

## Chapter 5: I Want To See You

Ryuuji and Naru, in separate armchairs, sat beside each other in the reception area of the hospital. An infant car seat rested by Naru's feet. There was Katsuko, getting rocked and cradled in her father's arms. Her young eyes stared up at her father's face with curiosity, her drooling mouth left ajar while she opened and closed her hands repeatedly. Ryuuji chuckled.

"Quite amazing how much they take after their mother, huh?" Naru said, his chin resting in his palm on the armrest next to his son-in-law. His gaze focused on the deep hue of Katsuko's brunette hair, the shine in her large gem-like brown eyes and her puffy, rosy cheeks that looked like strawberry-flavoured marshmallows. He brought his sights up to Ryuuji, who didn't take his eyes off his daughter for a moment.

"Yeah. It is," Ryuuji responded. "These girls really are hers."

Naru straightened out. "She must be worried sick about little Katsuko here."

The little smile on Ryuuji's face immediately faded away. "Yeah. She must be."

The two men stood from their chairs. Ryuuji carried Katsuko by her shoulders and quietly handed her over to his stepfather-in-law. Naru rocked his granddaughter himself to comfort Katsuko during the handover. Finally, he picked up the car seat and looked at the young father before him.

"Hey, Ryuuji," he called out, prompting the boy to stare back at him. "I promise your daughters will be in good hands. You don't have to worry one bit."

"I know," Ryuuji muttered.

"I... I'm sure it won't be long before you and Taiga will be together again. Just hang in there, alright? If there's anything you need, you can always give me a call."

"Mmh," Ryuuji only nodded. "I'll be fine, Naru."

Naru pursed his lips. He took in some air before uttering the words.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way, Ryuuji. Trust me, I tried to convince my wife as much as I could, but—"

“It’s okay, Naru,” Ryuaji interjected before plastering on a little grin. “This kind of thing is just a part of being an adult, isn’t it? I’ll tough it out. You just focus on looking after Taiga and my daughters, alright?”

Naru’s stare was full of nothing but worry, but after Ryuaji widened his smile, he sighed. There wasn’t anything left he could do.

“I understand. Take care, Ryuaji,” Naru said before buckling little Katsuko into the car seat and lifting it off the floor by its handle. The two men nodded to each other before Naru left the hospital building. Ryuaji watched Naru through the glass doors of the entrance as he stepped into a cab and disappeared from his sight along with his daughter.

Ryuaji’s smile fell from his face. He sighed deeply and watched the pale white rubbery floor beneath his shoes, with a dark shadow cast from the ceiling light above his head. He clenched his fists and shut his eyes tightly, before holding his breath. He counted the seconds that passed, before slowly releasing the air in his chest.

Naru and Katsuko would be on their way to the station by now.

Ryuaji opened his eyes and looked forward. With a straight face, he began taking steps towards the hospital exit. His fearsome sanpaku eyes scared a mother and her child in a wheelchair on the way out, even though his eyes didn’t glare at them once. He held onto a hanging strap as he stood alone amongst the sea of commuters on the morning train. He strolled along the roads that cut through the neighbourhood blocks, accompanied only by the cold, howling breeze.

Finally, after climbing the rickety staircase to his apartment, he unlocked the front door and pushed it open. He stared into the miniature kitchen inhabited by shadows. Yasuko was still looking after her mother that day, leaving Ryuaji to look after the house all on his own. She planned on coming home at night to keep him company after her father returned from work, but what did it matter?

Before Taiga was pregnant, his hours were filled by a part-time job at the local bakery. He always made it home in time for his wife and mother to return to a clean house and a warm dinner. He could continue cooking meals and keeping everything tidy, but who would he be doing it for other than himself? He couldn’t return to his job either, lest he’d have to explain why he wasn’t looking after his daughters. Yasuko always left early in the morning too, having to

reach her parents' home before her father left for work, so he was going to be in that apartment in solitude regardless.

Right, there was no escaping this loneliness. That was the fact he had to accept. In order to become the best partner he can be, to regain the trust of Seina to look after her daughter, he had to be able to overcome any circumstance. If he couldn't learn to live on his own like this, what kind of husband would that make him? What kind of example would that set for his daughters? What would be the point of sending Taiga away?

With a deep breath, Ryuaji stepped into his apartment, shutting the door behind him. Thus, his trial began.

As for Taiga, she was laying on her side with her legs stretched along the sofa in Seina's living room. She cradled a sleeping Mitsuko in her arms, stroking her head, while she watched Haruko play around with her toys atop a soft colourful blanket that Seina had laid out. Her ears were filled by the droning sound of the TV playing the usual dramas that aired in the morning. She restlessly huffed through her nose, her mouth remaining sealed and straight. She felt her body sinking deeper into the sofa the longer she laid there.

“Taiga!”

Seina joyfully called to her daughter with a wrinkly grin as she stepped into the living room with her cellphone next to her ear. She brought it down to her chest to keep her voice from getting picked up.

“Naru is coming home with Katsuko right now! He tells me she's healthier than ever!”

Taiga lifted her back from the cushions, her body leaving behind a sunken imprint.

“Oh, that's wonderful,” she said with a soft smile. “When are they getting here?”

“They'll be here in the afternoon,” Seina answered. “Oh, once little Katsuko's here, she'll be the most comfortable baby in town! You won't have to worry about her health ever again—” Her ears suddenly picked up something. She quickly brought her phone back up to her ear and raised a finger at Taiga. “Ah, sorry, Naru's still on the phone with me. I'll get back to you.”

Seina stepped out of the room, leaving Taiga alone with her daughters again. She felt something rustling at her chest and looked down to find Mitsuko moving her arms around and slowly opening her eyes after waking from her morning nap. Taiga chuckled and leaned over her baby.

“Hello, Mitsuko. Did you enjoy your nap?” Taiga asked tenderly. “Are you excited to see your sister again? I know I am.” Mitsuko only gazed up at her mother with open eyes and a drooling mouth. Taiga sighed. “Granny’s house must be very comfy, hm? You’ve got a nice crib and so many nice toys.” A frown started to appear. “If it’s comfy enough... Then you won’t cry about dad again, right?”

Mitsuko blabbered incoherently. She started grabbing at Taiga’s chest, pulling on her white tank top. She couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I guess you aren’t the only one that gets hungry after naps,” Taiga said before pulling the one of the straps of her tank top off her shoulder, exposing her chest to let her baby feed.

Mitsuko calmly closed her eyes as she felt the warmth of her mother’s bosom.

“You three really only take after me, huh? Poor dad.” Taiga huffed. “It really has been a rough time for him, hasn’t it? He always spends so much time worrying about me, and you three...” Taiga’s gaze softened. “Especially me...”

Suddenly, Taiga felt an aching in her arms carrying Mitsuko.

“Oof! Okay, you’re heavy,” she said as she laid back down on her side, shifting her baby’s weight off her body as she continued to feed. She groaned. “I guess there’s no point fighting it... I just have to recover quickly, then we can all be together again. We’ll start enjoying ourselves once Dad is with us. What do you think?”

Taiga looked down at her baby, who only let out a little hum. She continued stroking her little head.

While her daughter resided in the living room with her own daughters, Seina stood by her bedroom window, staring through the glass as sunrays beamed onto her from head to toe, casting a faint shadow behind her. She still had her phone up to her ear.

She spoke sternly.

“I haven’t forgotten what we’ve discussed. Doing this doesn’t make me happy either, but this is how it has to be. I don’t want to see my daughter in a hospital bed again, and this is the only way I can make sure of that, whether she likes it or not.”

She paused to let her husband speak. Her shoulders loosened and her voice eased.

“I know... I know... I want to make it easy for her, but you know how it is. I...” Seina sighed deeply. “Look, if something happens while she’s under my care, I’ll take accountability.

I'm not afraid to admit that I have some shortcomings of my own, but you have to let me do this, Naru."

She let her husband speak again, nodding a few times as she waited her turn to speak.

"Okay, I hear you... Thank you for putting up with me, Naru. I won't trouble you anymore. I'll see you later."

She nodded one last time.

"I love you."

And hung up. She gently closed her phone and placed it against her forehead. Her eyes closed as she inhaled slowly and exhaled softly. Finally, she shoved her phone into her pocket, dusted off her dress and raised her posture before leaving the room. It wouldn't be long before her third grandchild would arrive.

Morning turned to noon.

Back at the apartment, Ryuaji had just finished washing the laundry, which consisted only of his pajamas and the clothes he'd just used to step outside to meet with Naru. The dish rack had but a single dripping bowl and plate after he'd finished having his breakfast. Out on the balcony, after hanging up his last piece of wet laundry, Ryuaji felt his phone vibrate.

He opened his cellphone to find a message from Taiga.

*Being here really makes them sleepy*, the message said. Attached was a photo of all three of his daughters napping in their own cribs, surrounded by their fluffy plush toys. Ryuaji chuckled at the adorable sight, but immediately sighed at the thought of not being there to witness it in person.

*Cute*, he responded, before putting the phone away and stretching his arms. The image of his three daughters was pushed to the back of his mind. He stepped into his bedroom, searching for the next chore he had to complete and thinking of the next errand he had to run.

It was time for everyone to adjust. For Ryuaji, to learn to live on his own, only for himself, for Taiga, to recover as quickly as possible so she can reunite with her lover, and for Seina, to watch over all four of her kin.

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“Takasu-san! Do you have a minute? I need help deciding which I should buy.”

“Hey, Takasu-san! There’s a cat up in that tree! You’re tall. Can you reach it?”

“Takasu-kun, are you free right now? I could use some help moving some things!”

“My little boy won’t eat his vegetables. Can you do something, Takasu-san?”

*H-how did it end up like this!?*

There was Ryuaji strolling through the neighbourhood in his cleaning househusband outfit, with his apron over his body, a cloth tied around his neck as a makeshift face mask and headscarf covering his hair. Sweat ran down his face while he carried two heavy buckets filled with his cleaning supplies, including the obligatory Takasu stick. The weight caused him to pant like a dog as he pondered how he ended up becoming the errand boy for the folks in his neighbourhood.

He had tidied up the whole house while noon was still young. The futons were smooth and orderly, the fresh laundry was folded and aromatic, and the dishes were shining like polished armour. There really wasn’t anything else left for him to do, so he chose to sit in front of the TV to watch a drama that one of the neighbourhood housewives had recommended to him—a summer flick about a business man and business woman falling in love.

