I Show You Myself As A Fruit Tree

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/847.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	General (non relationship-focused)
Fandom:	Lucky Star (Anime & Manga)
Relationships:	Izumi Konata & Narumi Yui, Narumi Yui & Kobayakawa Yutaka, Izumi Konata & Kobaykawa Yutaka
Characters:	Izumi Konata (Lucky Star), Izumi Soujirou (Lucky Star), Kobayakawa Yutaka (Lucky Star), Kobayakawa Yuki (Lucky Star), Narumi Yui (Lucky Star)
Additional Tags:	Hospitalization, Sickfic, (kind of), Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Immunocompromised Character, Everyone Needs a Hug, Illness, 1990s, Pre-Canon, takes place c. January 1999, Originally Posted Elsewhere | Cross-Posted, Cross-Posted on AO3
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-10-31 Words: 10,734 Chapters: 1/1

I Show You Myself As A Fruit Tree

by keliskindacool

Summary

In the winter of 1999, Yutaka Kobayakawa falls seriously ill. The circumstances are heartbreakingly familiar.

(Originally posted on AO3 on 20th September 2026.)

Notes

so... hello fanfiction.lol...

as you may suspect yes, i am an ao3 author in search of a new site after the 2-4 week shutdown. on one hand it has given me more incentive to finish my work. on the other hand my work has nowhere to go for now so i admittedly feel a little aimless?

i am currently working on another fic involving tsukasa hiiragi which i'll begin posting here maybe? i aim to crosspost to as many sites as i can so that my work is available at least somewhere on the internet. i really need to download epubs off the archive more.

anyways this seems to be the first lucky star work on ff.lol... i hope the 5 lucky star fans on here enjoy this!

Forty one and a half degrees celsius was, by no means, a normal fever for a seven year old girl.

Yuki sat outside of the ward with a shellshocked visage, her head resting in her hands as she attempted weakly to fight the urge to break down right there and then, barely taking notice of the legions of grieving and weary mothers and fathers in the chairs beside her.

She struggled to remember when it had begun, or how it had happened in the first place. It had all happened so fast. *Too* fast. One moment, her youngest daughter was laughing playfully, stomping around with glee around the living room. The next, she woke up feeling a little feverish – yet, neither she nor her husband suspected a thing. A little paracetamol seemed to do the trick, after all.

However, that evening…

Yuki glanced towards the door.

She was in there. Yutaka was in there, bedridden and barely conscious, hooked up to god-knows-how-many machines and helplessly trapped in her own agony. She had deteriorated steadily for hours, yet Yuki never suspected a thing. At least, not until it was too late. Not until Yutaka stumbled downstairs, attempting to tell her that she was unwell but quickly finding that she was only able to mumble out pained half-cries.

It was only the second time in her life she had ever been forced to call an ambulance. Something she wished she would never, *ever* have to do again for as long as it lived. The past had repeated itself enough times already, she thought.

In retrospect, Yuki should have seen this coming a while ago. She knew. She *knew* how Yutaka's body struggled dearly to fight off infection, deep down, but had secretly hoped that the day she'd eventually have to come face-to-face with that reality would never come. Now she saw where that line of thinking had gotten her.

Right back to the start. The same place she found herself in just a little over five years ago.

Only this time, she was going to lose her bundle of joy.

She quietly broke shortly after that revelation, her face sinking further into her hands. The first time had almost destroyed her. This time, Yuki wasn't sure if anyone would be there to pick up the pieces once it was over.

There she laid in the hospital bed, untied red hair splayed across the pillows, a few stray strands sticking to her sweat-slicked face. She looked peaceful, yet simultaneously pained, breathing heavily and hyperventilating despite her resting eyes. Around her, machines beeped and whirred, reading vital signs and carefully dripping fluids into her veins. The bedside table was already stocked with flowers and a few well-wishing cards. Soujirou was mildly surprised by that.

It wasn't anything serious. At least, not initially. Soujirou remembered well; he remembered the phone call he had with his sister earlier that morning, when she detailed Yutaka having a mild case of the flu.

Influenza. That was all that it was. Nothing more than a common winter bug. Yet, somehow… it had resulted in *this.* A high-grade temperature, worse than any he had ever heard of before, and another eternity spent within the suffocating confines of a hospital ward. Nothing to do but seemingly wait for the inevitable.

He thought back to what the doctors had told him and Yuki, when Yutaka was first admitted to hospital in the late hours of the evening.

…was it really inevitable?

A chill passed through the dreary meeting room from the half-open window. The doctor, stern-faced and professional looking, spoke calmly, his voice devoid of emotion. Yuki's eyes went wide, shimmering with sorrow with each word. Soujirou didn't know how to react. He simply stared at the desk, tightening his grip around his yet untouched cup of coffee, despite how its heat scalded his hand ever so slightly.

