the table.

“I asked my mom if there was any way you could be here with me and our babies. I even suggested that you come live together with us, but she turned me down, said you’d just get in the way and that you needed a break from me.”

“Taiga...”

“But I get it now. You’ve been looking after the whole household all on your own, and I only made everything harder for you. You always looked so agitated, and when you finally got the chance to relax I went out and... Ugh... I should’ve expected you’d reach your limit sooner or later. Maybe you need some rest like I do.”

“That’s not...” The words just couldn’t come out of his mouth.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Ryuji. As much as I hate being apart, as much as I want us to always be with each other, I need to do what’s best for our family. As long as my daughters are getting what they need, I’ll be happy. Haruko and Mitsuko have been happy being around my mom, and Hiroto’s getting along with them too.”

Taiga’s voice became shaky.

“After all, that’s the adult decision here, isn’t it? I can’t keep thinking about what I want. I need to focus on what I... what we need. It’s the same decision you made. That’s why you insisted on sending me away.”

Ryuji rubbed his eyes and sniffled. He could feel the tears before they arrived.

“So please, Ryuji, look after yourself. I’m alright being here. Mom says once I’m healthy, we’ll be together again. I don’t know how long that will be, but I know our babies will be okay during that time. I’ll just have to get used to living here. I’m sure my mom wouldn’t mind you just visiting, either.”

Taiga paused.

“Did you get any of that, Ryuji?”

His lips finally moved.

“Yeah. I heard you.”

He could hear her sigh on the other end of the line.

“I love you, Ryuji.”

“I love you too, Taiga.”

The quiet static of the call ended with the sound of a click. Ryuji pushed his phone to the side of the table, keeping it out of his sight. He placed his head in his hands, heaving slowly and deeply. The living room was dead silent. Ryuji sat so still he’d be taken for a statue depicting a man in terrible grief.

Taiga was going to be just fine without him. The way he felt about that fact struck him with immense guilt. He hoped that, somehow, the decision he made—to send Taiga away—was the wrong one. If somehow Seina wasn't taking care of her right, if Taiga and her babies really couldn't stand being under someone else's care, that would've been his cue to swoop in and steal his family back. But it never came.

There was only one thing he could do now.

He had to follow in his wife's steps.

He had to get used to living on his own.

That would be the right thing to do.