Halfway through the episode, he had already found himself half asleep. He remembered being told that it only got better by the fifth episode, but he needed an easier way to kill time. He figured a nice cup of iced tea would go well with the show, so he went ahead and boiled a kettle. Once it was steaming, he prepared the tea in a glass jug.

However, when he opened the fridge to cool it, he realised how little room there was to fit the jug. The refrigerator was chock full of groceries that Yasuko had bought over the weekend, with fresh vegetables, succulent fruit, and high-quality red meat. Not to mention, some of the snacks he’d bought from his binge hogged almost a quarter of the fridge space.

Ryuaji took a box of chocolate biscuits out and huffed. He couldn’t remember the fridge ever being this full. Before he got married and Yasuko got a promotion, they had to be more stringent with their spending. There would be just enough for his and his mother’s meals. When Taiga moved in and their average household income increased, even then, their fridge would only be half as full.

His frown deepened as he remembered what it was like when Taiga was pregnant. Their grocery store visits doubled, and Taiga followed every single one of them to fill the cart with

whatever she and her babies were craving. But even after returning with plastic grocery bags that bloated until they tore, the fridge was always left with just an item or two after half a week.

He'd watch in horror as Taiga devoured every snack and dish he placed in front of her, with her belly growing and growing over the months until she could barely walk or fit into any of her clothes—and it never ended there, either. He was forced to heed the commands of his pregnant wife to satisfy her cravings, no matter what time of day. He'd run through the streets searching for the nearest FamilyMart to buy some chips and/or chocolate. Part of him was afraid if he didn't, he'd be the one getting eaten.

Ryuaji huffed. What fun days those were. Only a mess of a man like him would be saddened by the sight of a plentiful fridge.

Either way, he needed to make space, otherwise all the tea he made would go to waste. He took out all the snacks he'd bought, rearranging the fridge such that he could fit the jug inside. However, after looking at the pile of snacks, he realised he couldn't think of a time to eat any of them. Snack binges were Taiga's thing, after all, even when he'd join her sometimes, but doing them on his own would just make him feel horrible again. If he saved them until she got back, they could end up stale.

Ryuaji already had an idea of how to get rid of them, given his close ties to his fellow neighbours. He gathered all the snacks into a dainty rattan basket, with a tall, thick handle arched over it. He wrapped a shiny red ribbon around its rim. All the snacks were neatly arranged in rows, with all the big ones in the back and the small ones in the front. He grinned at his well-crafted hamper before putting on his early winter coat and taking it outside. He made his way to the home of a mother of four he befriended.

It all happened in the span of under an hour.

“Hey, Tanaka-san! I remember your girls loved these snacks, and I had a lot leftover.”

“Ah, Takasu-san! Please, come in and have some tea. Let me treat you!”

“Oh, you don't have to—”

“Please, I insist. You've already done so much for me, just let me repay you.”

Ryuaji would enter the woman's home to enjoy a relaxing tea break and chat with the woman who was nearly twice his age. Despite the dissonance between their identities, they had quite a lot in common. Everything was easygoing until one topic came up.

“Oh, Takasu-san, I’ve been having so much trouble getting the grease off my stove. No matter how much I scrub, it just won’t disappear, and I haven’t got a clue why!”

“I can take a look at it!”

Ryuaji enthusiastically volunteered. He showed the mother a special trick to make her stove sparkle like it was brand new. Somehow, something so mundane left the woman astonished that she had to tell the tale of Takasu Ryuaji, the Magic Cleaner, to the rest of the women in the neighbourhood.

He was already quite popular, but nobody was compelled to approach him since his wife always took centre stage. However, now that he was happily taking favours from his neighbours, they just couldn’t miss the opportunity. After leaving the Tanaka household, Ryuaji was stopped in the streets by more neighbours he had befriended. With all the free time he had, he just couldn’t refuse.

Now, fully equipped with cleaning gear, he was on his way to fulfil his next favour. The exhaustion from carrying everything, on top of going from house to house to help out, made his head spin. However, thinking back at how happy he was taking everyone’s orders, he couldn’t blame anyone but himself for getting into this situation. Fortunately, it was the last favour of the day, and any requests after that were gently turned down.

“Alright… This should be quick.”

Ryuaji approached the porch of a single-storey house. It had vegetation growing up the edges of its walls and there wasn’t a shimmer of light coming through the dull curtains behind the tinted windows. When he pressed the doorbell, he couldn’t hear anything besides the click of the button, so he opted to knock on the door.

“Ah! C-coming! Haah!” A feminine voice was heard from the other side. Ryuaji took a step back to let her introduce herself. When the door was pulled open, his eyes widened as he was greeted by a young woman with messy, curly brown hair. She was heavily pregnant and donned a maternity dress full of creases. She held a white cloth in her hand which she was using to dab her moist forehead.

“Oh, hello!” Ryuaji said, his voice cracking a little.

“H-hi!” The woman glanced at Ryuaji’s cleaning supplies. “You must be Takasu-kun! Nakatani-san must’ve told you to come here, right?”

“Yep! That’s me, at your service!” Ryuaji said with his head held high.

“Y-you can call me Kiyomi!” The woman bowed. “Thank you for coming to my aid!” She hastily stepped to the side and gestured into her home. “Please, come in, come in! Make yourself comfortable! Heheh... Haah...”

Ryuaji stepped into Kiyomi’s home and was engulfed in a thick shadow. Not even the living room had its lights on. The floor was littered with boxes, plastic bags and loose clothes. His body swayed as he tried to avoid stepping on anything while carrying the heavy cleaning gear. When he looked back, he could see Kiyomi waddling around and staggering about herself.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Takasu-kun... Hah... You really seem like a kind man, so I’m very sorry for putting you through this.”

“Don’t worry about it. I like helping people,” Ryuaji said. “I believe this is the first time we’ve actually met. How long have you been living here?”

“For as long as this baby’s been inside me, haha! Hoooh... Well, not many people really know me besides Nakatani-san.”

The house was messy enough to be featured on reality TV. He could’ve sworn he’d seen a cockroach crawling amongst all the rotting cardboard on the floor. For a moment, he could hear Kiyomi continuously flipping a light switch, but none of the lights above them turned on. Then, he spotted it. His eyes narrowed at it crawling up the walls. His arch nemesis had made its appearance to terrorise another household—black mold.

However, for courtesy, he’d let Kiyomi lead him to her living room, which was just as cluttered and gloomy as the entrance. The coffee table was covered in more garbage and dirty dishes. The dull, stained sofa was the only thing there that wasn’t stacked with random objects, but there was barely any legroom. Navigating the floor was as challenging as trudging through a flooded marsh.

Ryuaji stood there and observed the mess of a home Kiyomi had been living in. He could hear her exhausted breaths as she joined beside him. He turned to her to find her holding the wall while she stroked her pregnant belly, her panting intensifying.

“My wife gave birth recently, you know. I’d be happy to introduce you to her.”

“Ah... Taiga, was it? Yes, I’ve heard. Is she healthy? I heard you had to deliver the triplets yourself because you couldn’t get to the hospital, hah...” Kiyomi said breathlessly, her head still down as she spoke through her discomfort.

Ryuaji set his cleaning equipment on the floor. “Well, it was my mother that delivered them. She almost died from the whole ordeal too, and now she’s with her parents to recover.”

“I see... Childbirth sounds... scary,” Kiyomi said while she raised her head.

“When are you due?”

“Two days ago,” she said with a cheeky grin. Ryuaji widened his eyes at her again. She gazed at her round belly and rubbed it in a circular motion. “You see, I’m being induced tomorrow, but I realised that I didn’t want to bring my little boy home to a house like this. It just isn’t fit for raising a child, you know?”

“I see.”

“I tried to clean it all myself, but it’s hard just walking around like this. Hoooh...”

Kiyomi leaned backward with her hands on her lower back. She shut her eyes tightly as a mild ache radiated through her body. “There’s no way I can get it all done in time before my baby arrives, especially not in my condition, so I had no choice...” The young woman looked up at Ryuaji pitifully. “Is there any way I can repay you?”

Ryuaji smiled and spoke tenderly.

“There’s no need for any of that. After all...”

He pulled a rubber glove over his hand and clenched his fist tightly.

“A mess like this is no match for Takasu Ryuaji!”

Ryuaji bore his monstrous sanpaku eyes and let his white teeth shine through his mischievous wrinkled grin. Indeed, he looked no different from a demon after setting his sights on some delicious human flesh. Kiyomi stepped away like a little stray puppy.

“Scary...”

“Alright! Let’s take this beast down!” Ryuaji roared while he pointed at the living room. He slipped his other glove on and pulled his scarf over his nose. He marched through the mess, with his shoulders stiff and fists clenched, and immediately dove for a stack of garbage. “Hup!” He grunted as he lifted the stack and let it rest on his chest before going to place it in a corner.

“He’s really getting into this...” Kiyomi commented. Seeing Ryuaji so determined to clear the mess, she felt herself getting riled up too. “L-let me lend you a hand!” She exclaimed shakily, sweat still running down her face. She waddled through the mess and picked up another stack. It rested atop her pregnant belly. “Hnnngh!” Her face scrunched up as she tried to follow Ryuaji’s movements.

“Huff... Huff...” However, the heavy load, paired with the weight of her baby in her belly, added immense strain to her body, causing her arms to quickly give out. Suddenly, her eyes shot open as an intense sting shot through her body. “Aaaah!” She cried out as she dropped the garbage to the floor and collapsed to her knees.

“Kiyomi-san!” Ryuaji dropped his items and rushed to her side.

“Aaaaah! Haaaaah!” She was crying as she grovelled on the floor, with her hand on her back and her closed, shivering fist on the floor. “Uuuuugh!”

“Kiyomi-san, breathe! Deep breaths will help you through the pain!” Ryuaji knelt down and rubbed Kiyomi’s back to soothe her further.

“Haaaah! Hoooh! Hoooh...” The woman inhaled and exhaled, slowly and loudly. She continued taking in as much air as she could until the wave of pain passed her. After a few minutes, her breathing softened. “Hoooh...” She weakly raised her head. “I... I think I’m okay now.”