"Yutaka's immune system.... is not working as expected," The words were fuzzy, unclear and foreign to Soujirou's ears. "...unable to fight off infection easily… it is entirely possible that she may die from this infection."
"Wha–" Yuki seized up at the accursed word. "Sir— You don't mean to—"
"It is, unfortunately, a possibility," he continued, unfazed by her despair, "...but that is not to say she will die for certain… she shall hopefully recover so long as…."

It was no use. He had all but stopped listening by this point.

…Death. A possibility of death. Yuki's grief-stricken expression told him that she saw it as more than just a *possibility.* He knew the feeling all too well; only, in his case, he never had the liberty of believing it to be little more than a probable risk.
He gripped the seat a little tighter as his eyes wandered back over to Yutaka's frail, drowsy form. In her sleep, she shifted ever slightly, a pained whine trickling from her lips. For a moment, when Soujirou first glanced over to that bed, he could've sworn, could've believed that it was someone else in that bed, someone he knew very, *very* well—

The windows clattered as the raging storm outside howled with a fiery passion, the curtains furling in the intense wind. A chilling breeze followed quickly after, rustling the garden flowers outside before tossing up any get-well-soon card or piece of scrap paper that dared to stand in its path, causing every hair on Soujirou's body to stand on end. It left as quickly as it arrived, the curtains peacefully fluttering closed not a few moments later.

"...Kanata?"

What a fool he was, uttering a dead woman's name like that. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just get over her? All of those thoughts flashed through Soujirou's mind in an instant – yet, he could no longer bring himself to care about whatever self-deprecating

drivel his brain had in store for him. Not this time. Not when the similarities were too striking to ignore.

It often felt like she was still here. That was the worst part of the whole situation.

And now he was back in the same position as he was all those years ago—

“Sou?” A weary voice glided into the room, the door drifting shut behind her.

Ah. He thought he’d been forgetting something. Yuki had stepped out of the room for a moment to collect herself, and now she was back, her eyes red-rimmed and shimmering with residual tears.

“...Yuki. Welcome back,” He greeted, wondering if such a positive demeanour was inappropriate at the current moment.
Yuki mumbled a response at first, before wiping her eyes, nodding briefly as she looked up. “Hello.”

An air of awkwardness cast over the room as the two siblings blankly stared at one another, clearly unable to think of anything worthwhile to say.
“Are you…” Soujirou began, swallowing briefly as his voice died in his throat. “...Are you going to sleep soon?”
“I’ll try,” she replied, cynically, “but I’ll probably be up all night watching Yutaka.”
“That…” …was awfully close to something Soujirou always did when Kanata was unwell, but he didn’t dare say that out loud, “...I understand.”

He briefly glanced towards the digital clock on Yutaka’s bedside table, gulping as he realised it was almost midnight, and had promised Konata that he’d be back before it got too dark outside.

“Well–” He shrugged his coat over his shoulders, trying not to make it seem as if he were in a hurry, despite the fact he most *certainly* was, “I should get going now. Konata’s gonna be in a bad mood if I’m gone for any longer.”

Yuki didn’t say a word in response. She simply gave a small nod, reclining in the chair beside the hospital bed as he left through the door, disappearing into the night and weeping during the drive home as one of Kanata’s favourite songs ambushed him on the radio.

If this were to go how it did last time… could he *really* handle losing someone else?

Her whole world was consumed by the raging flames of agony.

Every muscle screamed with exhaustion. Each breath stung with heat. She was trapped within a labyrinthine darkness, floating aimlessly through the nothingness.

And, most of all… a deep, sprawling fear stabbed into her heart at every passing second.

Yutaka was dazed. She had long since forgotten where she was, or what had happened – the fever had rendered her mind dull, skipping over remnants of memories not unlike a faulty

phonograph. Even in this state, several layers deep within the chasm of her own mind, her chest still crackled and popped with every breath.

…Where was she? Where was her mother? Uncle Soujirou? *Anyone?*

She would have called out for help if she could. However, she could no longer muster up the strength to even lift a finger, let alone attempt to speak. So, she remained there, helplessly rocked about in the turbulent seas of pain. Pain that radiated from head to toe, sparked by even the slightest of movements.

But… strangely, just as she was about to make peace with such a miserable existence, her eyes opened.

At once, the light blinded her, threatening to cast her back into the void; but, despite herself, she persisted, still too weak to do anything to alleviate her discomfort. Her eyes watered. Her breath came quicker. The pain multiplied tenfold.

Yutaka shifted to her side with all of her strength, and made eye contact with her mother.

“Ma…?” She weakly reached out to her, her voice scratchy and rough, only able to force out half of what she wanted to say.

Her mother turned to her, eyes widening in shocked relief before giving way to an emotion Yutaka found herself unable to recognise – but, it was too late. Already, Yutaka found herself being pulled under again, fighting to keep her eyes open for even a few more seconds.

