

## Chapter 6: Our Path Forward

Under the bright, blazing sun of a Saturday morning, Ryuji walked with his mother along the tall boundary walls of the neighbourhood. They followed behind a young woman with long, glistening hair and smooth, clear skin. It was Kawashima Ami humming to herself, donning a maroon cardigan that was on the front cover of that year's late autumn magazine, over her bright orange sundress that made her look five years younger.

Ryuji scanned the walls of the labyrinth he was walking through as he revised the landmarks in his head. There was the house with the white-tiled pathway, the one with weeds growing out of it, then was the home with the crumbly boundary walls made of red brick. At the third stop sign that was slightly tilted, they'd make a turn onto a road lined with tall yellow Ginkgo trees that were stripped of their leaves halfway. It wouldn't be long before that familiar line of Zelkova trees would become only a warm memory and the nature decor before him would take its place.

"It's quite a lively neighbourhood, isn't it?" Yasuko said cheerfully, her pink lipstick reflecting the white sunlight. She chuckled in her soft bright orange turtleneck sweater. The mother and son were wearing matching blue jeans.

"It does look like it's been lived in," Ryuji responded. He wore a pale green light jacket he had since high school. His attention was briefly caught by a little family standing in front of a truck selling yakiimo. He watched as the old man that drove the truck handed four pieces of steaming sweet potato to the father, who would pass the other three to his wife and children.

"It'll be a great place to raise our daughters."

"You're right about that, Takasu-kun," Ami exclaimed, swirling a set of keys around her finger. "This home was owned by a cousin on my mother's side, and everyone there usually either only had one kid or went completely childfree." She smugly turned to Yasuko and Ryuji. "It's not the type of place us wealthy folk like to be in, but it's perfect for normal people like you to raise a family."

"Did you come along just to brag?" Ryuji groaned.

“Shouldn’t you be acting more grateful?” Ami bit back with a smirk. “You know you wouldn’t even be walking these streets if it weren’t for me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Ryuaji, Yasuko and Ami arrived in front of a two-storey house, in the very middle of the line of trees. Its walls were painted in a shade of white bright enough to feed all the trees around it with the sunlight it reflected. The front door sat in the very centre, between two green plant beds that stretched to the sides of the house.

“You remember the playground that’s just down the road,” Ami said as she gestured to her side with her thumb. “Once your bundles of joy start walking, I’m sure you’ll be spending hours there.” She and Ryuaji looked at each other. She gave him a confident smile. “There’s an elementary school and a really good junior high school, both of them just walking distance away. And after that...” Ami tittered. “Ohashi is just a station away.”

“Thanks for letting us know,” Ryuaji responded. “Taiga would be happy to hear that.”

“Yeah, she would...” Ami muttered. “So why isn’t she here?”

Ryuaji could only turn his head away and purse his lips, making Ami narrow her eyes.

“Taiga-chan’s just out of town with her parents!” Yasuko happily interjected.

“Is that so?” Ami sighed before she started walking along the concrete path leading towards the house. Yasuko and Ryuaji followed after her. “It’s a shame. I really wanted to surprise her with what I’ve been working on.”

“But she was with us when we were designing everything, wasn’t she?” Ryuaji added. “Besides, you could do that once we actually move in.”

“Mmh. No,” Ami tilted her head towards Ryuaji. “It wouldn’t be much of a surprise unless both of you were here together.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because other than the property and the renovations, I actually pitched in just a little more to dazzle up one of the rooms.”

“Which one?”

“You’ll see.”

Ami unlocked the front door and pushed through. They stood by the genkan to remove their shoes before they could step on the shiny laminated wooden floor.

Upon entering through the front door, they were greeted by a tall, straight staircase leading to the second floor. A circular window above them allowed sunlight to pour through onto the dainty wooden steps. On their left was just a solid wall, but to the right, they'd be led to the house's living room, which they'd explore first.

"All your furniture's been set up, so you can start moving in as early as you'd like," Ami announced as Ryuaji and Yasuko went ahead to look around for themselves.

"Uwaaah!" Yasuko exclaimed in awe as she planted herself onto the spotless sofa right in front of the modern TV mounted on its stand. "Teeheehee!" She couldn't stop giggling and kicking her feet as her eyes analysed the room from corner to corner. Between her and the TV was a clean coffee table just at her feet. There was another sofa to her left, and two big armchairs to her right. She could fit her entire family in there, including her parents, and there would still be ample space. In the corner to the left of the TV was a desk for the family computer, which Taiga had planned to use for work.

Ryuaji walked along the space behind Yasuko. The entire living room was placed on a lowered floor to make it feel cosy and special, so Ryuaji was a step above her. Just past the TV area, he admired the dining table with six chairs surrounding it and a modern chandelier hanging just above it. However, his eyes lit up when he noticed the kitchen.

"Wow..."

He continued straight ahead and passed under an archway. There was a glass door leading to the back of the house, a deep pantry installed in the back of the tall staircase, and a pristine kitchen equipped with a state of the art gas stove, a fridge with an adjustable temperature, and cabinets lining the floor and ceiling, giving him three times the amount of storage space he had compared to the mini kitchen in the old apartment. Most importantly was the massive window between the kitchen and the dining table, allowing him to pass food there easily. He could imagine watching his family enjoy his home-cooked meals or sit in the living room while he worked in the kitchen.

The ground floor used to have a garage, but they chose to wall it off since neither Taiga nor Ryuaji planned on getting a car. It was then sectioned into their laundry room, storage closet and guest bedroom, accessible through a doorway next to the kitchen pantry. After that, they excitedly explored the second floor.

At the landing of the staircase, to their right, was a line of rooms with a bathroom at the very start of it. At the end of the line would be Yasuko's bedroom, with a window installed to finally give her some sunlight.

"Haha! It's been a while since I've had my own bed!" Yasuko laughed as she rolled about on the smooth mattress, creasing the neatly ironed covers and getting strands of blonde hair all over the pillows.

Between those two rooms would be Taiga and Ryuaji's bedroom. A king-sized bed stood against the wall, with a carpet sitting in the open space in the centre of the room. They each had their own closets, as well as their own private bathroom just for the married couple.

"What do you think, Takasu-kun?" Ami asked smugly.

"It's just as I pictured it in my dreams," Ryuaji answered with a smile. "Thank you, really. You've given me and my family such an amazing place to stay in."

"Well, don't go thanking me yet," Ami muttered. "There's just one last room I need to show you. You're going to love it."

Ryuaji followed Ami out of his bedroom and was led to the door to the single room on the other side of the staircase landing. The room would stretch along the length of the house and be situated above what used to be the garage.

"I might've taken a few creative liberties," Ami added as she held the door's handle. She gripped it tightly, before pushing it down to open it. Sunlight seeped through the gap in the doorway and beamed onto Ami and Ryuaji's faces. Past the open curtains, it looked like heaven was just outside the windows.

Ryuaji's mouth was left ajar as he stepped into the room.

"I know your daughters wouldn't be using this room for a while, but I just felt it'd be better if the room felt personalised before they started sleeping here," Ami said. She turned to Ryuaji. "I really wanted Taiga to see this too, but I suppose having you around is enough, so what do you think?"

"I... I..."

He imagined Taiga standing beside him, witnessing the same beautiful scene that he was. How immeasurable it was—his desire to see her stretched-out grin, hear her excited squealing, and feel her warm hand as she'd pull him along the room so they could explore it together. His

breath shortened and his fists clenched. He wanted her here more than anything. He wanted to do what made both of them happiest.

But he wasn't happy.

Not while he was standing there without his wife by his side.

"I... I'm sorry, Kawashima-san."

"Hm?"

Ryuaji dashed out of the room and ran down the stairs.

"H-hey! Where're you going!?" Ami followed, watching from the staircase landing as Ryuaji hopped while he frantically pulled his shoes onto his feet.

"Tell Yasuko I'll be home tomorrow morning!" His voice echoed before he ran straight out the front door.