“Kiyomi-san...” Ryuaji’s lips quivered. “I’m going to call an ambulance.”

“Huh!” Kiyomi suddenly turned to Ryuaji while her hands were still on the floor. She saw him pull his cellphone out of his pocket and begin to dial. “No! Gyyiiiihh!!!” The young woman groaned as she pulled her heavy body up with all her might to lunge at Ryuaji and steal the phone out of his hand.

“Hey! What are you doing!?” Ryuaji yelled.

Kiyomi hid the phone in her chest, out of Ryuaji’s sight. She managed to steal it just before he could hit the call button. “D-don’t call the hospital! I’m not ready to have my baby yet! Don’t send me away, please!” She cried out.

“But you look like you’re about to have your baby right now!” Ryuaji yelled back with his hands at his side. He wanted to take his phone back, but he couldn’t bring himself to raise his hand at another woman, let alone a pregnant one. A struggle could worsen her condition.

Then, in the corner of his eye, he spotted a dusty telephone resting on the TV stand. He trudged towards it, stepping past all the boxes and garbage.

“Wha... Where are you going?” Kiyomi asked before she spotted it as well. “Uwaaaah!” She wailed when Ryuaji lifted the cordless phone from its stand. He swiped the dust off the phone’s little screen as he tried to get it to turn on. “Don’t call the ambulance! Please, Takasu-kun!” The woman had started screaming where she stood. Ryuaji tried pushing the

buttons on the phone, but it gave no feedback. “That phone doesn’t even work, anyway! It’s been broken for months!”

“I can’t just stand back and watch you suffer! You need medical attention!” Ryuaji shouted back as he fiddled with the phone. His hands began to tremble. “I can’t let it happen again... I can’t let it happen to you!”

*Beep!*

Kiyomi’s heart sank when she heard it. Ryuaji managed to turn the phone on and press a number into the input field.

“NOOOOOOO!” She tried to run through the mess and snatch the phone out of Ryuaji’s hand like she did with his cellphone. However, with her troublesome size and weight, the residual pain from her lower body clouding her senses, and how arduous the floor was to walk through, she was bound to lose her balance. “IYAAAAAAAH!” She cried as she tripped and fell forward, about to land on her belly.

“AAH!” She squealed when her fall was halted by two firm hands holding her by the shoulders. Her eyes were stuck open as the adrenaline from falling settled. She noticed the cordless phone sitting on the floor. Ryuaji had dropped the phone to catch her. After all, her well-being came before anything else.

“Are you alright, Kiyomi-san?” Ryuaji asked softly. However, he jerked when he suddenly heard the young woman begin to whimper.

“Oohoo... Oohoo... Please don’t send me to the hospital, Takasu-kun. I’m not ready to give birth. I’m really not ready,” Kiyomi sobbed. She raised her head, showing Ryuaji her shining, watery eyes. “I’m so scared, Takasu-kun.”

“I understand,” he said tenderly. “I know how scary and painful childbirth is, but you can’t run away from it, Kiyomi-san.”

“No, you don’t get it. You don’t get it at all.” Kiyomi lowered her head. “Please, just help me, Takasu-kun. I promise I’ll go to the hospital today, but I can’t go right now. Not while the house is like this.”

Ryuaji looked down at the woman grovelling at him. He could only feel sympathy for the young lady, and her condition only seemed to cause her more distress. He was willing to do anything to alleviate it.

“Alright, I won’t call the ambulance,” he uttered. Kiyomi looked up at him and sniffled. “But once I’m done cleaning, you’re heading straight to the hospital.”

“Yes, I promise,” Kiyomi nodded shakily.

“Do you think you can endure until then?”

Kiyomi got on her feet and pulled away from Ryuaji’s hands. “Of course!” She exclaimed happily while wiping away a tear. “Besides, if anything happens, I have you to help out!” She uttered with a wide grin. Ryuaji smiled back. He stepped towards her.

“You should sit down and rest. Just watch your reliable neighbour Ryuaji transform your house into something lovely,” he said with his hand on her back as he led her to the sofa. He fluffed up one of the dusty pillows so she could lay down and rest her head atop of it. With her body stretched across the sofa and her hands on her tummy, she tilted her head to watch Ryuaji clear the mess.

“Don’t let that baby out just yet, Kiyomi-san! I’ll be done cleaning this whole house before you can even fall asleep!” Ryuaji shouted as the living room floor started to become easier to walk through from his cleaning.

Kiyomi smiled. The strange man that she let into her home was like a mythical fairy helping her get her life into shape. She winced and huffed as she was hit by another sting, prompting her to rub her belly even more, but just being in Ryuaji’s presence somehow made the pain a little more bearable.

“I’m an irresponsible woman,” she blurted. “You’re probably wondering how the house ended up like this, huh? That’s the reason.”

“It happens to the best of us,” Ryuaji said, still focused on clearing the garbage.

“Yeah, but... Everything that happened to me... To this house... The reason I’m all alone... It’s all my fault. Now I’m just loading the burden onto somebody else,” she said, her face still soaked. She let her sweat seep into the sofa and her dress.

“I ran away from my parents and all my friends to get with a man that didn’t even love me that much. We bought this house together, though I covered most of the costs, and only after he ran away while I was just a month away from my due date did I realise he was only thinking about himself.”

Kiyomi sighed.

“Now I’m all alone, and I’ll have to raise my baby boy all by myself. I wanted this child more than anything, but I don’t know if someone as terrible as me can raise him well. I just hope he’s happy with what I can give...” A stray tear fell down her cheek.

Even though Ryuaji’s eyes didn’t face her, his ears were picking up every single word. “It’s okay, Kiyomi-san,” he said calmly, his voice muffled by his mask. “I was just like your baby boy, you know. I only had my mother to look after me after my father ran away.” He wouldn’t notice the young woman’s eyes lighting up.

“Yasuko wasn’t the most responsible woman either, but she continued to be a loving mother and gave me a good life with what little she had. I believe if you have enough love in your heart, you can do the same.”

“I see...” Kiyomi mumbled. “Then I’ll raise my boy to be just like you, Takasu-kun.”

For a moment, Ryuaji’s hands stopped. A fuzzy feeling sizzled in his chest as he blushed at the young woman’s words. “Th-thanks...”

Kiyomi chuckled at Ryuaji’s bashfulness. “I take it your mother didn’t have a random man to help clean up her home. Hoooh...” She closed her eyes tightly as she calmly rode the next wave of discomfort that arrived.

“No, but it’s not like she wasn’t receiving any help either,” Ryuaji said through his grunts as he cleared the coffee table of all the items on top of it. He sprayed its surface with some sanitizer and began wiping it with his own cloth he had brought. “But I helped out as much as I could. I’ve been making all her meals since I was in school, you know.”

“Nngh... I don’t think I’d wish that for my baby,” Kiyomi responded. “I don’t even want to imagine the thought of my boy being the one to look after me instead of the other way around while he’s just a kid.”

“But you need all the help you can get, don’t you?” Ryuaji rebutted. “Just because someone’s doing something for you doesn’t mean they aren’t happy doing it. And if your boy loves you back enough, he wouldn’t even have a second thought about it.”

Ryuaji stood up and gave Kiyomi a wide smile.

“You can achieve so much when you aren’t alone. Take a look,” he said as he spread his arms apart to gesture at the entire living room.

Kiyomi opened her eyes as the pain subsided. Her mouth was left agape at the dazzling sight of her living room. She sat up to get a clear view of its beauty. Ryuaji had only been there

for a few minutes yet her living room already looked the same as the day she first bought the house. There was still garbage surrounding it, but she was just amazed by how much progress Ryuji had gotten in such a short amount of time.

“After I’m finished cleaning, you’ll have a new start with your baby. Your son will arrive in a clean and lovely home. You can focus on bettering yourself and raising your child instead of whatever mess was leftover from before.”

“Oh, Takasu-kun...” Kiyomi held her fist up to her mouth as she felt her eyes becoming watery. “Thank you... Thank you so much...” The tears escaped from her eyes and dripped from her chin. Ryuji strolled towards the woman without an obstacle in his way to set her back down on her pillow.

“Now, now, just continue resting. I’ll be done in no time.”

Kiyomi nodded and beamed at Ryuji. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, cradling her belly, while Ryuji stepped away to resume his work. Even though he wanted it to be his last favour of the day, just being there left a warm feeling inside him. He needed to do it as fast as he could, but he didn’t mind if the work went on for hours.

That was how Takasu Ryuji learned to live while he was away from his wife.

\*\*\*

*Waaaaaaaaah!*

“H-hey, sit still! You need to take your medicine!”

In her bedroom, by the edge of her bed, Taiga pushed aside little Katsuko’s hands and feet as she tried to put the end of a syringe filled with a milky fluid into her baby’s mouth. However, every time her hand got near her baby’s face, which had turned red from wailing and crying, her baby would kick and punch it away, or turn her head away to keep it from touching her lips.

“Uuugh!” Taiga ruffled her long brunette hair as the sound of her baby’s cries rang in her ears. No matter what she did, Katsuko’s face would stay scrunched up, her mouth wide open as she let out her high-pitched screech. Taiga held her head, closed her eyes tightly and gritted her teeth as the stress got to her. “What am I doing wrong, what am I doing wrong!?” The tantrums always made her want to cry with them.

Suddenly, her eyes opened when she felt the syringe get stolen from her hand. She watched as her baby got lifted from the bed. When she looked up, she was greeted by her mother calmly rocking little Katsuko in her arm while holding up the syringe, ready to place it into the infant's mouth.

"Shh... Shh... It's okay, Katsuko-chan. It's all okay..." Seina spoke tenderly. Taiga listened to the infant's cries quieten. She could see Katsuko looking up at her grandmother calmly and inquisitively. "It's time to take your medicine, so be good, okay?" Seina said with a wide smile, before lowering the syringe into Katsuko's mouth and pushing the fluid into it.

As Seina continued to rock Katsuko, Taiga buried her face into the edge of the bed.

"Why... Why can't I do it like you do?"

"Did you do the trick I showed you?" Seina asked.

"I did it exactly like you did, but I just can't..."

Seina knelt down and stroked her daughter's back. Katsuko had fallen asleep after taking her medication.

"It's okay, Taiga. Just rest and let me handle everything."