This wasn’t right. This *wasn’t* right! She didn’t like this at all. She hated being so sick – so *frail* and *weak,* always getting every cold and every infection and every other nasty bug that was out there – but none of those times had ever been *this* scary. What was happening to her? Why wasn’t *anyone* telling her anything?

…Was she dying?

Was *that* why everyone looked so upset?

Unfortunately for Yutaka, her exhausted body gave out before she could get a chance to do anything about her fears, and she was swiftly plunged back into the abyss, eviscerating the thoughts swarming in her brain.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

Soujirou had all but stumbled through the front door when he finally arrived home, exhaustion weighing down on his mind. It was stupid of him to have driven home, now that he thought about it – especially since he caught himself having to stave off the growing sleepiness within him.

Konata was a little puzzled by the whole situation. Today had been an incredibly bewildering day for her in general. Earlier in the evening, her father had gotten a call. She wasn’t sure what the call was about, nor was she sure of why he seemed so *jittery* afterwards, but… it

seemed urgent enough, she figured. At least, urgent enough for her to feel a little worried about it. And so, he was off in a flash.

She hadn't done much in the hours since then, aside from busying herself with another playthrough of *PaRappa The Rapper* – if she were being honest, she never particularly paid much attention while playing that game; it was mainly just something to keep her anxious mind occupied – briefly wondering what was taking her father so long as the hours grew ever later.

He was home now, though. It was over, she thought – whatever it was that he had to do was over now. She called out to greet him as soon as she heard the front door creak open, bounding over to him as the blanket, still wrapped around her shoulders, fluttered behind her like a makeshift cape.

However, the moment she finally saw him again, her stomach dropped at once.

…She had a feeling that something *terrible* had happened.

Her father wasn't really all there. At least, he didn't seem it in the slightest. He looked utterly dazed, blankly staring at the floor with tired, half-lidded eyes as he swung side-to-side, attempting half-heartedly to keep himself upright.
"Dad?" Konata folded her arms. "Did something happen?"
"Wha–" With a fright, he returned to his senses, mildly shocked by the sight of his daughter standing before him. "When did I– oh… right. Good evening, Konata.

Konata pouted a little. This was strange, even for someone as eccentric as her father. Just what *had* happened while he was gone?
"You didn't answer my question, y'know," She repeated, sternly, "Did. Something. Happen?"

Soujirou didn't give a proper response. He shifted on his feet a little, before mumbling something incoherent and stumbling off to his room, before stopping in his tracks, very clearly struggling to form a single thought. Slightly dizzy from the encroaching sleepiness, he turned back to face his daughter.

He needed to tell her.

He needed to tell her what had happened. That Yutaka was ill – *seriously* ill, and that she might not—

"...Yutaka… ho…" That was all he could force out before he turned into his room, disappearing for the night. A loud *thud* rang out across the house as he collapsed onto his bed, falling into a deep sleep right away.

…*Yutaka.*

Konata's blood froze in her veins.

….*Yutaka.…?*

She lingered there for a little longer than she intended to, staring daggers into the darkness. Eventually, she quietly trudged back into the living room, shivering as she tightened the blanket around her shoulders.

…*Yutaka…*

The PlayStation was still turned on. She picked up the controller, gripping it tightly in her hands. She *had* meant to keep playing before her dad came home, hadn't she? Konata went over to search for a game she had yet to play, barely glancing at the CD as she grabbed it and inserted it in the console, only somewhat comforted by the familiar startup jingle that echoed through the TV speakers.

Yutaka…!

She groaned a little, dropping to the floor and burying herself in the blanket. Yutaka. Yutaka Kobayakawa. Her baby cousin. And… that second, unfinished word her father had started to mumble out–

Nope. Not a chance. She peeked out from her makeshift cocoon, trying to focus on the game a little more. Apparently, she had managed to pick out *Final Fantasy VII* without even realising it. She smiled to herself a little, her spirits lifted ever slightly – Now she was talking! She'd heard so much about this game from the conversations she'd eavesdropped in at school – she was about to have the time of her life, playing all night long, from dusk till dawn—

Yutaka. Yutaka Kobayakawa. Yutaka Yutaka baby cousin in hospital Yutaka where is she Yutaka what happened to her Yutaka Yutaka Yutaka please be okay–

Konata swiftly turned off the console and buried herself deep into her blankets, hiding away from the terrors that lurked in the outside world.

…It was pointless to worry about such things. Her dad hadn't said that she was in hospital. So… she had to have at least a bit of hope. Maybe Yutaka wasn't in hospital. Maybe she was perfectly fine – sick with a cold, perhaps, but not to the point where she needed that kind of treatment. Surely not, right?

However, Konata's hope was rapidly dwindling. She knew her dad well. There was no way – absolutely *no way* – that everything was as okay as she wanted it to be. Not when he looked as unwell as he did.