"Hm? Where's Ryu-chan going?" Yasuko asked absentmindedly as she leaned over the railing above the stairs. The two women remained at the second storey until Ryuaji's footsteps were completely inaudible from their distance.

"That idiot... I can't believe he'd run out on me like that," Ami grunted, before turning to Yasuko. She started taking off her maroon cardigan. "I suppose we'll have to finish up the rest of the paperwork ourselves, Ya-chan."

"Sure thing, Ami-chan!" Yasuko pumped her fist.

"Haah! Haah! Haah!"

Ryuaji was sprinting through the streets. His heart was his timer, ringing to tell him that he was ready to be by his wife's side again. He needed to show it to her. He needed to show the wonderful life that was waiting for them and their family on the path forward, but it wouldn't be possible unless they were holding each other's hands. After fear had left him, there was only love to steer him along.

He didn't care what Taiga's parents thought, either.

Even if she couldn't walk, even if she could barely hold her babies, even if her recovery required his utmost attention, Ryuaji knew that what they needed the most was to be a family together. It was just as Seina had said—he needed to grow to become the best husband that Taiga could have, and now, nothing could get in his way. He wasn't going to wait for Taiga to get better

before he could see her joy of being a mother. If Seina resisted, he would keep pushing through. There was no doubt that Taiga would be happier with him, and that happiness he must provide..

*Wait for me, Taiga! Let's be the family you always wanted!*

Ryuugi's steady sprint brought him to a train station. It would only take more than two hours for him to reach her parents' home. Only two hours and they'd be together again.

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“Taiga?”

Seina called out, her hand pressed against the cold door.

“Are you at least going to come out for breakfast, Taiga?”

But it was as good as speaking to a wall of wood. Seina lowered her head.

“I’m sorry, Taiga. I really didn’t mean to upset you,” she said, her voice low and coarse. “I know I haven’t been respecting you as a mother. Your happiness is one of the most important things to me, and if motherhood is what gives you that, then I want you to enjoy it as much as you can.” Seina clenched her fist against the door. “But at the same time, I’m still your mother. I have a responsibility to keep you safe, even if it means I have to cause you trouble to do so.”

Her cheek rested on the smooth wood.

“You’ve been getting into so much danger lately, Taiga. It’s gotten to the point where it feels like you’re just getting farther and farther away from me. I’m afraid that, if I don’t hold onto you, I won’t ever see you again. That’s why I took it upon myself to look after you.”

Seina sighed deeply before she uttered the words.

“Please understand, Taiga. I’m just doing this because I love you.”

There really was truth in Seina’s words. However, those words stood at the mercy of Taiga herself, as the decision to accept them or not was hers. Confined to that rectangular bedroom, there wasn’t anywhere else for her to go, so naturally, every word that Seina had spoken through the door had been met by Taiga’s ears.

“How long?” She asked firmly as she knelt in front of the door.

“Hm?” It had been hours since she’d heard her daughter’s voice.

“How long do you plan on looking after me?”

“Well, as I said, until you’ve recovered.”

“And when would that be?” Taiga interrogated. “When I start walking again? I can’t do that unless I keep practising, you know,” she uttered contemptuously.

“It’s not just that, Taiga...” Seina got on her knees to bring her to her daughter’s level. “You get sick more easily, you can’t eat food that’s hard to digest, and most importantly, you’re prone to fainting. You’re still far from recovery, so keeping you here will bring you there as fast as possible.”

“But how long would that take?”

“As long as it needs to.”

Taiga chuffed. “So it could be years and I’d still be stuck here.”

“I... I wouldn’t look at it that way.”

“But that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Seina opened her mouth, but her tongue was tied.

“The day you return me to Ryuaji... Has that even crossed your mind?”

Taiga’s questions were left unanswered, but her mother’s silence spoke a thousand words. She grunted in her frustration and stepped away from the door. Seina never planned on letting her go, and since that was the case, Taiga’s sick self had to take things into her own hands.

“Taiga?” Seina’s ears had caught the sound of Taiga’s grunt and the rustling of the carpet as her daughter moved about. “Hey, what are you doing?” She placed her ear against the door, but there wasn’t anything discernible from the cacophony behind the door. That thought was enough to make her hands shiver. “Ugh!” She shuffled away from the door and went to her bedroom. From one of her drawers, she retrieved a silver key. After returning to the door, she held it up to the hole in the door’s handle.

But her hand froze.

The whole reason Taiga was isolated in that room was because of her. The last thing she’d want to see was her face, barging through the wall she had put up to protect herself. Seina huffed regretfully, her hand holding the key falling to her side. She’d already done enough damage. All she could do was give her daughter some space and let everything repair on its own, and so, she stepped away from the door.

On the other side, Taiga was huffing as she frantically shoved all her babies’ toys, among other things, into the duffel bag that Ryuaji had packed when he sent her away. She pulled its

zipper and sealed it tightly. The bag was bloated from end to end. It looked like any blunt force could burst it open.

“Nnnngrhh!!!” She groaned as she attempted to lift the bag off the floor by its strap. She wrapped it over her shoulder and, for a moment, she was carrying it well. “Gaaaah!” But she immediately fell to the floor, causing the bag to hit the hard wooden floor. The zipper popped off the bag and its teeth parted, allowing for all the contents of the bag to spill out onto the floor. Even with the time she had in recovery and all the times she tried to hold her babies, the strength in her arms had yet to return.

Taiga took a deep breath. She picked out the essentials from the mess she had just made, such as Katsuko’s medication and first aid items, and placed them into her bag. She donned her bright trench coat, shoving her wallet into its pocket, before trudging towards her bedroom window. She grunted as she lifted it open, letting the fresh morning air blow in.

Seina had made a habit to place everything that would be used for Taiga’s daughters inside the same room Taiga and her babies would sleep in. To her dismay, that would mean Taiga had access to them as well.

“Uugh!”

Taiga dragged the folded three-seated stroller to the window and pushed it through, letting it fall to the grass outside. She climbed out and fell to the ground the same way. After dusting herself off, she slowly pulled out all the folded parts of the stroller, her face scrunching up as she strained her body even getting its wheels out. Once it was standing and ready for her daughters to sit in, she was left sitting on the floor to catch her breath. Her body had grown heavier. In the time she needed to lift an arm, Seina would’ve already entered the room had she decided not to leave her alone.

Taiga climbed back into her bedroom and fell onto the wooden floor. Her whole body was stuck to the floor below. Using her forearms, she pulled herself towards her sleeping babies’ cribs. One by one, she’d bring her babies to the stroller she had rolled just outside the window. She’d lay one of their blankets on the floor and set them on top of it so she could pull them along like a dog would pull a sleigh. From the window, she’d carefully set her babies into their seats. After that, all she had to do was buckle them and start pushing them away.

“Aah!”

However, on her way out the window, exhaustion overcame her. After letting her body go, gravity pulled her hard towards the ground. Her face came closer and closer to the hard concrete until the skin of her cheek crashed straight into it. Taiga's eyes fell shut and her breathing went soft. Her entire body had turned into one big weight that pressed her down. She laid there all alone, with only little Haruko in the front seat of the stroller to see her.

Seina sat at the dinner table beside the living room with a set of empty dishes in front of her. She rested her chopsticks, lowered her head and pressed her palms together to give her thanks for the meal. Her gaze drifted to the other side of the table, where a bowl of porridge with cling wrap covering it paired with a glass of water sat idly.

Seina held her head in her hand as Taiga's breakfast turned cold.

A sniffle escaped from her. A tear climbed down her cheek. Her eyebrows wrinkled and strained, until she finally let go. Her chest was heaving as her chin dripped with more and more tears. Her sniffles grew into whimpers and groans.

Calm footsteps could be heard approaching the living room.

"Hey, Seina, I'm meeting up with a friend, so..." There was Naru, stepping out from the corridor and combing his hair. His feet were brought to a halt and his hands were lowered to his side when his wife's sobbing face entered his view. "Seina?"