Taiga pulled her face away from the mattress to glare at her mother.

"I'm tired of letting you do everything for me! I'm Katsuko's mother. I'm supposed to do this myself! If I can't get her to take her medicine, what if she stops breathing again?"

"Then I'll step in. You can't stress yourself too much, remember?" Seina said. Taiga looked down at her knees pitifully. Her mother placed her hand on her shoulder. "The doctor said overwhelming yourself would cause you to faint. You can't act like Katsuko's mother while you're unconscious, can you?"

"It's not like I can be Katsuko's mother while I'm awake, either," Taiga grunted. She lowered her head further. Seina could hear her begin to sniffle. Her daughter was getting upset over her own daughters again. She sighed and pushed Taiga's chin up with her fingers. When she got a look at Taiga's big watery eyes, she wiped off a tear with her thumb.

"Don't cry, Taiga," she spoke warmly. "Come play with your daughters in the living room. It's no good being with Katsuko all on your own."

Taiga sniffled one last time before she nodded. Her mother lifted her with her arm over her shoulder, helping her trudge out of the bedroom with her bony, twig-like legs. Once they

were in the living room, a little smile grew on her face when she spotted Haruko and Mitsuko laying next to each other as they shook their toys around in each other's ears.

The young mother was placed on her knees next to them on the soft coloured mattress. She bent down and got close to their chubby faces. Seina joined beside her, with Katsuko still sleeping in her arms. From the pile of toys, Taiga took a rubber one shaped like a mouse and squeezed it in front of her two adorable little daughters.

“Hey~! Do you like this one?” She said cheekily as the toy made shrill squeaking sounds every time she closed her fist. Both Haruko and Mitsuko reached for it. Their mother chuckled as she watched them try to pull it out of each other's hands. In the end, Haruko won the tugging battle and was allowed to hold the toy to squeeze it herself.

As she watched her sister have the toy all to herself, Mitsuko pursed her lips and wrinkled her brows. Her cheeks turned red as she turned to her mother with watery eyes.

“Oh, Mitsuko...” Taiga took her baby into her arms and cradled her. Little Mitsuko grabbed her mother's chest and scrunched up her face. Her mouth opened wide as she let out a loud wail from her tiny chest.

The two mothers in the room couldn't contain their amusement as they both giggled at how the crying fit started. Taiga took a pacifier from one of her bags sitting at the side and placed it into her baby's mouth. Mitsuko immediately went silent and looked at her mother with wide eyes as if she hadn't been crying just a few seconds ago. Taiga and Seina smiled at the baby relaxing in her mother's arms.

With all this lovely play, a thought came to Seina.

“Ooh! I just remembered, I still have your old baby toys.”

Taiga watched her mother lay Katsuko on the floor and leave the room. She huffed when her arms began to ache, and placed Mitsuko next to her sisters while she waited for her mother to return. She could hear her mother inside the storeroom rummaging through everything.

“Aha! Found it!” Taiga heard Seina exclaim before promptly returning to the living room with a red plastic box in her hands. She planted it on the floor and grabbed its lid. Seeing it up close, it was surprisingly clean for something that had been around for over twenty years. “Before your father and I separated, I decided to take these with me. Your father didn't have a use for them, and you were already too old to play with them, so he didn't mind.”

Seina lifted the lid to reveal all the old trinkets piled up in the box. There were soft toys, wooden toys, plastic toys, toys of all shapes and colours, though over time the colours had faded. There were dolls with luscious locks of hair, and animals that were cute and cuddly, perfect for a baby to snuggle with. Despite the wear and tear, there wasn't a speck of dust on any of them.

"Do you remember playing with these?" Seina asked.

Taiga scanned every toy in that box, but only one of them caught her eye. She smiled as she pulled out a cute baby doll with long hair, along with a miniature hairbrush that came with it as part of a set.

"Only this one," Taiga responded softly. All those memories of playing in her old home, with both her parents watching over her when they were still together—they played back in her mind. Her grin was stuck to her face as she pushed aside the doll's frayed hair to look at its round plastic complexion. The stickers used to represent its eyes had peeled off, but the contours of its big eyes, little lips and button nose remained.

"I used to play with this all the time..." She mumbled as she brushed the doll's hair with the little brush.

Seina comfortably eyed her daughter as she played with the doll. She could picture her baby daughter sitting in front of her, styling her baby doll's hair while she babbled in her ear without a care in the world. She only needed her mother's company to be happy. Everything was just so simple when she was a child.

Seina raised her hand to her daughter's head and began stroking her luscious brunette hair. Both their smiles widened as they felt the place grow warmer. Taiga lowered her arms and leaned towards Seina, resting her head on her shoulder, while Seina planted her cheek on top of her head. After all these years, no matter how old they had gotten, Taiga was still her daughter, and Seina was still her mother.

However, even after the fact, things had changed. That was the truth.

Taiga pulled away from Seina's shoulder, her eyes set on her three babies rolling about on the floor. Little Katsuko was laying flat on her back when she looked at her mother crawling over her. Taiga placed the baby doll in her little arms. She hugged the doll's cotton-stuffed body tightly. Katsuko, with a cheeky smile on her face, hummed to herself as she tossed about with the doll in her arms.

With a bright face, Taiga turned to her mother.

“Hey, let’s bring the girls outside! They could use some fresh air.”

Seina smiled at her daughter.

“Maybe some other time.”

Taiga’s smile slowly straightened.

“Why can’t we do it now? It’ll just be quick, and the weather’s really good. I’m sure the babies would love it.”

“Oh, I have no issue bringing the babies outside. They’re big and healthy, and getting some sun would be really good for them,” Seina said calmly. She reached out and stroked Taiga’s shoulder. “But the one that needs to stay inside is you, Taiga.”

Taiga frowned.

“I’ll be fine. I need to be outside too,” she whined.

“Taiga, you can barely walk,” Seina said, almost chuckling.

“I’ve been practising,” Taiga argued, but Seina shook her head. “Come on, Mom.”

“Taiga...” Seina straightened her face as well. “In order for you to recover quickly, you need to stay somewhere safe so you can rest. You’re very weak, so you can fall sick easily, not to mention your tendency to faint. I don’t want to take any risks,” she said sternly. “Aren’t we having enough fun playing inside?”

Taiga only pouted. She flopped onto the floor and laid next to Katsuko and Mitsuko. Her eyes focused on her babies and were repelled by the sight of her mother.

“I really can’t do anything...” She muttered as she nuzzled Katsuko’s chubby little arm, feeling her baby’s silky skin against her face.

“You know I mean well, Taiga,” Seina uttered.

“I’m tired of doing nothing but rest, Mom,” Taiga’s eyes fell to the floor. “I just want to do what’s best for my babies. Can’t I just have that?”

“That’s what I want for my own babies too, Taiga. That’s why I need to keep you inside. It’s what any responsible mother would do.”

Taiga sat up and glared at her mother. “Well I’m a mother too!” She exclaimed firmly as she furrowed her brows. Her voice caused Seina to jolt, but she simply glared back. After the two women stared at each other for a moment, an exasperated sigh left Taiga’s mouth before she laid back down. “Whatever. If that’s what you want, then so be it. It’s not like I can do anything about

it. I can barely move, and I can't even stop my own babies from crying without you stepping in," the young mother grumbled sarcastically.

"Taiga..." Seina tried to lean closer, but Taiga tilted her head further away. "Please don't make me out to be the bad guy here. As much as I'd love to see you happy with your babies, you just said it yourself, didn't you? You don't have the ability to look after the babies on your own."

Taiga chuffed while she swirled her finger over Mitsuko's belly. Seina took a deep breath to maintain her composure.

"I'm sure that after you're all well, you'll be thankful that I took good care of your babies while you were in need yourself."

Taiga's fingers wrapped over Mitsuko's belly. Her baby continued to suck on her pacifier while Taiga gripped her body tightly. "Why would I be thankful for missing out on looking after my daughters?" She said scornfully.

"Don't look at it that way, Taiga—"

"I don't even know how long it'll take for me to be well again," she interrupted. "They could already be walking easily before I ever do."

"And what's wrong with that?" Seina leaned closer again, her volume growing loud enough to echo throughout the living room. "You're still spending quality time with your daughters, and you'd still get to watch them grow. It's only the hard part that you don't have to go through. Is that not a good thing?"

"I don't want to just watch them grow, Mom!" Taiga sat up and glared at her again. "I want to be the one to put in the work to make them grow! Isn't that what the hard part is all about? Is that not what I was meant to do as a mother?"

"You can't even do that in your condition!" Seina shouted over her.

"It doesn't matter if I don't even get to try!"

Taiga projected her voice, her face just centimetres away from her mother's. Seina reeled back from the high volume of her shout. Taiga's breathing had grown heavy. Even just arguing like this was exhausting. She placed her hand over Katsuko's little head, stroking it softly.

"I need to be there every step of the way. I need them to look at me and know that their mother is there for them, no matter how sick I am." Taiga carried Katsuko by her shoulders and placed her in her lap. Her arms reached around her little body, and she leaned over to embrace her daughter like a teddy bear.

“Can’t you understand that?”

Seina watched Taiga and her baby calmly look into each other’s eyes. Katsuko kicked her legs about as she held the doll tightly in her chubby arms. *To be there every step of the way*, those words echoed in Seina’s mind. It was the duty of any loving mother, and it was one that Seina had failed to fulfil all those years ago. Seina understood—her daughter was trying to avoid all the mistakes her own mother made raising her.

And yet, even after knowing her daughter’s intentions, her pride just wouldn’t allow her to stand down. She couldn’t make the same mistake she did back then. If Taiga really never needed her, if she just stood back and let everything between her daughter and her son-in-law unfold, would she ever see the day where Taiga would look at her and know that she would be there for her, too?

“I’m sorry, Taiga,” Seina said. “I understand you completely.”

She couldn’t let her love be forgotten. Not again.

“But I can’t let you get hurt anymore.”

Taiga let out an exasperated sigh. Her eyes were weighed down just to avoid seeing her mother’s face.

“There’s no point in trying to get through to you, is there?”

“I’m just doing what’s best for you, Taiga.”

“That’s just what you think.”