She remained there, safely cocooned in her blankets, anxiety fluttering in her stomach as her mind screamed, assaulted with terrifying scenario upon terrifying scenario – *Yutaka being horribly sick, unable to recover from her illness, just like Mama, dying just like Mama did* – until, eventually, the ticking of the clock on the wall lulled her into a restless slumber.

Yuki sighed shakily as she watched over Yutaka's slumbering form, the morning light streaming in through the windows as songbirds chirped their waking song in the distance. She was in the exact same place she had found herself in the previous night, slumped over in

the chair beside her daughter's hospital bed, and had moved very little in the hours since. She hadn't slept much at all – if she were to guess, she could probably count the amount of sleep she had in minute-long intervals.

The machines surrounding her little girl beeped and ticked as if to mock her, as they had done all night. It was driving her mad – each *beep* and *click* filled her with an indescribable sense of rage, one that made her tightly grip her mug of tea such that, briefly, she grew concerned that it would shatter in her hands. The room swirled around her, leaving her confused, dazed, and wishing for some semblance of rest.

It still seemed surreal to her. Since that evening, she had been agonising over the events in her mind, endlessly attempting to decode the signs she may have overlooked and what she could have possibly done before it was too late. Where *had* she gone wrong? Yutaka was completely fine that morning. It was just a small cold, wasn't it? How had it developed into… *this?*

Yutaka stirred a little in her… Yuki couldn't really call it *sleep* – she knew Yutaka was, despite how she seemed, at least somewhat conscious – whimpering in pain whenever she so much as trembled. The sight would have brought her to tears yet again, had she had any tears left to spare.

Upon taking another half-hearted sip of her coffee, she remembered – *crap,* how had she forgotten? Soujirou would be here within the next hour; he *had* called her earlier, she remembered, though she was half asleep when she answered the phone. Moving on autopilot, she rose from her seat, stretching as the exhaustion radiated across her muscles and bones. Despite herself, she somehow had the energy to take a quick shower, swiftly getting dressed for the day – well, as dressed as she could muster the energy for, at least. However, when she stepped out of the bathroom, as prepared as she could be for the day–

Yutaka was awake.

Not "awake" in the sense that Yuki had figured beforehand, either – she was fully awake, nervously looking around the room, trying (and failing) to sit up in the bed, groaning as pain racked her body.
"Ugh–" She stammered out, tripping over her words "Ma— Where—"

Without another thought, Yuki rushed over to her daughter, quickly learning that she, in fact, *did* have plenty more tears left to cry.
"Yutaka?" She cried, quietly, kneeling by her side, her voice dripping with desperation, "Yutaka, honey… you're awake… how are you feeling…?"
Yutaka blinked slowly, and for a horrifying moment, Yuki thought she was about slip into the depths of unconsciousness for yet another time – but, to her relief, Yutaka drew in a shaky, unstable breath, coughing and spluttering in the process, trying her best to look her mother in the eye.

"B…." Her eyes clenched in pain, watering from the still-present temperature, yet she forced herself to continue. "B…*ad….*"
"Honey—" Yuki's breath hitched, a strangled cry suffocating itself deep within her throat. She couldn't. Not now. Not in front of her daughter. "You don't have to push yourself so

hard… just rest, okay? It's okay. You– the doctors will help you feel better."
Yutaka nodded shakily. "O-O…Okay…"

Naturally, her hand fell atop Yutaka's hair, her fingers working through the delicate, sweat-slicked strands of her hair as she gently scratched her scalp. Her eyes fluttered shut briefly, at first. It was the first semblance of peace Yuki had seen on her daughter's face since the previous morning.

She didn't want to let go. If she had her way, she would've kept on caressing her little ray of sunshine until her very bones were reduced to pulver. But she was *exhausted* – so, very *exhausted* – if only Soujirou could come quicker, so she could go home and finally *rest,* and see her darling Takashi again– *he was supposed to be home today, after all—*

Her saviour merrily opened the door, strolling into the room with a cheerful facade plastered all over his face. Behind him, his daughter, Konata, followed him closely, shyly shielding herself with his leg. Her face brightened a little as her eyes met with Yuki's, and she gave the older woman a small, sheepish wave. Yuki thought for a moment – it *had* been a while since the two last met, hadn't it?

Though, upon noticing just *who* was in the bed, Konata broke away from her cover in an instant, dashing wildly toward the hospital bed, her stomach fluttering with anxiety at the sight.
"Yutaka–!" She cried out. It was her. *It was her, after all.* Her father had already told her, of course, but she had refused to believe him until she saw it with her own eyes. "Yutaka– are you–"
"Konata," Soujirou grabbed her arm – firm, but not too firm – gently leading her away from the hospital bed. "Be careful, okay? Yutaka isn't feeling very well. You don't want to get sick now, do you?"
"I don't care if it's—"

Konata's voice died in her throat. She tried to think of something, anything to fire back with – she didn't care if she got sick; this was *Yutaka* she was talking about, for crying out loud! – but, eventually, she gave up, weakly hugging her father in search of comfort.
"...I just want her to be okay…" Her voice was quieter, the flame from a few moments ago now thoroughly extinguished.
Soujirou ran a reassuring hand through her hair. "She'll be okay, Konata. I promise. She's just… sick right now, that's all."