Naru swiftly strode to his wife's side and immediately took her hand while he wiped away the droplets running down her cheeks.

"What's wrong, Seina?" He asked tenderly while lifting her chin to see her watery eyes.

"I'm sorry, Naru," Seina shook her head. "I don't know what to do anymore."

Naru pulled out a chair to sit beside her. "This is about last night, isn't it?" He said while rubbing his wife's back. "I'm sure it'll all turn out alright."

"All I've done is make things worse. What was I thinking..." Seina cried while she pinched her eyes. Her chest continued to heave.

Naru huffed quietly and took his wife's shoulder. "Let's send her back to Ryuugi, Seina."

Seina suddenly turned to her husband with her reddened eyes wide open. "Wh-what?" Naru stared back at her and nodded. "I-I can't do that! I still have to look after her! I have to make sure she recovers! How can you even suggest that!?"

“I’m sorry, Seina,” Naru spoke calmly. “I’ve really tried to reason with your whole plan, but after seeing it play out, I just can’t let it continue anymore.” He clasped his wife’s hands together. “You’ve spoken to Ryuji about whether he’s ready to look after Taiga and her babies, but have you ever questioned whether you’re ready too?”

“Wh-what are you saying?” Seina stuttered through her tears. “I’m her mother! I’m supposed to be capable of looking after her!” Naru only looked at her wistfully. “I’m supposed to be... But neither of us are happy this way...” Her body shivered as she sniffled profusely. “Oh, Naruuuu!” Her back curled up and her head lowered to her husband’s hands as she wailed. “I’m a failure of a mother, aren’t I!? No matter what I do, I just can’t make up for anything! All those years I’ve left my baby in the dark will be a stain on my life forever!”

Naru reached his arm over his wife’s back and embraced her warmly.

“No, Seina. You aren’t a failure at all. It’s far too early for you to say things like that.” Naru rested his wife’s head beneath his neck. “Your heart has always been in the right place. I know you just want to be the best mother you can be, but along the way, it looks like you’ve lost sight of what Taiga really wants.” His hand ran down his wife’s back. “But for as long as you and Taiga are alive, I’m sure you can find it again.”

“But... our wants are the same, aren’t they?” Seina spoke weakly, then raised her head. “What she wants the most... is for all of us to be happy together as a family. That’s why she came back to us while she was in high school. It’s why we can still talk to each other even after all the years we’ve been apart.”

She placed her hand on her chest. All the lovely conversations over hotpot dinners they’d had when Taiga first married, all plans she’d heard for her grandchildren during her visits while Taiga was pregnant, and now, all the times they’d laughed as they watched the three little infants play around—it all came to the front of her mind. A faint smile appeared on her face.

“And for a while, it really did feel like we were one big, happy family. She could look at me the same way she did when she was just a little girl.” But her smile faded, and her fist clenched tightly. “Even though everything I’ve done to protect her has only made her angry, I want to hold onto that feeling for as long as I can.”

Naru placed his hand over Seina’s fist.

“That feeling isn’t going anywhere, Seina.”

“You can’t say that, Naru,” Seina muttered. “Not after everything she’s been through.”

He huffed exasperatedly. “I know you’re only looking out for her, but Taiga has her own wants as well. She won’t be happy if you give her one thing and take away everything else.”

“I know...” She muttered again, shakily. “I want her to be happy, I really do, but I just...” Her voice had given out. There wasn’t anything she could say when the truth was already on display. After losing the will to even think of a way to defend herself, all she could do was continue without another thought.

Naru caressed her head before standing from his chair.

“Look, I’ll be home before evening. While I’m gone, please, talk to Taiga and just listen to her for once? I’d like to see things get better between you two before I return. I’m sure both of you could come to a compromise somehow.”

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead before heading through the front door. After the click of the door’s latch, the only thing Seina could hear was her own tired breath. Her daughter had cut her off in her own room. Her son was busy playing by himself. The house was nearly spotless, save for the dirtied dishes on the dinner table.

She was alone again.

*Aaa... Aayaayaa...*

“Guh!?”

Taiga pulled her face off the ground. Little shards of rock stuck to her puffy cheeks. A faint purple bump stuck out next to one of her eyebrows. Her head immediately turned to her baby Haruko in her stroller seat, who had woken up and started babbling. The blinding glare of the sun entered her eyes, causing her to squint and shelter her face with her arm. After giving herself a moment to come to, she chuffed, before hurriedly crawling behind the stroller and lifting herself to her feet. Taiga clumsily pushed forward before she could even ask how long she’d been unconscious.

The clink of a tray, weighed down by the bowl atop of it that was filled with warm porridge, could be heard from the outside of Taiga’s bedroom. The sound was followed by three firm knocks, then the mature voice of a woman.

“Taiga, I know you want to be alone, but can’t you at least eat something?”

Seina uttered firmly, with the tray at her feet. She waited for a response, but Taiga was long gone. She'd worked up the effort to speak to her daughter again, just to be met with more silence. With that, she lowered her head and sighed.

Suddenly, her eyes shot open and her breathing seized. Under the gap beneath the door, a bright light was peeking through, far too bright for Taiga's bedroom light to emit. Something was wrong. Her maternal instincts were set off, making her hearing more sensitive. She picked up the outdoor breeze flowing in from the window, but there was only one more thing that confirmed her suspicions.

She couldn't hear Taiga. Not even a tired breath or a pained groan.

Seina made a beeline for the dinner table, snatching the key she had left on the tabletop, then making a U-turn back to Taiga's bedroom. Her hand shivered as she tried to aim the key into the keyhole. After frantically scratching the key's tip against the hole's rim, she finally shoved it in and turned it, hearing the lock click.

She pushed through the door to find a mess of all of Taiga's belongings strewn across the floor. The window was howling, the curtains fluttering with the wind. The stroller was missing, as were her daughter and granddaughters.

"Taiga!?" Seina cried out. She leapt over the pile of toys and tubs of milk powder, and threw her head out the window. She gritted her teeth as she looked left and right, then left and right again, but she only saw the grey concrete and green grass. She pulled back from the window and rushed out of the room. Her feet slid along the floor and threw her off, but she quickly regained her momentum and dashed to the front door.

Seina jumped into her shoes and threw herself into the sunlight.

*She couldn't have gotten far!* She thought, as she sprinted down the pavement, her short hair floating with the wind. She straightened her glasses and glared straight ahead. The words she would say to her daughter were blocked from her mind. They wouldn't be let through until Taiga was in her sight again.

She was right about her daughter not getting far, especially not with her weak body. With the stroller behind her, Taiga peered from behind the fence of one of the neighbours and watched as her mother ran off.

“Knowing her... She must be heading to the police station first...” Taiga mumbled. She pulled away from the fence and trudged behind the stroller. She gripped the handles tightly and began pushing it along, its wheels aligning with the concrete path.

“Gyiih!” However, Taiga suddenly felt her head fall, like a bowling ball being held by a thin pole. She was fighting to keep her eyelids from falling shut. Her legs trembled and her hands were loosening. “No... Not again...” She muttered. Her hands remained on the handles as she lowered her knees to the ground. She closed her eyes tightly as she endured the exhaustion weighing on her body. “Hoooh... Hoooh...” Her breaths were deep. The energy she was losing, she was steadily replacing with all the air she took in.

“Hrrgh!” She growled as she got on her feet again, resuming her arduous journey. She placed each foot forward, one at a time, putting care into every step.

*Wait for me, Ryuujii...*

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“Haah... Haah... Almost... There...”

Taiga’s flushed face was drenched in sweat as she continued to push the stroller along at a steady pace. Her legs were aching after walking without ever stopping for a break. She could barely afford one, lest she be found by her mother. The station was just down the road. All her efforts would’ve gone to waste if she had gotten found now.

“Gnnngh!”