The living room fell silent, with only the babbling of the three babies audible to the two women there. Taiga quietly poked at her little Katsuko’s cheek, while Seina sat on her knees and solemnly observed her daughter. Neither of them would notice the little footsteps approaching the little room.

“Mama?” A little boy had appeared from the corridor, rubbing his eye. Seina turned to give him a light smile. Her dear son became her focus.

“Ah, good morning, Hiroto. Are you hungry?”

Hiroto nodded. “Can I have cut fruit?”

“Of course, dear.”

Seina stood up and walked towards the kitchen. Her son followed behind her, leaving Taiga to play with her babies on her own. The mother and daughter wouldn’t speak to each other for the rest of the day.

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“And... There!”

There stood Ryuji in the bathroom of Kiyomi’s, towering over the sparkly white tiles while wielding his signature Takasu stick. He pulled off his cloth mask and head scarf, and admired the shine reflecting back into his eyes. The sun was setting outside, giving the sky a soft orange tint. He smiled. His work here was done, and it didn’t take longer than an afternoon, as expected of someone of his caliber.

“Hooh... Hooh... Hooh... Hnnngh!”

While Ryuji was away wrapping up the last of his cleaning, Kiyomi remained laying on the sofa in her living room. The sofa was a bright shade of grey after Ryuji rid it of all the dust trapped inside its cushions earlier. There wasn’t a single dark patch to be seen—that is, until Kiyomi started dirtying it again. Her face was scrunched up as she gripped her pregnant belly. Her maternity dress was drenched in her sweat, which had started soaking into the sofa as well. She groaned as if she had already started pushing.

“Alright, Kiyomi-san! Your house is squeaky clean, corner to corner!”

Kiyomi heard Ryuji approaching from a corridor. She quickly opened her eyes and softened her face to hide the intense pain radiating in her lower body. There was her fellow neighbour holding the gloves he had pulled off his hands.

“So how about it? Would you like to see the results?” Ryuji said with his shoulders high and his hands on his hips.

“I-I’d love to, Takasu-kun...” Kiyomi stammered. “But I don’t think I can move around right now.”

Hearing her weak voice made Ryuji’s eyes shoot open as he remembered what he was supposed to do. All the cleaning had distracted him from the woman in desperate need of medical attention laying in the living room.

“Oh, right! The hospital! Let’s get you to one right now.”

Ryuji immediately pulled out his cellphone and dialled for an ambulance.

“I really wished I’d done this earlier...” Ryuaji muttered as he held his phone up to his ear. Kiyomi simply watched with her back stuck to the sofa while she panted heavily. It wasn’t long before an operator would pick up Ryuaji’s call.

“Alright, thank you, I’ll continue monitoring her,” Ryuaji said, before turning to Kiyomi. “Help is on the way.”

“That’s good...” Kiyomi nodded. “Hey, Takasu-kun...” She suddenly called out to him. “I’m not going to be pregnant for any longer... Do you at least want to feel my belly before my baby is born? It’s my thanks for everything you’ve done,” Kiyomi said while caressing her belly from top to bottom.

“Oh... Sure.”

Ryuaji approached Kiyomi and got down on one knee. With his phone still close to his ear as he remained on call with the hospital, he used his other hand to feel Kiyomi’s warm, round tummy. He felt something move under his palm. The baby was healthy and active. Both of them smiled and simpered.

He could feel his heart relaxing as the little kicks of this peculiar woman’s baby put him at ease. Ryuaji and Kiyomi were still strangers to each other, but this experience felt weirdly familiar. He could only be reminded of the time Taiga was pregnant with their daughters. They were far more energetic and powerful, so it was always easy to notice when they were awake. He’d feel Taiga’s belly everyday, and their excitement to meet their daughters grew and grew. When he’d put his cheek to it, Taiga would stroke his head while he listened to their daughters’ little heartbeats.

Ryuaji sighed. No matter how hard he tried to live on his own, his wife always came to his mind. His heart ached as he couldn’t be by her side.

“Hm?” Suddenly, something felt off. He couldn’t hear anything from his phone anymore. He took a look at his phone’s screen to find it pitch black. When he tried pushing its buttons, nothing came of it. “Oh no...”

“Wh-what is it?” Kiyomi asked, continuing to pant.

“My phone died...” Ryuaji said shakily. “I-it’s alright! I’ve cleaned through every centimetre of this house! I know where your charger is... If you wouldn’t mind me using it.”

“Go ahead...”

Ryuji left the living room to find the charger in Kiyomi's bedroom. Next to Kiyomi's king-sized bed was a micro-USB cable hanging over her nightstand which he'd plug his phone into. However, after plugging it in, he only got more worried.

"Why isn't it charging!?" He grunted. Like the pregnant woman in the living room, he found himself dripping in his sweat as panic rose in his chest. He kept pushing and pulling the head of the cable in and out of his phone, but no matter what he did, there wasn't a volt of energy that entered his phone's battery.

Then, his head shot up when he heard it.

"Hnnnnnnggh!!! Takasu-kuuun! Takasu-kuuun! Please, come back!"

After shoving his phone into his pocket, he made a beeline for the living room, his feet sliding against the wooden floorboards when he grabbed onto a corner to stop himself from falling. There was Kiyomi, gripping her belly even tighter, with her back raised and her head pressing into her pillow as she grimaced in pain.

"Takasu-kun, please, don't leave me alone!" Kiyomi said through her gritted teeth.

Ryuji leapt to her side to grab her hand. "Is the pain getting worse?"

"Much worse! Nnnnnngh!" She raised her head with her red, wrinkled face.

"I... I'm pushing, right now!"

"Wh-what!?" His voice cracked. "W-wait, let me get in touch with the hospital again! I need their instructions!"

Ryuji stepped away to grab Kiyomi's telephone, letting go of her hand.

"N-no! Don't let go! Please, don't let go!" She whimpered as she grabbed at the air where Ryuji previously stood.

"J-just give me a minute! Your charger wasn't working with my phone, so I'll just use this one instead!" Ryuji exclaimed as he frantically pushed the phone's buttons to dial for the hospital. But none of the buttons gave any feedback.

"That's not going to work!" Kiyomi cried out with her hands over her belly again. "That phone only worked earlier by luck! It hasn't worked properly for months! And my charger... Haaah... And that charger..." She smirked through her pain. "Now I remember... The reason I haven't used my cellphone for three months... I never got that charger replaced! Nnnnnngh!" She was immediately struck by another wave of pain, causing her to dip her head into her pillow again.

“How have you been living this whole time!?” Ryuji shrieked in disbelief.

“Please, Takasu-kun—AAAAAH!” Her screams pierced his ears. He quickly grabbed her hand again to help her bear the pain. Her voice became so shrill it was causing him to wince as well. However, there was something else that made his ears perk up.

The sound of a fluid spilling onto a cushion.

“Oh... Oh no...” Kiyomi stammered.

It had to be from her sweat. Perhaps a pipe was leaking from somewhere. No, Ryuji knew where it came from. He knew where to check, but his mind kept trying to pull himself away from it. His bodily instincts took control and he stepped along the sofa to look at the space between Kiyomi’s legs. There, his breath seized.

Her maternity dress and the cushion were soaked.

“My water broke!” Kiyomi yelled.

The moment he saw it, Ryuji brought her phone up to his face and kept pushing the buttons, hoping to hear at least one beep from it. His hands trembled endlessly as he jabbed his fingers into it, but the phone was nothing but a piece of metal.

*Not again, not again, not again...* The silence of the phone allowed his thoughts to overpower all the sound around him. Whether there was a woman deep in labour in front of him or not, he couldn’t think of anything else before he got in contact with the hospital again.

“Takasu-kun! Please, Takasu-kun!”

Kiyomi’s entire body was shivering as the immense pain ran through it. She slowly lifted her back, pried one hand off her pregnant belly and began to reach for Ryuji, struggling to even keep her arm straight. It was only after she snatched the phone out of his hands and threw it out of sight did he look at her pained face. She gripped his hand tightly and stared intently into his sanpaku eyes.

“Takasu-kun, there’s no way to call the hospital now! Stop distracting yourself!”

Stray tears ran down her cheeks as she yelled at her neighbour. She panted heavily through her contractions, hoping to seek comfort from the man by her side, but he only panted in response. Both their shoulders were convulsing as worry ran through their veins.

“The ambulance... It’s coming, right?” Kiyomi softened her voice. Ryuji nodded, his head bobbling anxiously. “But the baby... I can’t hold him in any longer...” Ryuji’s breathing

stopped when he heard her utter those words. “If worse comes to worst, I’ll need you to deliver my baby...”

It was the last thing he wanted to hear.

“Takasu-kun!?”

Ryuaji pulled his hand away and stepped backward. Kiyomi stretched her hand out desperately, but he was far out of reach. He pressed his palms against his forehead as he stared at the ground. His vision blurred until the uniform streaks in the floor below him blended into the beige wood.

He began to mutter.

“No, no, no, no! Not again! I can’t believe this is happening again!”

“Takasu-kun, please!” Kiyomi begged. “Help me and my baby!”

“I can’t! I just can’t!” Ryuaji started to cry just like Kiyomi was. “I’m useless here! There’s nothing I can do to help! You’ll only suffer through this birth and there’s no way I can help you at all!”

That fateful night was sent to the front of Ryuaji’s mind. The pinch of Taiga’s teeth sinking into his shoulder getting weaker and weaker the longer it went on, the wails of pain she let out that echoed throughout the apartment, and the limpness of her body before she had even delivered her third daughter—all of which he couldn’t prevent or ease even while he held his wife so tightly. The pain was soon to return, now for another woman, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

“You can’t trust me! You can’t trust me with this at all!” Ryuaji wailed to the floor.

“You’re the only man I can trust right now, Takasu-kun!” Kiyomi wailed back. “I really don’t care what it takes! I’ll let you get between my legs and pull the baby out if you have to! I just want us to be safe! Hnnnngh!” Her whole body was curling up as another contraction hit her. Her belly was cradled in her arms. “You’re one of the kindest people I’ve met, Takasu-kun. Don’t leave me now...”

Ryuaji pushed his hair between his fingers as his entire body jittered.

“What are you not getting!?” He cried out. “It doesn’t matter how kind I am or the amount of good I try to do! You’ll just get hurt even when I’m by your side! I... I...” He stepped towards the corridor leading to the front door. “I need to get help! You need someone else to deliver the baby!”