…He could tell that she didn't believe him for a second.

Now that his daughter was firmly nested by his side, Soujirou shifted his focus towards Yuki, letting the door drift shut behind him.
"Good morning," He began, "I see Yutaka's awake. How's she feeling?"
"...Not much different," Yuki's voice croaked weakly as she spoke, "She's… she's still so weak…"

Already, Yuki was beginning to spiral once more. Memories of the conversation she had with the doctors the day prior flashed through her head, their terrible statistics and predictions only dragging her deeper into the dark miasma flooding her mind.

“Sou, I–” She clenched her fists, trembling as her voice wavered and cracked, “I don’t– I don’t know what to *do* anymore–”
“Hey… hey, easy,” Soujirou placed a hand on her shoulder, trying his best to comfort her. “Just go home and rest for now. You look exhausted.”
At that moment, exhaustion fully settled into Yuki’s muscles. She shakily moved away from her brother, swaying a little with each step – though, she quickly regained her composure, forcing herself to wake up for the journey ahead.

This was what they had agreed upon, after all. Takashi had been away for most of yesterday – some business related stuff, Yuki imagined; she couldn’t quite recall what he had told her – and she had spoken to him over the phone yesterday. He wasn’t able to leave work at the time Yutaka first fell ill, but had promised her that he would be home first thing the next morning, and would take time off work to accompany her at the hospital.

Soujirou was always there for her, she thought. How could she ever repay him for all the good he had done?

Yuki wasted no time in making her leave, not bothering to take her belongings with her – she knew that she would be back soon, after all. Konata tagged along with her – Soujirou didn’t want her staying in the hospital all day, fearing that she would grow bored and restless from staying in such a place for too long.

Once again, Konata found herself climbing into the back of Yuki’s car. It was nowhere near as small as she remembered – she could’ve sworn that the roof was a lot farther away than it currently was, for one – though, she paid little mind to it, pressing her face against the window and patching as the scenery slowly drifted by. There wasn’t much for conversation. Of course, Yuki asked the usual questions – how she’d been recently, what she’d done over the weekend, how she spent the rest of New Years – but that was that.

Konata wrapped her arms around her waist. She couldn’t tell if it was due to the cold or something else entirely, but she was trembling, yet unable to get the terrifying thought of *Yutaka Kobayakawa* out of her head.

Over in the driver’s seat, Yuki had begun to quietly weep once more.

It had been two hours since Yui found out, and about another hour and a half since she locked herself in her room.

She was curled up on her bed, snot and tears staining her pillows and sheets as a tempest of boiling-hot rage whirled within her. Yui just didn’t get it at *all*. What sort of sick joke *was* this?

Her mother hadn’t told her until that evening. A *full day* after Yutaka was first hospitalised. Not once did she tell her what the ambulance was for when she heard the sirens as they illuminated every room in the once-dark house, nor did she explain why she suddenly took off with vague-half promises that her father would eventually come home. All day and all night, she had been restless – utterly *restless* – agonising over every possibility in her mind, reaching into dark corners that were once thought to have been abandoned long ago.

Yui figured she would've been upset no matter what happened. But… to be told this late that her sister might *actually be DYING–*

She bit back a curse, socking her pillow across the room. It brought her little relief.

One day. It had only been a little over a day since Yutaka was rushed to hospital, yet she already felt hopelessly alone. The silence was already driving her mad. There was no one. No one left to pester her in the middle of crucial exam revision sessions. No one to calm down at the crack of dawn after a particularly nasty nightmare. *No one.* And to think this was what life would be like for her if her baby sister were to–

Outside of her window, a car revved its engine, its tires screeching quietly against the asphalt as it sped off to whatever destination it was headed to. Yui figured it was her parents setting off to accompany Yutaka at the hospital. Leaving her to fend for herself once again.

"Urgh–" She clutched her hands over her head, a stray tear trickling down her cheek. And at that moment–

"Yui-neesannnn~!" A small fist pounded desperately against the door. Yui scoffed, shifting to the other side. *"C'mon! Open the door already!"*

… Who else would it be, other than Konata? Yui rolled her eyes.

"Heeey!" Of course, the pounding only grew more intense. *"Yuiiiiii! It's just me! Aunt Yuki left!"*

Now Yui was starting to feel a little irritated. Konata was a wonderful cousin to have and all – really, she wouldn't dare to ask for anyone else – but *Jesus Christ,* why in the world was she so damn *nosey* all the time? She should really learn to mind her own business for a change.