Despite her efforts, her body would force her to a halt. Her legs shivered as she fought to keep herself on her feet while she lowered her head and shut her eyes tightly. A powerful numbness overcame her. Her fingers around the handles of the stroller were loosening, but with a deep breath, she fastened her grip and glared forward.

*Waaaaah!*

Steeling her resolve would all be for naught as the sound of a baby’s wail emanated from the middle seat of the stroller. Taiga went to its side and pulled away the hood to find little Mitsuko throwing her arms about, her face tomato red from her tantrum. Her mother didn’t even need to dip her head in to smell. She needed a diaper change. Taiga simply sighed. A journey with a baby was never going to be smooth, let alone with three of them.

“Ugh... I didn’t bring any diapers,” she muttered and pinched her eyes. She searched her own pockets to see if she had somehow grabbed a diaper and forgotten, but that wasn’t the case. However, she did notice that the stroller had pockets too. A big sigh of relief was released when she found a single clean diaper hiding underneath the seats, presumably left behind from the time Seina took the babies outside.

Taiga rolled the stroller into a nearby park to stop at a bench. She changed her baby’s diaper while she sat on the bench and rested her legs. The soiled diaper was tossed into the bin just next to her. Once Mitsuko was fitted with a clean diaper, Taiga was about to close the hood. However, her baby continued to whine, reaching out her hands and grasping at the air.

“Are you hungry too?” Taiga asked exasperatedly.

She scanned her surroundings. There wasn’t another person in her vicinity, though she could hear the laughter of the neighbourhood children playing at the playground a few metres away. It was quiet enough for Taiga to lift her baby out of the stroller to start feeding. She unbuttoned her trench coat, then her undershirt to expose her chest. Finally, she took little Mitsuko into her arms and rested her on her chest. Once she could feel that her baby had started feeding, she buttoned up her coat to cover and wrapped her arms over her infant.

Taiga chuckled when she felt her baby rustle inside her shirt. Her whole chest was warm and cosy. Her shoulders relaxed with her daughter’s comfort, as did the rest of her body. She felt her eyelids draw to a close. Her head fell back and her hair dangled over the backrest. Slowly, she succumbed to her fatigue once more. The pleasant feeling of her baby’s body heat would sink her into another deep slumber.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

“Uwah!”

Taiga jolted awake after feeling a tap on her shoulder. She breathed heavily as her eyes darted about. Time had slipped out of her grasps after letting herself go on the park bench under the early winter sun. The first thing she did was embrace her daughter, who was still inside her coat even after she had stopped feeding. She sighed with relief after feeling her baby’s arms push back at hers. However, when she looked up, she was spooked by two police officers standing over her. One of the men leaned over her.

“Sorry, would you be Takasu Taiga?” The man asked.

“A-am I doing something wrong, officer?” Taiga stuttered, inching away from him.

“Oh, not at all!” He said, calmly waving his hands. “It’s just that your mother had asked us to search for you after you ran away from home. If it isn’t too much trouble, we’d like you to come with us so we can get your side of the story.”

“Is that so?” Taiga murmured. She opened her coat to free Mitsuko from her chest and placed her back into the stroller.

“You’ve got a cute bunch, huh?” The other officer added.

“Mmh,” Taiga hummed as she buttoned herself back up.

“So... Is it okay if you came to the station with us?”

“Hmm... No, I’m okay,” Taiga answered. “There wasn’t anything serious happening to me at home, so you don’t have to worry. I just couldn’t stand being there, so I ran. It’s just a little family squabble, so there’s no need to step in. If we really need to talk, we can talk here.”

“I see...” The officer closest to Taiga scratched his forehead. “I suppose you wouldn’t mind if we brought you back to your mother so you could talk it out?”

“No, I don’t feel like talking now,” Taiga said bluntly.

“Where are you running off to exactly?” The other officer asked.

“To be with my husband.”

“You weren’t living with your husband?”

“Do I really have to tell you everything?” Taiga asked the officer near her scornfully.  
“Why don’t you go ask my mother when you see her again? I have somewhere to be!”

The two officers narrowed their eyes at the grumpy woman in front of them.

“Well, that would be a good idea. How about we have a chat together with your mother? We can get a clearer picture with both of you here,” the officer near her said.

“I...” Taiga stammered, but an idea quickly popped into her head. “If you want a clearer picture, why don’t you talk to my husband instead? He’s waiting for me at the station. Can I get a ride there so we can talk?”

The two officers looked at each other.

“She’s just using us to escape, isn’t she?” One of them whispered.

“She can barely walk. It’s not like she can get far.” The other whispered back.

Their volume was barely audible enough for Taiga to make out what they were saying, though, even if she hadn't listened, it wouldn't be a secret what they thought of her request. The two officers turned back to her.

"We don't have anything to ride you in, but we can accompany you to the station," the officer nearer to Taiga explained.

"I can help you push your stroller," the other officer added.

"Alright, thank you," Taiga muttered as she lifted herself onto her feet and adjusted her coat. Taiga trudged along, back onto the concrete path leading to the station. The other officer pushed the stroller beside her. The officer that first spoke to her held up his hand behind her shoulder. However, when she felt it brush against her, she stepped away from him.

"I can walk fine on my own!" She whined.

"Alright, alright," the officer said with his hands in the air.

Taiga would complete her journey to the station under the surveillance of the two officers. However, she could only return to her husband's arms by shaking the two men off her tail. As they quietly walked along the road, Taiga schemed.

Taiga supported herself on the handle of the stroller as she stood by the side at the station with the two police officers. One or two salarymen would pass them every few seconds. The crowd was light enough for Taiga to see the other side of the station from where she stood. While they stood there idly, she could hear one of the officers sigh and the one holding her stroller ask whether they should eat somewhere for lunch.

Taiga was sweating.

*Damn it... The crowd isn't thick enough for me to hide in... Taiga narrowed her eyes at the train timing display. The train's arriving soon, and the gates are right there... I have to make do with this somehow.*

She raised her arm and poked the officer holding her stroller in the side.

"Oi! Let go of my babies, would you?" She scolded. "Shoo! Shoo!" She flicked her hand, prompting the officer to awkwardly back away while she stood behind the stroller and gripped its handles. Once she had control of the stroller, she didn't say a word to the officers.

"Hey, ma'am..." The officer that walked beside her asked. "We've been waiting here for quite a while. Do you know when your husband is going to show up?"

Taiga shot a glare at him. “Give him some time!”

The officer jolted, before huffing again, leaving the three in silence once more. Restless from standing there doing nothing but wait, the officers let their eyes wander.

*Alright, time to make my move.* Taiga nodded and focused forward. She turned to one of the officers and put on a crooked smile.

“Ah... C-can you excuse me for a moment?”

“Hm?”

“One of my babies needs a diaper change,” she murmured as she pointed to her stroller. “Just let me head to the restroom for a moment.”

The officer she spoke to raised an eyebrow, then sighed.

“Go ahead,” he groaned.

Taiga swiftly faced forward and, without another word, began pushing her stroller. Her legs shivered with each step as the stroller moved at a sloth’s pace, but her speed never dwindled. She bit her lip as she headed towards the gantries.

“Hey, ma’am!” The officer shouted exasperatedly. “The restrooms are the other way!” He pointed his thumb in another direction, one that led away from Taiga’s goal. However, even after hearing the officer’s voice, she’d take her next step, and the next. With the officer’s attention, she needed to act fast, so she took a deep breath and prepared herself for her next advance.

“Ma’am!” The officer called out again irritatedly. That was Taiga’s cue. She ducked her head and shut her eyes as she focused all her might and energy into pushing herself forward. The seconds between each step shortened and the distance between her and the gantries was quickly shrinking. Though the placement of her feet remained unaligned and her legs continued to tremble, she managed to bring herself to a run.

“Hey! Don’t run away!” The officer shouted. Even though their person of interest was making her escape, the two men only jogged towards her. A sick woman like her couldn’t get far, they believed. However, Taiga would attest to that.