“No...” Kiyomi muttered. Ryuji took more and more steps, and the moment he was out of her sight, her stomach turned. “NOOOOOOO! TAKASU-KUUUN!” She screamed with her chest, making him freeze in place. An ocean of tears flowed over her cheeks. “PLEASE, DON’T LEAVE ME ALONE! I DON’T WANT TO BE ALONE AGAIN!”

Her entire body shivered as she pressed her palms against her eyes to halt the stream of tears escaping from them, all while her body continued to sting.

“I’ve been alone for so long...” Kiyomi sniffled. “I’ve tried so hard to do everything on my own, because I have nothing! I have nothing to repay to anyone else! Aaaaaaaggh!” She screamed as she felt like she was being stabbed in her lower back. “But I can’t do it this time! I really can’t! So just this once, I want to be greedy, Takasu-kun! Please, save me! Save me and my baby!”

Kiyomi trembled as she shifted her body to get a clearer look of Ryuji standing just by the corridor leading to the front door.

“I don’t want to lay here wondering whether or not you’ll return, Takasu-kun! It’ll just make the pain worse! I don’t know if I’ll make it out alive if I was alone for even a moment! Please stay, Takasu-kun—AAAAAAGH!” Kiyomi suddenly curled into a ball as she held her pained belly. Her condition was only worsening as she continued to sob. She was too overwhelmed to notice Ryuji had turned to face her and witness her in her pitiful state.

There, laying before him, was a woman in desperate need of his help. He couldn’t bear to see another woman suffer like his wife did, but the back of his mind was telling him of the futility of his abilities. Ryuji knew little about childbirth, not more than his own mother did. From his chats with his other neighbours who had been pregnant before, he couldn’t consider his knowledge to be enough to do something as incredible as deliver a baby all on his own.

But the longer he spent dithering, the worse Kiyomi’s condition became. He had to decide his next course of action, then and there.

As Kiyomi laid there, grimacing in agonising pain, she heard Ryuji click his tongue, followed by footsteps along her wooden floor getting quieter and quieter.

“No... No...” Kiyomi let her tears continue to flow. Ryuji had disappeared from her field of view. The living room went quiet, with only her struggling groans audible and nobody around to hold her hand. She was alone again.

Just a moment later, the sound of footsteps returned, getting closer and closer, but she was too overwhelmed to pick it up.

*Snap!*

The sound of rubber caught her attention. She looked up to find Ryuaji standing in her living room, now equipped with his cloth mask, apron and a clean set of surgical gloves he had pulled over his wrists. He glared at Kiyomi with his monstrous sanpaku eyes as he raised his fist and clenched it tightly.

“Sit tight, Kiyomi-san. I’ll be getting my hands dirty again.”

“Oh, Takasu-kun...” Kiyomi sighed with relief as a smile stretched across her face.

A basin of hot water sat by the foot of the sofa. A warm cloth was draped over Kiyomi’s forehead. She huffed and puffed while she looked past her pregnant belly and watched Ryuaji dip his head below her long skirt.

“It looks like the baby’s already been on its way out for a while. It won’t be long before he’s born. The pain will be over soon.”

“Okay... Hoo... That’s good...”

“Just push once you feel another contraction.”

“Alright, haah... Hnnnnngh!”

Kiyomi shut her eyes tightly and clenched her jaw as she beared down with all her might. Her face turned red as her entire body locked up.

“I see it! I see it coming out! I... Huh?”

However, after the round of pushing ended and she opened her eyes, she found Ryuaji with his head raised as he stared below her dress. His brows were furrowed.

“How am I doing? Haah...”

“You’re... d-doing good,” Ryuaji mumbled and stammered. “The baby’s already coming out. I can see his little... f-feet.”

“Feet?”

Ryuaji was visibly shaking, and his eyes were stuck open, focusing on the sight between Kiyomi’s legs. “Oh no... The head’s supposed to come out first, isn’t it? This isn’t right. This isn’t right at all. Is this really going to be okay?”

“No, no, no...” Kiyomi tilted her head back into her pillow. “This is the worst... This is the worst! My baby... Oh, my baby, I’m so sorry...” The stream of tears started up again. “I can’t give birth like this at all... Ngaaaaaaah!” She screamed as she was hit with another intense contraction.

A pregnant woman’s resignation was one of the most detrimental factors to childbirth. When Ryuji realised that, he shook his head and stabilised himself. He needed her to focus on pushing again, and in order to do that, he needed both of them to calm down, so he pressed his palm against her belly and soothingly stroked it. Kiyomi looked at him with worried eyes while she felt the warmth of his palm absorb into her body.

“It’s okay, Kiyomi-san. I’ll do whatever I can to deliver your baby boy safely. I’ll be with you through the whole thing, so just relax, alright?” Ryuji spoke clearly, but continued to pant heavily as his heart raced.

Kiyomi bit her lip and nodded.

“Are you ready?”

She shut her eyes and nodded vigorously.

“Alright, then push!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

*Waaaaaaaah! Waaaaaaaah!*

It had only been twenty minutes, yet there was Kiyomi’s newborn son wrapped in a blood-stained white towel, crying for his mother’s nurturing. The new mother rocked her baby gently in her arms with a wide smile on her face. She couldn’t stop herself from giggling as she tickled her baby’s puffy cheeks.

“Oh, you’re here... You’re really here... Touma, my little Touma, so big and healthy,” Kiyomi spoke tenderly as she continued to soak her cheeks with tears. She looked up at Ryuji standing over her. His apron and gloves were covered in blood, and his mask was pulled down to show his soft grin. “Do you want to hold him, Takasu-kun?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” he refused politely. “I already had my chance when you pushed him out.”

“You can’t be counting that, can you?” Kiyomi pouted as he chuckled. She looked at her baby again. “Hello, Touma! This is your home now! Do you like it?” She spoke cheekily, but her

baby only wailed in response. She raised her head to talk to Ryuaji once more. “Thank you so much, Takasu-kun. I really wish there was a way I could repay you.”

“There’s no need. Seeing a happy mother with her baby is enough for me. But if you need any more help, don’t just call me, Kiyomi-san. I’m sure my mother or my wife would be happy to be there when you’re in need. You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

Kiyomi nodded happily. Ryuaji sighed with relief. Though the sofa was soiled and they were both covered in sweat, all was peaceful under Kiyomi’s roof.

*Knock! Knock!*

They both turned to the front door, where the knocking originated.

“Who could that be?” Kiyomi asked.

“It must be the ambulance. I’ll go answer it.”

Ryuaji calmly left the living room, allowing Kiyomi to get her moment of privacy with her son. Even after he left, she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

He turned the doorknob and pulled the door open. However, his eyes widened when, instead of seeing the blaring of red ambulance lights, he was greeted by a man who was a head taller than him with stubble on his chin. He looked only slightly older than Ryuaji was.

“Hey, Kiyo—... Wait, who are you?” The man asked.

“Huh? The ambulance isn’t here?”

Ryuaji watched as the man lowered his head to scan Ryuaji’s appearance. It was at that moment that Ryuaji realised how terrible he looked. There was a complete stranger covered in blood answering the door of a house he didn’t own. His murderous eyes didn’t help, either. There was only one conclusion that could be drawn from it.

“You...” The man growled and bore his white fangs. Ryuaji quickly raised his hands.

“Wait, it’s not what it looks like—Gyyiiiih!!!”

Ryuaji suddenly felt himself getting lifted off the floor while the man’s hands were clasped onto his neck. He struggled to breathe as the man carried him through the corridor like a bird that had just been hunted.

“Where is Kiyomi!? What did you do to her!? You monster!”

Ryuaji croaked as he listened to the anger and desperation in the man’s voice. His airways had been cut off, rendering him unable to form a single word. The man carried him all the way to

the living room, where the man's roar disrupted the peace between the mother and her newborn baby.

“Tell me what you did! I’ll make sure it’s ten, no, a hundred times worse when I do it to you! You’re the lowest of the low, going after a pregnant woman—”

“Tokio-kun!?” Kiyomi exclaimed.

The man looked around the assumed murderer he was choking to find the supposed pregnant woman laying on the sofa with her baby in her arms.

“Kiyomi!”

“Guaagh!”

The man dropped Ryuugi to the floor, making him fall to his knees as he held his own neck. He huffed and huffed, taking in as much air as he could. His face had briefly turned blue, but was quickly returning to a healthy red colour. He thought he was about to die. While he struggled to pull himself off the floor, the visitor was standing by Kiyomi’s side and holding her shoulder.

“Oh, Kiyomi, you’ve already given birth… Why aren’t you in the hospital?”

“I’m sorry, Tokio-kun. I was too scared to go on my own. My house was a total mess, too. I wanted to get it cleaned before my little Touma was born. Have you seen how spotless it is now?” Kiyomi chuckled.

“It is a lot cleaner than the last time I’ve been here…” Tokio muttered. “But why didn’t you call me for help? I could’ve helped you clean, or driven you to the hospital.”

“You’re my dear friend, Tokio-kun. I didn’t want to bother you about my house. It was my mess, after all, but…” Kiyomi bit her lip. “I realised it was all too much for me, so I called Takasu-kun here to help me clean it up, and he did a really great job! After that, he even delivered my baby! Touma came out as a breech baby, you know!”

“Takasu-kun?” Tokio looked at Ryuugi, who was supporting himself against a wall as he was still panting and recovering from his assault. “Are you and Takasu-kun…?”

“Huh? No! He’s married and has three children of his own, but he was helping out everyone in the neighbourhood, so I thought I’d get his help too…”

“I see…” Tokio approached Ryuugi and clasped his hands together. “Thank you so much for helping Kiyomi deliver her baby! She really means a lot to me, and you kept her safe! I just can’t thank you enough!”

“Uh... Y-yeah...” Ryuaji muttered at the man who attacked him. Tokio immediately returned to Kiyomi’s side.

*What’re you doing here anyway, Tokio-kun?*

*I was just passing by and wanted to check up on you.*

Ryuaji stood to the side to let the two talk things out. He couldn’t steal the attention of Kiyomi away from someone that knew her more than he did. They’d only just met for the first time that day, after all, but seeing her so calm while she spoke to her friend only gave him relief.

“So what’re you going to do now? Should I tell the boss to put you on leave?”