"If you don't open up, I'm gonna play on your Biohazard save!" The threat was hollow. Yui knew what would happen if Konata did that. To say the least, she knew the girl wouldn't dare to do anything that may so much as *threaten* her access to video games of any sort.

Yet. Still. Despite Yui's continued silence. The knocking did not let up once.

And it was *really* pissing her off.

She pressed the remaining pillow as hard as she could over her head, partly hoping that she'd wind up smothering herself to an early grave if she fell asleep. That was it. Persistence was key when dealing with Konata. She was sure to give up soon. Any minute now, and she'd trudging away from the door in defeat.

But alas, Konata, as always, wore her out first. The knocking just wouldn't *shut up.* She kept going, knocking harder, faster, and faster – somehow, it was even *more* infuriating than the last few times. *Knock. Knock knock knock knock knock oh my god SHUT UP—*

She slammed the pillow down, throwing herself up from the bed, clenching her fists as she barely bit back her rage. She was done. Absolutely, one-hundred percent *fucking* done. She marched over to the door, shaking from the sheer intensity of her anger, and—

“Please, Konata, just GO AWAY ALREADY—”

A fierce gust of wind blew the windows open, travelling through the room before it tossed the door aside. Konata tumbled over as the door swung inwards, faceplanting onto the floor with a light, surprised gasp. Outside, the trees creaked and whined, lone cans and other metallic objects skating across the ground, until, gradually, the air outside returned to its usual stillness.

…What the hell was that?

Konata slowly picked herself up from the floor, wincing in pain briefly as she dusted herself off. She seemed quite unfazed by the freshly formed bump on her head, thinking nothing of what had just happened.

A sinking feeling formed in Yui’s gut. That wind… for some inexplicable reason, it reminded her of… *something.* She couldn’t quite put her finger on what that *something* exactly was, but felt it unwise to simply brush it to one side nonetheless.

More important, however, was Konata. The moment she took one look at the girl, any semblance of rage or ill will that had been simmering towards her vanished in an instant. She was staring at her feet, her arms folded tightly as she shifted from foot to foot, her eyes wobbling as she sniffled quietly.

“...Dad’s gonna be here any minute now,” Konata sighed, “I… I’m sorry. Just… I don’t know why Yuki— why she never *told* you–”

Before Konata could get another word in, Yui pulled her into a tight, crushing embrace, mentally scolding herself for everything she had said to Konata in her head. How could she be so *ignorant?* Of course she wasn’t the only one suffering. Of course Konata was also terrified. Why wouldn’t she be? Yutaka was… as far as she understood, Yutaka was *dying.*

The word sent shockwaves racing through her nervous system, her eyes welling up with tears. Dying. *Dying.* She hadn’t wanted to believe it, but… with an immune system as weak as hers, and with the sort of infection that she was struggling with—

“Don’t–” She choked out, “Don’t apologise— *I’m* sorry, Konata. I’m… I’m *so sorry.…”*
“Why are you–” Konata choked out, tears trickling down her cheeks as fear constricted her throat not unlike the snakes she recalled seeing in wildlife documentaries. “I….”

Konata sighed, burying her face into the warmth of Yui’s shirt. A shiver crawled up her spine, dispersing from head to toe as her head began to throb in sync with the violent tsunami of dark, *horrifying* thoughts overwhelming her mind. She wrapped her arms tightly around Yui’s back, squeezing as hard as was physically possible for a girl of her size, unable to hold back the torrent of emotions building up within her.

Her cheeks stung with mortified heat. Konata was not at all one to show her emotions so openly – at least, she tried her best not to most of the time. This was different, though. She could not even hope to stay strong during a time like this.

Especially not when it came to Yutaka. When she saw her, half-conscious in that bed, looking eerily similar to her mothe—

“I’m… I’m scared…” She hadn’t meant for the words to trickle out so effortlessly, but it couldn’t be helped.

As her own fear crushed her, Yui tightened their shared embrace, a beacon of hope in such a dreary, bleak tempest.

Words could never hope to replicate even a fraction of the pain that rended her nerves.

The morning had been completely fine, for the most part. Perhaps “completely” wasn’t entirely true – she was still sporting a thirty-nine-and-a-half degree fever, her muscles crying out for rest whenever she so much as twitched, but her condition had improved nevertheless.

Though, unfortunately, whatever hope her parents may have had in that brief moment of reprieve had been mercilessly crushed.

Now, the poor girl was in hysterics, wailing in agony as she was swarmed by leagues of doctors, nurses, and medical assistants from all sorts of departments, each of whom were fretting over the worrying sight presented before them. Her tears only grew each time she felt a gloved hand prodding and poking at her skin, her eyes shut tightly, unable to handle any more sensory input other than the agony already assaulting her receptors. A needle pierced her skin, injecting god-knows-what into her veins as her wails transformed into blood-curdling shrieks.