*Come on! Come on!* Her scrunched up face reddened as she pushed forward with everything she had. She could hear the beeps of the card scanners get louder and louder as she closed the distance.

“Gaah!” However, just before the front wheels of the stroller could even get between the gantries, Taiga felt herself get pulled back.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” A woman’s mature voice blared in her ear as she felt a hand gripping her arm tightly. The clacking of the officers’ shoes had abruptly gone silent. Even then, she never lifted her head.

“Hnnngh!” Taiga groaned as she tried to pull herself away from the hand, as if she were trying to persevere through intense weather. Her feet slid along the floor as she tried to push towards the gantries, but she didn’t move an inch from where she stood.

“Taiga! We are heading home at this very instant!” The woman yelled. Taiga felt the grip on her arm tighten, and in turn, she pushed forward harder. “That’s enough, Taiga!” The woman shouted again, this time grabbing onto the handle of the stroller and pulling her away from it. That was it for Taiga. She clicked her tongue and raised her head to face the woman.

“Let go!” She shouted, shooting a deadly glare at none other than her own mother. Past her shining glasses, Seina only glared right back. The two police officers stood from afar to watch their heated reunion unfold. However, after getting a look at her daughter’s face, her eyes lit up.

“Ngaah!” Taiga shrieked as Seina let go of the stroller to grab her daughter by the chin, pulling her in to examine her closer.

“Taiga, look at yourself! You’re covered in bruises!” Seina chuffed. “I should’ve never let you out of my sight!”

“Stop touching me!” Taiga shouted as she swiped her mother’s hand. She pushed her feet against the floor to pull herself away, but her mother’s grip was too strong for them to separate. “I’m not going back!” She growled.

“Why do you have to be so troublesome!?” Seina blustered. “I try so hard to look after you and all you do is put yourself in harm’s way! Can’t you see what you’re doing to yourself? You can’t just go off all on your own!”

“Why...” Taiga grumbled. “Why do we have to keep having this talk!?” Her shout pierced her mother’s ears. “I keep telling you how I feel and what I want, but nothing changes! What’s the point of talking anymore!?”

Passersby shot glances at the two women filling the station with their yells. Some of the strangers standing at the side were whispering to each other with their hands over their mouths. Only the two police officers seemed to mind this, as Taiga and Seina continued to exchange glares and shouts with each other.

“O-okay, it looks like it’s getting a bit heated here...” One officer stuttered as he hesitantly stepped towards them.

“How about we take this discussion to somewhere more private?” The other officer cheerily suggested while a drop of sweat ran down the side of his head.

“So you’re just going to leave on your own!? In your condition!?” Seina yelled back at her daughter without even glancing at the two officers approaching them. “I’m sorry you feel that way, but can’t you see that I’m just trying to hold us together as a family? If you don’t have anyone to look after you right, do you know what could happen?”

“Who’re you to tell me what’s right for me—Gaaah!”

Seina jerked her daughter’s arm closer to her.

“We’d be torn apart! You don’t want that, do you!?” Seina cried out.

“Like hell you’d know what I want!” Taiga shrieked in her mother’s ear, causing her to reel back. Her screech echoed off the walls of the station. “I don’t care whether we’re together or apart, I don’t ever want to live like this!”

*Fwoooosh!*

The train Taiga had intended to board rolled into the station, the ringing of the rails overpowering Taiga’s grunts. Seina felt a lump in her throat. She stared in disbelief at her daughter, who continued to wrestle out of her hand. Her grip on her arm slowly loosened. Her body, which had braced to keep Taiga in place, would let up after hearing her daughter’s words.

“You... You don’t... care?” She stuttered. Her heart ached at the proclamation her daughter made so loudly. Her voice turned into puffs of air.

“Ngaah!” Taiga grunted as she finally pulled away from Seina’s hand, which would fall limply at her side. After being released from her mother’s grasps, she stood on her crooked legs, panting from the energy she had exhausted. “Haah... Haah... I’ve had enough! I won’t hear anymore about family when anything I say means nothing! When’s the last time you’ve even thought about what I want!?” Taiga continued to pant. Her words were broken up by a sniffle. “Mom, I hate being sick, I really do. But nothing anyone has done has helped me feel better!”

“Taiga, I...” Seina stuttered again. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“I don’t want to hear it...” Taiga growled again, her head hanging low. “Ever since I gave birth, everyone’s been making me feel miserable trying to do what’s best for me. Why don’t I get a say in any of that?” Her eyes glistened with the water that built up in them. “Even Ryuaji, my

own husband, treated me that way..." She raised her head and shouted with her mouth open wide. "I am a grown adult! I worked hard to earn for my family! I'm the mother of three children! I want to be treated like one!" When she lowered her head, a stream of tears followed. "I just want to be happy about it for once..." She whimpered.

There wasn't a response Seina could muster for the pain that poured out of her daughter. She could only stare pitifully as her daughter swiped her arms over her own face to wipe the tears into her sleeves.

"Mom... Every time we argue, it's like you're never even thinking about me! You don't care about a single word I say!"

"Taiga, that's... That's not true..." Even she couldn't defend herself with confidence.

Taiga sniffled and pulled her arms away to show her mother her fuzzy red nose and cheeks. She furrowed her brows at her. "If that were really true, we wouldn't be here!"

Seina's pained gaze fell to the floor. She closed her eyes and took the brunt of her daughter's words. She could only look at how far she had pushed her daughter and what she had done to cause this. If what Taiga said really was true, then who could Seina be thinking about other than herself? In the end, the fear of being separated from Taiga was what tore them apart.

"I'm so tired, Mom. I'm so, so tired of everyone treating me like this... All because I've been bedridden for a few months," Taiga pleaded. She raised her head and braced her shoulders to shout with all her might again. "I'm standing on my two feet, aren't I!? I'm shouting loud and clear, aren't I!? I don't care what anyone says! What makes me happy and what's right for me, I will be the one to decide!" Her straightened body shivered with each breath that left her. "So just leave me alone and let me be free for once!" Her head teetered from side to side. "Please..." Finally, Taiga's words trailed off as her head fell backward, followed by the rest of her body.

Seina, stuck in her trance of pity, would only jolt into action when Taiga was halfway towards the floor. "Taiga!" She called out as she reached out for her daughter.

*Thud!*

But she was too late. Taiga would hit her head on the edge of one of the gantries before hitting the hard tiled floor. "IYAAAH!" Seina let out a bloodcurdling scream as she rushed to her daughter's side, got on her knees and lifted her head onto her lap. She brushed her daughter's hair off her face to see her eyes closed softly. A drop of blood left behind a thin red trail as it ran

down her forehead. “Taiga, I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...” Seina sobbed, her tears dripping onto her daughter’s relaxed face. She lifted her wrinkled face to cry out.

“Please! Somebody, help!”

Fortunately, the two officers were already steadily approaching. One of the officers had prepared a cloth to wipe the blood off Taiga’s face, while the other placed an adhesive bandage over Taiga’s wound.

“Oh, thank you, thank you so much...”

“We’re just doing our job, ma’am.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble... It’s my fault it turned out like this...”

The beep of a scanner sounded behind Seina, followed by the shifting of the gantry gates. Only Seina would notice a person’s shadow cast over her.

“Taiga!?”

The shriek of a man’s familiar voice prompted Seina to quickly turn behind her while the officers tended to Taiga. Seina’s eyes widened as she recognised those sharp, white sanpaku eyes staring in shock at the situation she and her daughter had gotten into.

Her lips quivered. Beads of sweat ran down her face.

“Ryu... Ryuji...”

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“Nn... Nngh...”

Taiga moaned and scrunched her eyes as she came to. However, the hardness and dustiness of the train station’s floor was absent. Rather, she was engulfed from head to toe in a heavenly softness. She gripped a part of what felt like bedsheets to feel its silky material. It was as luxurious as the bed she slept in at her mother’s home, but its texture brought about memories attributed to something else—the day that she and her husband would visit a furniture store to buy their own bed for their new home.