“I don’t know... I’m not even sure maternal leave is long enough for me to figure this parenting thing out, and I don’t even know if I can afford a babysitter...” She sighed. “I just wish I could put all my time into my little Touma. I’ve never cared about anything else but him.”

“Then I can make that happen, Kiyomi,” Tokio uttered.

“Huh?”

The man placed his hand under the newborn baby in Kiyomi’s arms.

“I... I’d like to help you raise Touma. I’ll take on the role of the boy’s father if you’d allow me to, unlike that horrible man that chose to run away! You should live your life as the mother you’d always wanted to be.”

“Wh-what!?” Kiyomi’s lips quivered. Her face turned beet red. “Wh-why would you even do that? That’s such a tall order for you to take on... This baby isn’t even yours! And what would your parents say? There’s no way they’d approve!”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks!” He exclaimed. “I want to do what makes both of us the happiest! I’m sure that when my parents see us as a happy family, they’ll feel nothing but happiness for us as well! The baby doesn’t have to be mine, I’ll still support you every step of the way!”

“Wh—” Kiyomi’s eyes were watery again. “Why would you do all this?”

“Because I love you, Kiyomi!”

The mother jolted.

“I’ve loved you for the longest time. I’ve done everything I could to help you from this distance, but now that you’re a mother, you’ll need more and more care. I can’t bear to see you struggle all on your own anymore. I want to be right by your side!”

“Uwaaah!?” She was blushing like a high school girl.

“So what do you say, Kiyomi?” The man stared intently into her eyes, which were leaking with tears.

“I... I...” Her chest heaved as she struggled to get the words out. “I love you too, Tokio-kun, but...” She sniffled. “I don’t deserve any of this. This baby has always been my responsibility. He was born from my own mistakes. I can’t bear to trouble you with parenting him...”

However, through her shining tears, she heard the snapping of rubber. She spotted Ryuji in the back, taking off his bloodied gloves and apron. With everything her neighbour had done for her through his unwavering kindness, just his scary face brought her comfort. She was reminded of everything he had told her.

“But now that my baby is here, I’ve realised that I love him too much to worry about anything else. I won’t care about how he was conceived or who he belongs to. I’ll get as much help I can to make sure he is loved, so...”

Kiyomi lifted her head and gazed at Tokio, her tears giving her eyes a dazzling shine.

“Tokio-kun, please marry me!”

Suddenly, Tokio’s face became as red as Kiyomi’s until they looked like a pair of cherries. His steady front crumbled at the sudden proclamation.

“I will! I will make you my wife, Kiyomi!”

“I love you, Tokio-kun!”

“I love you too!”

Perhaps Kiyomi was still delirious after giving birth, but all the words just came pouring out of her mouth. Their faces got closer and closer together as they showered each other in words of affection. When they were just centimetres away from each other, Kiyomi grabbed onto his collar, pulled him in and pressed her lips against his. After pushing a whole baby out, she was still so full of energy.

Ryuji felt a smile appear on his face and a warmth grow in his heart as he watched the couple kiss each other intimately. Tokio had taken her cheek to bring her face even closer. He stood there for a few seconds to see the kiss through, but his smile straightened when he felt how long they had been stuck to each other. His eyes widened when he spotted something pink appear between the couple’s mouths. That was his cue to move out.

“L-looks like I should take my leave...”

Ryuugi grabbed his cleaning supplies and shuffled towards the front door. Even after opening it, he could still hear the smacking of lips from behind him. Suddenly, he flinched when red lights flashed in his eyes. An ambulance was parked just outside the house, and two paramedics were approaching the front door. He pointed them in Kiyomi's direction and quietly left the premises.

*Hopefully they stop before they're found...*

A chuckle escaped from him as he walked down the street. The sky was a deep, dark blue and the stars were sprinkled amongst the fluffy clouds above him. Yasuko was probably making herself a meal at this time while she awaited his return. His apartment wasn't far from Kiyomi's home. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary to run into the couple again. Word would probably spread about what happened. If he passed the couple in the street, he'd probably see little Touma in a stroller being pushed around by a happy, energetic neighbour, and they'd greet him enthusiastically. He'd get another chance to hold Touma, since they'd know him as the man that helped deliver him.

*Right... I just delivered a baby...*

The fact had just set in what an incredible feat he had just performed. Despite the complications encountered and how easily the situation could've turned for the worse, both Kiyomi and her baby made it out safely with his help. Ryuugi's smile widened. He couldn't wait to tell Yasuko about it once he got home. She might even feel proud of him. It would certainly make for an interesting story to tell Taiga once they reunited, too.

*Taiga...*

He couldn't help but compare how the birth went compared to Taiga's. From the very moment Taiga was in labour, both he and Yasuko feared for her life. Every second that passed was filled with dread and panic as Taiga felt herself getting weaker while he held her tightly. In the end, he couldn't keep her safe.

However, after that night, he felt like he could do anything. If Taiga, or even Katsuko, had an emergency, he had the energy and courage to act and ensure they both came out of it well. He was more ready than ever to have Taiga back in his arms and to hold all three of his daughters. He just needed to wait until Taiga was ready to come home.

*Get better quickly, Taiga. I want to see you.*

\*\*\*

“Huh?”

Taiga’s eyes sprung open before she arose from her bed. She scanned the perimeter of her room. Her surroundings were flooded by darkness. Her digital clock told her it was two hours before the sun rose. The silence was filled by the blasting of the air conditioner, the cold reminiscent of her time in the hospital. But amongst it, all was quiet.

Too quiet. She knew this feeling all too well.

Taiga pressed her feet onto the carpeted floor before letting go of the edge of the bed to bring herself to a stand. Her legs trembled, but she ignored it entirely as she trudged towards the three cribs in front of her bed. In her haste, she placed a foot the wrong way, causing her to trip forward, but she quickly grabbed onto the handle of one of her cribs to keep herself from hitting the floor.

Taiga raised her head and looked over the crib in front of her.

“M-Mitsuko?”

It was far too dark for her to make out anything, but she didn’t need her sight to sense her daughters’ presence, which the room lacked. The middle of the three cribs, where Mitsuko was meant to be sleeping in, contained only soft toys and miniature pillows.

“Mitsuko! Where are you!?”

Taiga swished her hand inside the crib, trying to feel around for the warm body of her infant, but she was only pushing around all the colourful toys her baby was meant to be sleeping underneath. In her search for Mitsuko, she remembered her other daughters as well.

“Haruko? Haruko!?”

She did the same to the crib to her left, but the result was the same. She huffed in desperation. Her senses had to be wrong, somehow. There was no way her daughters could just disappear into thin air. Yet no matter how much she felt around, she couldn’t feel the warmth of any of her babies. When Haruko didn’t show, her third daughter came to mind.

“Katsuko... Gyyiih!”

Taiga struggled and leapt towards the third crib at her right. She began grabbing all the toys and pillows, and tossed them behind her.

“Katsuko! Katsuko!”

Her baby needed extra attention given her poorer health compared to her daughters. If her most vulnerable daughter disappeared, if anything happened to her, Taiga could never forgive herself. As the crib grew emptier, her heart raced faster. She tossed away everything until there was only a mattress left for her to grab at.

“No... No! Katsuko!” Taiga cried out as she gripped the sheets of the mattress tightly. But she couldn’t end the search there. She turned towards her bedroom door.

“Uurrgh!”

Taiga grunted as she burst out of her bedroom. She made a loud thud as she fell forward onto the wooden floor, using her arms to cushion the impact. The front of her body ached, but her panic overwhelmed any other feeling she had in that moment. Like a soldier in the trenches, she used her forearms to pull herself along the floor. As she moved, she’d bring herself up to a crawl, before trying to get on her feet to run, but her recklessness would cause her to fall onto the floor again. She’d continue to drag herself along. Nothing could keep her from looking for her babies.

However, she stopped when she reached the living room.

“Haruko... Mitsuko... Katsuko...”

The colourful carpet that her daughters would play on was still laid out. Their toys were neatly kept in their boxes. The sofa cushions looked untouched. The lights of the living room were off, with the moonlight shining between the tiny gap in the curtains as the only way for Taiga to see. The room was barren. No sign of her daughters anywhere.

“My babies...”

Where else could they be? There weren’t any cribs for them in her parents’ room, and there wouldn’t be any reason for them to be in Hiroto’s room either. How far would she have to crawl to hold them again? She could barely move a muscle. It’d take her an eternity to even get a clue of where they could be.

“No... No...”

With the futility of her efforts and the suspense of her daughters’ whereabouts setting in, Taiga’s breathing grew heavier. She pressed her palms against her forehead and heaved dry air until she looked like a fish out of water. There was nothing she could do to bring her daughters back. She could only scream and hope her voice reached them.

“HARUKO! MITSUKO! KATSUKO!” She raised her head to the ceiling and unhinged her jaw to project her voice. It echoed off the walls. “WHERE ARE YOU!? MY BABIES!”

The young mother screamed like a banshee. Her cries were strong enough to make the glass panes in the windows rattle. However, such a strong voice demanded far more energy than she could expend. Her head began to spin. She couldn’t even cry for her own futility. Tears streamed down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. With her consciousness waning, she grovelled onto the floor and clenched her fists.

“AAAAAAAHH!” She wailed into the living room carpet, her cries muffled. “HARUKO! MITSUKO! KATSUKO!” She had to keep calling for them, even after she felt herself weakening from her pain and exhaustion. She’d do anything to hold her babies again. She at least needed to know where they were. But there was nothing a woman in her condition could do. In a time of need like this, she could only turn to the one thing that brought her comfort. “RYUUUJII!!! HELP ME, RYUUJI!!!”

But Ryuji was over three hundred kilometres away.

“AAAAAAAHH!”

Crying was all she had.

Suddenly, the lights in the corridor behind her were switched on.

“Taiga?” A man’s voice called out.

“AAAAAAAHH!!!” But she was too overwhelmed to notice him.

The man marched towards her and lifted her from the floor by the shoulder. He turned her around to look directly at her tear stricken face. It was Naru tending to her, but her eyes couldn’t be opened as they were filled with tears of panic.

“What’s wrong, Taiga? What are you doing out here?” Naru asked worriedly.