Yuki was rendered inconsolable by the horrific sight, helpless to stop her worst nightmare from being orchestrated right before her eyes. Yet, she could not find the strength to turn away. She simply watched on, wracked with sorrow and grief.

She felt horrendously nauseous. Tears streamed down her cheeks, dripping softly onto the floor below. And her daughter’s screams–

No. No. No no no no *no.* She didn’t want to hear it anymore. She never, ever wanted to hear such a horrific sound *ever* again. Yuki would rather tear off her own ears than be subjected to such torment.

At that moment, she remembered the grim news the doctors had broken to her the other night. Her memories were blending into one another; each day was a new struggle, and she had long since forgotten when Yutaka had first been taken into hospital – *had it been two days? Five? Three?* – but not even time could hope to wear down the terrifying things the doctor had told her as if he were forecasting the weather.

It was her immune system. Yutaka’s immune system was weak – *abnormally* weak, far weaker than she initially assumed – and, consequently, the influenza was wreaking havoc within her body. It was struggling to fight off the infection – at times, the doctor suggested that she might not be fighting off the disease at *all.*

Yuki wanted to remain optimistic about this. She *really* did. She wanted to convince herself that her daughter would get better; that she just needed to stop being *so damn cynical* and have faith in the doctors.

But she wasn't stupid. She had seen death before, and its skeletal hands had seemingly already marked her daughter. Besides… what faith *could* she have? What faith did she have left in humanity? In *herself?* She had all but failed to notice the signs the first time. Just a few hours ago the doctors were already mentioning sorts of terrifying things such as *sepsis* and *opportunistic infection,* and she made the mistake of googling her daughter's symptoms only to be told that her daughter would be dead and buried in a *matter of months*– and the *screaming* – oh *god*, the screaming just *wouldn't stop*–

Silence had returned to the room. Her daughter, once in unimaginable agony, was now at rest, her eyes shut tightly.

She was no longer writhing in pain. Nor was she whimpering to herself at every sudden movement. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Yutaka had finally drifted off to a peaceful sleep, and Yuki wasn't sure if she would ever wake up again.

That night, Yuki had a particularly frightening dream. She found herself at a funeral, helping her family carry a small casket through the church as she gazed upon the rows upon rows of blank, faceless people filling out the pews. It was an arduous task – she hadn't expected it to be so damn *heavy* – but, eventually, they managed to place the casket atop the altar. To her surprise, no one seemed to be particularly sorrowful - not even her family shed any tears, remaining cliff-faced, simply doing what they needed to do without much thought.

And then, right as she was about to stand at the altar and give her eulogy, the lid unlocked with a faint click, creaking as it slowly drifted open.

Inside the casket was her daughter.

Soujirou was hunched against the wall, pressing the receiver firmly against his ear, his face paling the more Yuki spoke. He shook ever slightly, pressing a hand against the wall for purchase, praying that the words coming from the other end were little more than some elaborate prank.

In the living room, Yui and Konata were both huddled under the kotatsu, idly watching whatever was on TV at the current moment. The day's *Cardcaptor Sakura* episode had passed by, and now the young otaku was entirely listless, her head resting against the table as she slowly blinked in and out of consciousness.

Neither girl was awfully awake; Konata had fallen asleep around a dozen times already, and Yui was finding it difficult to keep her eyes open for more than a few minutes herself – but that hardly mattered when they took notice of the conversation Soujirou was having over the phone. At least, not when it became clear that it was more serious than they initially thought.

Yui yawned, rubbing her eyes as she turned to Konata. "What's Uncle Soujirou so worried about…?"

“Mm…” Konata grumbled into the table, shifting to face her cousin; although, she *still* didn’t get up, “...Dunno… probably about… I dunno…”
She let out a small, discontented sigh. This wasn’t getting anywhere. Especially not with how exhausted Konata was.

Her glance drifted over to the kitchen. Soujirou was still there, the receiver pressed yet further against his ear. Idly, she wondered if he would end up breaking it by accident by doing that.

However, before she could turn away and return to mindlessly staring at the show which she could’ve cared less about, she caught something that Soujirou had said. A word which made her stomach twist and churn with dread.

“...Yutaka…three days….” He repeated, quietly, to himself, *“...still hasn’t woken up?”*

…What

Any residual sleepiness that may have clouded her brain was now gone. The room suddenly felt as if it was closing in around her. Her chest tightened, and her heart began to throb desperately against her chest, working overtime as her hands ran cold and clammy with sweat.

Konata, too, seemed to realise that something was up, looking around the room in confusion. *She must have heard it too,* Yui thought; though, unlike the older girl, she didn’t seem to be panicking. It puzzled her to no end; how in the *world* could she be so calm about any of this?