She was halfway through her pregnancy at the time and had started to feel its effects disrupt her sleep. Ryuji wasn’t used to sleeping in a bed, given the circumstances he was raised in, so it was one of her goals to let him and his mother live more comfortably too. Laying on that bed in that store felt like resting atop a fluffy cloud compared to anything else they’d laid in, so

after purchasing it with Taiga's hard-earned money, they were ecstatic. Now that Taiga wasn't pregnant anymore, the comfort had multiplied tenfold.

Even though Taiga felt herself waking up, she'd smack her lips and try to fall back asleep. The bed just felt too good to get up. Her mind wouldn't rest, though, as she noticed a warmth in her hand which rested on the mattress. Something was gripping it tightly. Slowly, her eyes drew open, letting the light beam into her sight. Her blurry vision focused on the face before her, with white sanpaku eyes shining before her, dark bangs that drew over them like blinds, and a soft and gentle smile that would soothe a crying baby.

"Ah... You're awake," the husky voice of her husband massaged her ear. Before she knew it, her big, brown eyes were wide open. Her heart skipped a beat when she realised her beloved was laying just beside her, watching over her in her slumber. The bright sun shining into the room created a bright outline along the edge of his skin. It was a scene out of a dream.

When her gaze wandered past the contours of her husband's figure, she noticed the bright shade of paint the walls were coated in. She turned her head up to see the white ceiling above her, with a ceiling light in the very centre. This wasn't her mother's house, nor was it Ryuaji's apartment. She finally sat up and got a view of the room's layout, which was lit up by the window letting all the sunlight pour in.

"Our new house...?" Taiga mumbled. "What... What am I doing here?" She felt the side of her forehead and found the adhesive bandage taped over the wound on her head. Ryuaji sat up with her and rested his head next to hers.

"You fainted when you were at the station, remember?" Ryuaji spoke tenderly.

"Yeah, I do, but now..."

"I arrived just after you did, but you had stressed your body and mind so much that you were unconscious for the rest of the day." Ryuaji caressed her palm with his thumb. "I guess rest really is important, huh?"

"Mmh..." Taiga nodded weakly.

"After you fainted, I spoke with your mother, and we eventually came to an agreement."

Taiga and Ryuaji's eyes met.

"You're going to be living with me again," Ryuaji grinned.

"Oh, Ryuaji..." Taiga dipped into her husband's chest and wrapped her arms around him. Ryuaji returned the embrace with his arms around her waist. "But how did you convince her?"

“She said I seemed more levelheaded...” Ryuaji turned his head down to his wife’s cute face. “But I think she already had a change of heart before we even started speaking.”

“Really?”

Ryuaji quietly nodded.

*Aaah... Aayaaan...*

Taiga’s eyes lit up at the sound of a baby’s babbling and whining. Their heads immediately turned towards the window, where three cribs with frames coated in a cherry blossom colour sat under the serene sunlight. The wood of the cribs was pristine and reflected sunlight cleanly.

Ryuaji took Taiga by the hand and brought her to the edge of the bed, where the tips of her toes brushed against the cold vinyl flooring. Ryuaji stood up and lifted his wife to her feet, holding her lower back to support her while he gently held her hand. As they stepped towards the cribs, Taiga’s face became flushed. She felt like a princess being led down an aisle. It felt like forever since her husband had handled her so intimately.

They stood over the three cribs to find Haruko and Mitsuko sleeping comfortably between their little cushions in their adorable onesies. Katsuko, however, had her face wrinkled while she whined, and all the buttons on her onesies had been undone from her tossing and turning. Despite how distressed she seemed, Taiga and Ryuaji couldn’t help but smile.

“Looks like she’s hungry,” Taiga said. Ryuaji lifted their infant from the crib into Taiga’s arms. The weight caused her to dip, but he caught her before either her or their baby could get close to the floor. With Katsuko in her mother’s arms, they slowly stepped back to their king-sized bed. Once they were laying comfortably again, Taiga unbuttoned her shirt and let her baby rest on her bare chest while she fed.

Taiga and Ryuaji felt their bodies fill with warmth at the sight of their baby at peace. Ryuaji’s arm had reached over Taiga’s shoulder. They were close enough to feel each other’s body heat too. They remained in place as they relished in each other’s presence.

“Taiga...” Ryuaji spoke softly. “I’m sorry for how I treated you before. I know how difficult life has been for you ever since you gave birth. I won’t ever send you away like that again. I’ll always be by your side. That’s what I promised.”

Taiga turned her head up and nuzzled her husband’s neck.

“But... You were so keen on us being apart. What made you come back?”

Ryuaji stretched his smile warmly.

"I had a change of heart, too," he spoke caressingly. He placed his hand on his wife's marshmallow-like cheek. "This joy of being a family just doesn't feel right if we aren't together. You knew that from the start, didn't you?" His thumb stroked along her cheekbone. "During the time we were apart, I realised how much of a mistake it was to send you away. I missed holding our daughters, and I missed holding you. After a while, I decided that, no matter what your mother says, I want to be the one to look after you."

"That's what I've been saying the whole time!" Taiga giggled and punched his chest.

"Heheh... Yeah, I know. To be honest, even if your mother told me I couldn't bring you home, I would've gone and done it anyway."

"Look at you, getting so bold..."

The couple couldn't contain their laughter. Taiga's chest shook as she chuckled, startling little Katsuko who was still attached to her. She whined, tears welling up in her little eyes. The couple quietened, but their smiles remained.

"Taiga..." Ryuaji rested his hand on her thigh. "I really want to do things differently this time. You must be tired of being inside for so long..."

Taiga's eyes lit up like two shining suns.

"I want to savour our time as a family, and I'll do anything it takes to achieve that. If there's somewhere you want to be, I'll carry you and our daughters there, and if you ever fall sick, I'll nurse you until we can spend time together again. Even if it does slow your recovery, I still want all of us to be happy. That is what we really need."

"Oh, Ryuaji..." Taiga pressed her head against Ryuaji's chest. "I am happy. I'm very, very happy to be with you again." However, a small frown grew on her face. "But my mom... The last time we spoke, we were arguing and shouting at each other. I don't want to end things like that."

"Don't worry, Taiga," Ryuaji said while he stroked her hair. "It won't be that way. I promise. For now, let's just enjoy the time we have together."

Taiga's smile shot right back up. She brought her gaze back down to Katsuko.

"Ah, she fell right asleep after she finished..." She rocked her baby gently.

"I suppose that means you're free now?" Ryuaji butted in.

"Free? To do what?"

Ryuaji snickered. “There’s something I want to show you.”

Taiga was taken along by the hand. The fuzziness in her chest tickled her again, causing her to blush as her prince walked her towards their daughters’ bedroom. He held her by the front of the door as he turned the handle and pushed it open, letting the sunlight pour through the gap. He handled her as carefully as he would with a flower, and brought her through the shining doorway.

“Oh, Ryuaji...” Once she saw the view, her heart raced.

The beds they had purchased for their daughters had the edges of their frames painted a bright pink. The front of the beds each had the names of their daughters spelled out in wooden letters attached to them. Mitsuko’s bed sat at the end of the room, Haruko’s bed was in the centre, and Katsuko’s was closest to the door. Each bed had a teddy bear with their names sewn into their miniature dresses. The wall at the end of the room even had three little cartoon tigers painted on it, playing under the lovely sun.

“Ahahah!” Taiga couldn’t contain herself as Ryuaji brought her further into the room. She sat at the front of Haruko’s bed, her legs spread out on the floor, and felt the hard laminated wooden letters attached to the bed’s frame. “Oh, this is wonderful, just wonderful! The girls are going to love these once they move in!”

“All the extra details were a gift from Ami.” Ryuaji knelt beside his wife. “And I can’t wait to see what the girls think when they’re old enough to sleep on their own.”