It was then she recognised her stepfather’s voice. “My babies! They’re not in my room! I don’t know where they are!” She wailed, her voice becoming coarse. “AAAAAAAHH!” She leaned her head back and continued to sob, until Naru shook her.

“They’re okay, Taiga! They’re okay!” He shouted, prompting his stepdaughter to go silent. She looked at him with her big eyes, shining from the tears reflecting light off of them. “Your mother took them! They’re just going outside for a stroll. You don’t have to worry. They’ll be back soon, I promise.”

Taiga's gaze stared blankly forward. Her arms went limp and dropped to her sides. Her legs gave out completely and spread on the floor. Her throat had run dry. All that crying, all that pain, all because her mother went and took them without telling her. Soon, her head fell to Naru's chest, and her eyes closed gently. Her heart calmed, but she wasn't ready to rest just yet.

Naru sat her down on the sofa and placed a cup of warm tea in front of her. She took the tea's handle and held its dish underneath it, but the clattering of the cup's base against its dish from Taiga's arms vigorously shaking worried Naru enough for him to help her hold it up. While Taiga sipped her tea, Naru soothingly stroked her back to calm her after such a scare.

Once she set her tea down, Naru continued to run his hand down her back, but stopped when she held his arm and lowered it, prompting him to retract and keep to himself while they both quietly awaited Seina's return. Taiga glared at the front door with her half-open eyes. She rested her elbow on the armrest and tapped its cushion rhythmically as the seconds passed.

After nearly half an hour, she caught the sound of keys jingling behind the front door, followed by a click. Naru and Taiga watched as the doorknob turned and the door pushed open. A three-seated stroller came through, with little Haruko sitting in the front. Taiga's eyes lit up at the sight of her babies comfortably sleeping in the stroller, with Mitsuko in the seat behind Haruko, followed by Katsuko behind her. However, her face straightened when her gaze met Seina's, the one pushing the stroller.

"Taiga? Why aren't you sleeping?" She asked nonchalantly. "You're awake too, Naru?" Naru didn't respond. He faced away from the two women.

"Why..." Taiga muttered. "Why did you do this?"

"Oh... The babies were getting fussy in the middle of the night, so I just took them outside. That was what you wanted, wasn't it? They got plenty of fresh air, and—"

"No!" The agitated mother roared. "Why didn't you tell me!?"

"You were fast asleep. I couldn't disrupt your rest. You know how important it is for you to recover, right?"

Taiga smashed her fist onto the armrest. "That doesn't mean you get to take my daughters without saying anything! The least you could do was ask me if I'd be okay with it!"

"Like I said, your recovery takes priority over everything else. I was going to bring them back before you'd notice. You should still be in bed right now."

“I’m not a child, Mom!” Taiga yelled. “I’m responsible for my own babies! I need to know where my babies are and what they are doing! Is that not important? Do you think that just because their mother can barely walk, that you can just go ahead and take them away whenever you like? Or do you just not see me as that, a mother?”

“Come on, Taiga, don’t take things that way. It’s got nothing to do with you—”

“It has everything to do with me!” She cried. “I’m their mother! Who does what with them is for me to decide! And right now, I think my babies can do without your help!”

“What?” Seina was baffled. “Taiga, you can’t be serious.”

“I can’t keep letting you do whatever you’d like. You’ve been causing too much trouble!”

“B-but Taiga! I’ve been taking good care of the babies, haven’t I? I’ve fed them, played with them, given them everything I had to make them comfortable. You haven’t forgotten about any of that, have you?” Seina pleaded.

“Ryuji and I have been handling the babies just fine before you came along!”

“Ryuji!?” Seina shrieked. “You can’t possibly be thinking of going back to him, can you? You haven’t even been staying here for that long! You’ve barely recovered, and Ryuji has barely had any time to himself! He can’t be ready to look after you again!”

“Well if I can’t have him, then I’m better off on my own!”

The two women snarled at each other like two ferocious tigers. Their yelling left them panting. Their faces wrinkled as they exchanged glares. Naru watched the ordeal from the side. Having their shouts pierce his ears made him sigh. He placed his hand on Taiga’s shoulder.

“Hey, maybe we should tone it down a little...”

However, while the two mothers left a pause between them, Taiga caught a faint sound of a baby’s whining. Her ears perked up and her focus shifted to the stroller. She could easily recognise it as Katsuko’s, but now that her attention was on her baby, she noticed something else. She sniffed the air and caught the smell that led her to widen her eyes.

“Katsuko...” She muttered, before getting on her feet. She stumbled for a moment, then trudged towards the third seat from the front of the stroller. Seina jolted when she spotted Taiga’s fingers holding onto the edge of the stroller’s hood.

“W-wait, Taiga—” Seina tried to reach for her daughter’s hand, but she was too late. Taiga threw open the stroller’s hood to get to her baby. Seina reeled back and winced as she heard her daughter gasp. Taiga reached into the stroller and held up her baby, putting her out for Naru and

Seina to see. Katsuko stared at her mother blankly, babbling like usual, while her chin and onesie were coated in the residue of white, half-dried throw-up that had been hastily wiped off. The sickly sight was enough for Naru to open his eyes as well.

Naru and Seina glanced at each other.

“Wh-what is this?” Taiga asked, huffing anxiously. “Why did Katsuko throw up on herself?” She stared at the soiled patches on Katsuko’s clothes, before glaring at her mother again. “You... You fed her formula, didn’t you?” She growled. Seina closed her eyes and frowned, averting her daughter’s gaze. “Mom!” Taiga roared when she was met only with silence, even though her mother had been arguing away just a moment ago. Seina’s face scrunches up at the volume of her daughter’s shout.

Naru stood up. He took Haruko and Mitsuko from the stroller, their heavy sleeping bodies laying comfortably in his arms. “I’ll, uh...” He couldn’t defend his wife this time. “I’ll put these two back to bed.” The man left with the two infants, leaving Taiga and Seina to confront each other on their own.

“Taiga, I...” Seina mumbled. A lie would only tarnish her image as a mother further. “While we were outside, I gave her just a little—”

“Seriously!?” Taiga yelled, holding Katsuko to her chest and letting some of the vomit rub off on her pajamas.

“I know! I know she can’t take it!” She exclaimed regretfully while her eyes watched the floor. “But we were too far from home and I just couldn’t leave her hungry! I had to give her something!”

Taiga wasn’t hearing any of it. Feeling the weight of her baby, she sat on her floor with her legs spread apart. She stripped Katsuko of her dirty onesie, using the clean parts to wipe off the remaining vomit on her mouth, before unbuttoning her own shirt to expose her bare chest. Katsuko continued to whine as her irritation from throwing up remained, but she went silent after being allowed to feed. Taiga kept her eyes on her baby. Disbelief stayed on her face as she avoided her mother’s figure.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen, Taiga. I really do care about your babies. I even took Katsuko’s medicine with me just in case. After Katsuko threw up, I came straight home. I was going to ask you to feed her, I promise. I know I made a mistake, so please—”

“No...” Taiga hugged her baby tightly. “I don’t want your help anymore! Stay away from my daughters!” She yelled without once looking at her mother.

“Taiga!?”

“I don’t care what you say! Just leave us alone!” She turned away, keeping Katsuko out of Seina’s sight.

“But... What then!? Are you going to handle all three babies on your own? Do you really think you can do that!?”

“It’ll be better than having you around!”

“D-don’t do this to me, Taiga! Not after I’ve done so much for you and your daughters!”

“We don’t need your toys or cribs, and I can go back to sleeping in a futon! You can give all that away for all I care! I’ll do everything myself!”

“And what’re you going to do when your babies start crying again, or when you’re too exhausted to feed them? Don’t you realise how much you’ve relied on the help of others?”

Taiga’s eyes widened when she heard her mother’s words. Her hands trembled, shaking Katsuko gently, while her jaw was clenched.

“Do you really want to turn all of that down, after you said you wanted what’s best for them? Even Ryuugi was putting in all his time and effort to look after you!” Before she knew it, Seina was raising her voice and lecturing her daughter. “We’re both doing all this so you can focus on your recovery so you can finally become a mother like you always wanted to, but you just won’t listen to us!”

The air went still between the two women. Seina’s rant left her panting. Taiga had frozen like a porcelain statue.

“So I’m not a mother?” Taiga muttered.

A deafening silence filled the living room.

When she realised what she had said, Seina felt a lump in her throat.

“W-wait, Taiga, I didn’t mean it like that!” She stuttered, holding out her shivering hands. “Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken the babies without your permission. I won’t do it again if you’d just let me continue looking after—”

“Shut up,” Taiga uttered as she struggled to get on her feet. “Don’t talk to me,” she spoke firmly as she stood next to her mother. She trudged towards the corridor and placed a hand on the wall to support herself.

“Taiga, please, don’t be like this,” Seina pleaded as she grabbed Taiga’s arm.

“I SAID DON’T TALK TO ME!” Taiga yelled, her voice echoing along the corridor as she pulled her arm away. “Gaah!” However, the roughness of her pull caused her to lose her balance and fall backward to the hard wooden floor.

“Taiga!” Seina cried as she reached out for her daughter.

“Urgh!” Taiga held Katsuko tightly as her back absorbed the impact of the fall. After grimacing from the pain crawling up her body, her eyes focused on her baby. Thankfully, Katsuko was unharmed, but the tension startled her and caused her to cry. Through the little infant’s wailing, Taiga glared at Seina one last time before she turned to crawl away.

“Taiga, please, you’ll hurt yourself!” Seina exclaimed. However, when she took just one step towards her daughter, Taiga only crawled away faster. The young mother on the floor reached the doorway to her room.

“Taiga!” Seina called out once more as she attempted to reach for her daughter.

*Bang!*

The bedroom door was shut in Seina’s face. She heard the click of the door’s lock from the other side. She gently knocked on the door.

“Please, I didn’t mean it like that! Come on, we can’t talk like this!”

It was only the sound of Katsuko’s crying on the other side of the door. Though she could faintly hear Taiga’s breathing, there wasn’t a word that came through. With her hand resting on the door, Seina closed her fist. Her head hung low as she let out a low groan.

*What have I done?*

There was no sign of when her daughter would be comfortable speaking to her again.

On the other side of the door, Taiga rested against it, rocking little Katsuko in her arms. Her embrace around her daughter tightened.