Taiga began to feel around the entire bed frame, appreciating the colour added to it. “Hm?” She felt an unevenness when she ran her fingers along the side of the bed’s frame. She shuffled herself along the floor to find some words etched into it. Ryuaji followed.

*You are always a blessing to your mother and everyone that loves her.*

Taiga quickly shuffled to the other side of the bed to find even more etchings.

*When you learn to walk, please walk by your mother’s side so she is never alone.*

*When you learn to hold things, please embrace her, and hold her hand gently.*

*When you learn to speak, please speak words of kindness to her.*

*When your mother showers you with all her love and care, please do the same for her.*

“Ami... wrote all of this?” Taiga’s lips quivered.

“I didn’t notice this before...” Even Ryuaji was befuddled.

Taiga slowly drew her hand back to her side. She let out a soft sigh.

“She’s really something...” She muttered, her gentle smile appearing as a part of her face’s natural shape. The room fell quiet as the couple sat there to take in the words. It felt like their voices were right next to each other’s ears when they spoke.

“This is where our daughters are going to spend the rest of their lives...” said Taiga.

“Each time they step out of this room, we’ll see them grow little by little...” said Ryuaji.

“And each day, they’ll always know...”

“That they always have someone looking after them.”

After admiring the work put into their daughters’ bedroom, Ryuaji toured the rest of the house with Taiga. She’d sit at the dinner table while Ryuaji showed her the magnificent kitchen from behind the open window between them. However, their attention was soon drawn towards the sound of a car’s honking from outside the house.

“Ah, that must be her,” Ryuaji said.

“Who?”

Ryuaji returned to Taiga’s side to lift her to her feet. He pulled her along towards the entrance and helped her put her shoes on. Finally, he opened the front door and brought her under the bright outdoor sun.

“Oh...” Taiga mumbled. Just a step outside the house, they were greeted by a familiar woman with square-framed glasses and brunette hair done into a bob. It was Taiga’s mother, humbly standing over her. On the road behind her was her car she drove Taiga in before.

“Mom?” Taiga turned to her husband. “I thought...”

“I’m driving you back to Ryuaji’s apartment,” Seina clarified.

Ryuaji stroked Taiga’s shoulders.

“I still have something to settle back here. We still haven’t fully moved in, you know?” He said with a smile.

“But what about the babies?” Taiga asked.

“It’s okay. Your mother gave me a stroller to push them around all at once. I’ll have no trouble bringing them home.”

Taiga turned back to her mother, who had promptly reached out her hand. She was gently handed over to Seina, who would lead her into the back of her car. Ryuaji cheerfully waved at

his wife as she entered. She waved back with a little grin before she closed the car door. With his hands on his hips, Ryuaji watched the car leave his view as it drove off.

Taiga rested her cheek against the window as she watched all the neighbours, houses and trees pass her by. Across from her seat, Seina was in the front, driving calmly. The silence was heavy, with only the car engine's whirring to fill the air. Seina would speak after their car eventually left the neighbourhood.

"Do you hate me, Taiga?"

Taiga pulled her cheek off the glass. Her mother watched her through the front car mirror.

"No. Not at all."

"Even after everything I'd done?"

"Mhm..."

Seina's grip on the wheel tightened.

"The way I acted was completely unacceptable..." Seina murmured. "I caused you a lot of distress, I got between you and your husband, and I disrespected you as a mother. You're really just going to brush that all away?"

"I wouldn't put it like that," Taiga said, still staring out the window, her posture now straightened. "I wasn't happy with the way you treated me and my family for the past few days. I hated it so much that I tried to run away. But even then..." Taiga turned to the front mirror and softly watched her mother's eyes. "I don't think it's enough for me to really hate you."

Seina chuffed.

"Then what is?"

"I might never know," Taiga said tenderly. "All I really know is that you did mean well."

Seina chuckled.

"At this point, I'm not even sure that's true."

"It is."

Seina's sarcastic grin fell to a small frown.

"Who are you to tell me that?"

"Because I know the difference between someone that cares and someone that doesn't," Taiga uttered. "Believe me, I've felt it."

Seina fell silent.

“It always sounded like an excuse when you did all those things and told me it was for my sake, and to some degree, I think it actually was. But if you really didn’t care about me, I don’t think I’d be sitting in this car.”

Seina’s fingers relaxed on the wheel.

“Even though it felt like you wouldn’t listen to a word I’d say, I still listened to yours. You were always so desperate to keep me safe and healthy, and while I didn’t like being under your care, it’s better than not being looked after at all. It’s hard to hate someone when you’re happy, and I really am happy that you still care for me.”

Seina stared at the traffic lights ahead.

“I guess the part that confuses me is... Why are you only acting this way now?”

The air went still.

“Because I was scared, Taiga.”

Taiga laid her head against her headrest and watched her mother’s brown eyes look forward at the cars ahead of them.

“I left you alone for so long as a child. I hadn’t been acting like your mother like I should’ve. You went through the trouble of staying with me while you were in your 2nd year in high school, so I really wanted to make up for all of it, but...”

Seina took a deep breath.

“It just seemed like such a tall task... I couldn’t imagine how terrible it must’ve been all on your own, to the point where it felt like nothing I could do would ever be enough. But you seemed so much happier after marrying Ryuaji, I thought that over time, I could just forget about everything that happened.”

Her shoulders tensed up.

“But then you got pregnant with those triplets. It was exciting at first, but as your pregnancy progressed, it felt like there was a bad omen at every corner. The weather was getting really bad near your due date, and your high-risk pregnancy demanded serious medical care. Part of me feared that all those factors would affect your delivery and then...”

Seina’s gaze drifted to her daughter in the mirror. They averted each other’s eyes.

“I broke down when I left that hospital. My own daughter, nearly losing her life to something we were all so excited for. It was inconceivable... After that, I just couldn’t sit back and watch anymore.”

Seina softened her voice.

"I really didn't have anything against Ryuji, you know. In fact, I was happy to let him have you. But after you gave birth, it felt like I was running out of time. It felt like I wasn't ever going to see the day where I'd look back on all the years we'd been apart without feeling any regret. If you really did lose your life, then we'd be apart again for many, many more years."

She sighed again.

"I couldn't let go of you again."

A stale silence filled the car.

Finally, Seina chuckled.

"Thinking about all that now, and how I'd been treating you recently, I really have been thinking only about myself, haven't I?" She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Taiga."

Taiga watched her mother go silent as she focused on driving again.

"You don't have to worry anymore, Mom," she said. "I'm getting healthier everyday. I won't be dying anytime soon. We'll be a complete family for many years to come."

Seina didn't glance at her, her flat frown still on her face. Taiga firmed her voice.

"And since that's how you feel, then I suppose I'm entitled to a request."

Finally, Seina's eyes met hers, its movement as swift as a spider's. With her mother's attention, Taiga made sure not to trip over a single word.

"Don't look back anymore, Mom. Don't wallow over for all the years you weren't by my side, because what matters is that I have you now." Seina's body relaxed at those words. Taiga focused on the road ahead of them. "The only path we have is forward."

Seina's mouth was sealed shut as she tried to find the words to respond. After a brief pause between them, she snickered.

"I guess you're right, Taiga." She sighed. "I'll try my best."

It wouldn't be long before Taiga would spot in the corner of her eye—the line of Zelkova trees swaying with the wind. Seina stopped the car in front of the apartment building. She stepped out of the driver's seat to open the door on Taiga's side like a chauffeur, but Taiga raised her hand at her when she tried to lead her along.

"Hold on, I want to try walking by myself this time."

"Are you sure?"

“I need to get used to it again. I’ve already walked through your neighbourhood on my own, anyway. Just wait for me at the stairs.”

Seina moaned. “If you say so...” She turned and started approaching the stairs leading to Ryuji and Yasuko’s apartment. The moment she faced away from her daughter, Taiga immediately grabbed the top of the car door to pull herself to her feet. She eyed her mother’s back as she took a deep breath. Finally, she pushed against the car and thrusted herself forward, instantly bringing her to a steady walking pace.

Though her legs were crooked and her steps were unaligned, the distance between her and her mother was closing. She glared determinedly at her mother’s side, and when she was just in her reach, she snatched her mother’s hand. Seina looked to her side to find her daughter’s shoulder right next to hers, cheekily swaying her arm forward and backward with a little grin.

Seina sighed again.

“I thought you wanted to walk by yourself...”

“I am walking by myself, aren’t I?” Taiga chuckled.

The mother and daughter climbed the stairs hand-in-hand. Taiga supported herself against the wall as she carefully placed her feet on each step. Seina followed her pace, slowing herself down so her daughter could maintain her balance. Once they reached the landing, Taiga stood back and held the handrail while her mother unlocked the front door.

Seina pushed the door open. She stood to the side, giving Taiga space to pass through the doorway and into the dimly lit entrance of the apartment. All the lights were off, the kitchen only visible thanks to the sunlight that crept in.

“Yasuko’s inside. I think she might be asleep. I could wake her up if you need her.”

Taiga let go of the handrail and trudged along. She leaned against the side of the doorway, right in front of her mother.

“I think I’ll be fine,” she said. Seina stared wistfully into her daughter’s eyes before nodding. She took just one step away from the door.

“Wait, Mom.”

Seina turned towards her daughter, ready to hear her next request, but for a moment, her breathing stopped. Her eyes lit up when she felt her daughter’s slender arms wrap around her body and the weight of her daughter’s chin pressing onto her shoulder. Their cheeks grazed each other as Taiga adjusted herself into a more comfortable embrace.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Seina stood there without a word. She slowly brought her arms up and returned her daughter’s hug, running her hands up her back.

“Ryuaji and I are thinking of having a housewarming party after we move into our new home. Promise me you’ll be there, alright?” She spoke lovingly into her mother’s ear. “And when my babies are older, I was hoping you’ll be available to look after them in the event Ryuaji and I, or even Yasuko, aren’t around. It could be an emergency, or maybe we’d just need time to ourselves... Either way, I’m counting on you to be there for us.”

“Y-yeah...” Seina mumbled. Taiga pulled away from her mother and looked directly into her eyes, past the frames of her glasses. A smile grew between her cheeks.

“I love you, Mom.”

Seina took in the scene of her daughter’s adorable grin. Eventually, it grew on her too.

“I love you too, Taiga.”

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“Taiga-chan! Ryuji-chan! Hurry, hurry!”

Yasuko briskwalked down the road and stopped in front of the opening in the boundary wall leading to the wonderful two-storey house they would be staying in. She twirled to face down the road and raised her hand up in the air to wave with her signature sunshine smile. On her back was a baby sitting comfortably in her carrier, with a soft beanie that had “Mitsuko” stitched into its rim. The infant gazed with her big curious eyes at the bright blue sky.

“Come on! I’m going to unlock the door!” Yasuko shouted, flapping her arms about.

“Don’t run with Mitsuko on your back!” Ryuaji shouted in return.

“It’s okay! I’m being careful!” Yasuko said as she stepped into the front yard and began approaching the house’s front door.

Taiga and Ryuaji had only just arrived at the front of their home, walking with each other hand-in-hand. Haruko clung to her father’s back, excitedly pulling on his shoulders and kicking her feet, while Katsuko was attached to her mother’s, napping peacefully. Both of them had their own beanies, too. Ryuaji looked down at his wife, who was walking steadily beside him. Taiga’s steps were still skewed, but after her time recovering, she could walk with her chest held high.

The couple's smiles met each other. They stopped to admire their pristine home, from the ridges of the rooftop below the deep blue sky, along the clean white walls making the house shine, to the rich greenery in the planter boxes below.

"So this is it..." Taiga mumbled.

"Our new home..." Ryuji said.

Taiga inhaled slowly, then exhaled gently.

"I'm going to miss that old apartment," she uttered.

Ryuji looked at Taiga with a cheeky grin and a raised eyebrow.

"Really? I thought you despised that place."

"I mean, it wasn't great. It was always so cramped and dark, but..." Taiga blushed. "At least being tucked into that tiny box of an apartment meant I was always right next to you."

"Ah..." Ryuji chuckled. "That's nice."

Taiga glared at him. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing! I thought what you said was lovely," he raised his hands defensively. "I just never expected it from you, growing up spoiled and all—Guuh!"

Taiga jabbed her elbow into Ryuji's side, causing him to jerk.

"Haha... It's great to see you so full of energy again," he pleaded, before straightening himself and raising his chest up high. "Well, I can't wait to start living here. I mean, it's four times bigger than where we were living before! Isn't that amazing?"

"For sure."

"And also..." Ryuji tightened his grip on Taiga's hand. "It's where our daughters will be growing up. With a wonderful home, nourishing meals..." He gazed at his wife confidently.

"And two loving parents, they'll be living better than both of us ever have."

Taiga's eyes widened. "R-right..."

"Taiga-chaaaaan! Ryu-chaaaaan! I'm going iiiin!" Yasuko projected her voice as she stood by the front door, jingling the set of house keys above her head.

"I guess we better get moving," Ryuji said.

"Mmh," Taiga nodded softly.

Ryuaji took a step forward. However, as he held his wife's hand, he felt himself get tugged back. He turned to see Taiga just standing there, watching the house, paralysed. Her feet were planted to the ground.

"What's wrong, Taiga?"

"N-nothing, it's just..." Her fingers rustled inside Ryuaji's grip. "You said they'll be living better than we have, but what happens if we can't... give them that?"

"What are you talking about?" Ryuaji tittered. "We have everything to give, don't we?"

"I..." Taiga stuttered. "I'm scared, Ryuaji."

"Of what?"

"Of being a mother."

Ryuaji took a step back, to his wife's side.

"You were so excited before. What's giving you the cold feet now?"

Taiga's sights fell to the ground.

"You said that since they have two loving parents, they'll be living better, but..." Taiga sighed. "Is that really true?"

"Taiga..." Ryuaji lowered his head and pressed the side of his forehead to hers. "You've wanted to love these babies since the start, and that love has never once faded. I'm sure if you keep going, our daughters will always be happy. What are you so worried about?"

"I don't know, it's just—" Taiga shook her head. "I'd always wanted us to raise a child better than our parents raised us. I always hoped that when they've grown up, they'll love us back as much as we loved them. But now we're actually doing it, and I'm afraid that, somewhere along the way, I'm going to mess up..."

Taiga huffed deeply. Yasuko had already started unlocking the front door. As she spoke, Ryuaji gently pulled her forward, making her move without her noticing.

"I'm good at changing their diapers, feeding them, and now, I can even make them stop crying. But they're only babies now. What am I going to do when they're old enough to think for themselves? Anything could happen! They could grow to hate us, maybe they'd run away, or worst of all..." She swallowed. "They could end up like me."

Ryuaji only laughed quietly.

"You don't have to fear, Taiga," he said gently as he pulled Taiga's arm closer to his shoulder. Her eyes sparkled as she gazed up at him. "If you're worried about being a good

mother, then I'll support you with all my power to make you the best mother you can be. As long as we're together, we can get through anything, remember?"

Taiga admired the sun's shine highlighting the edges of Ryuji's confident smile. Her husband's loving stare made her heart skip a beat. With her lips still quivering, she nodded.

"Yeah!"

Before she realised it, she was already standing in the doorway beside her husband. They watched Yasuko in the living room, happily bouncing on the new sofa after she had set Mitsuko down on one of the sofa chairs. Taiga and Ryuji looked at each other and giggled. While Taiga sat on the step of the genkan to take off her shoes, Ryuji closed the door behind them.

There went the click of the door's lock.

It was time for the Takasu family to open a new chapter of their lives.

Nothing could get between them anymore.

With every new challenge that came their way, they would face it together.

That's a promise.