“Did you hear…?” She was almost too afraid to ask. “Yu– Yutaka… she’s…”
Konata didn’t say a word. Instead, she scooted up to Yui, finding her hand and grabbing hold of it, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Yui wasn’t fooled, though. From the moment their hands interlocked, she could tell that Konata was *far* more terrified than even she was.
“I know,” Konata’s voice was trembling, “I don’t wanna think anymore… you shouldn’t have to, either.”
Yui chuckled at that. “I wish I didn’t have to.”
“Maybe if I keep watching the TV…” Konata shifted a little, now laser-focused on what was currently playing on the television. “The new *Detective Conan* episode will come on…”
“That doesn’t air until Saturday,” Yui added, cynically.
“I know!” Konata chirped. It sounded awfully forced. “That’s what I’m hoping for!”

The two fell back into silence after that. Outside, an owl chirped, a lone car whooshing past as it rolled down the lifeless streets; and somewhere, tucked away in a hospital ward, her little sister laid ensnared in a deep sleep, the kind which could very well turn out to be an eternal slumber.

How many times had Yuki found herself in such dreary consultation rooms?

The ceiling was as drab and as bleak as she remembered it being for the past hundred or so times she had been here, and the same could be said for whatever the doctors had to say. In fact, she had stopped listening to the doctor's words long ago – her husband, sitting in the chair next to her, seemed to be the only one paying any attention.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse. Just when she thought that maybe, *just* maybe, she was allowed to hold some semblance of hope. Of course it wasn't going to get better. She should've known better than to delude herself with such meaningless fantasies.

To put it simply, things were not looking good. By this point, not even the doctors knew what to do.

Yutaka had been asleep for almost three days now. Perhaps the matter would be less concerning, excruciating pain aside, had the doctors not found the fact that she wasn't comatose the most intriguing aspect of it all. No one truly knew just *what* was wrong with her. They knew she was immunocompromised by every meaning of the word, but there were always a few variables that always prevented them from fully assessing the extent to which she was.

If anything, the only thing they could do was…

"...watch and wait," Yuki blinked. Ah. She spaced out again. "I'm afraid that's all we can do. We can keep her comfortable with painkillers, of course, but there just isn't any definitive treatment we can give her."
"...I see." Takashi, though he appeared cold, seemed evidently troubled by the news.
The conversation droned on for a while longer after that, and Yuki soon found herself drifting off into her own thoughts once again, the hopelessness clouding her mind transforming into a potent terror. And, soon enough, a particularly disturbing question crossed her mind. One which she had intentionally ignored any time it popped up.

How long did she have left?

Though it was clear that Yutaka wasn't exactly on death's door – not yet, anyways – her condition was deteriorating quickly enough that the doctors were beginning to gauge the time that she had left. It was, of course, too early to say how long it was for sure, but with how sharply Yutaka had declined, and the way her antibodies were constantly fluctuating but never fully working – Yuki couldn't help but fear the worst.

Every night since the day her daughter screamed in agony, Yuki had gone through the same nightmare as she did on that day. Whenever she fell asleep – be it at night, or on the train, or even just sitting by herself on the waiting room – she would find herself right back in the church, carrying her child's casket to the altar and watching it swing open all over again, or helping to load it onto a conveyor belt and watching as it slowly plunged into the flames, never to be seen again; and, far too often on those typically sleepless nights, Yuki found herself pondering: how much of those dreams were really *dreams,* rather than foresight into the future? What if every single one of those nightmares were a prediction for what was to come—

She blinked, and found herself stumbling out of the consultation room, bleary eyes glancing around familiar-yet-unfamiliar hallways as she and her husband marched back to the ward.

His thumb traced circles around the back of her hand. It was a relatively small gesture, but one that brought her the ghost of comfort nonetheless. The hallways stretched long and thin, the walls of the children's ward rife with displays of stuffed animals, crayon-caked drawings, and the eternal antiseptic smell that seeped into each crevice. In the waiting room, anxious mothers, fathers and relatives waited with bated breath for any semblance of news regarding their children.

The horror, for now, had come to a close. It didn't comfort her in the slightest. Yuki figured it would rear its ugly head in the coming hours anyway.

As she resigned herself to hopelessness, trying to ignore the fleeting sparks of hope that still crackled across her brain, Yuki opened the door to the room which had quickly become a second home of sorts, ready to greet the endlessly growing collection of well-wishing cards, gifts, and flowers, already finding herself fighting the anticipatory grief swelling within her heart from the first step.

However, to her surprise, when she fully let herself into the room, and turned towards the bed… the sight that laid before her was so bewildering, so unexpected, that, briefly, she figured she must still be dreaming.

Yutaka was awake. Sitting upright in her bed, her head tilting in confusion at her mother's disbelief.

Her eyes were rich with life.

Her consciousness was like the crackling lightning of a collapsed power line. Frequent, yet fleeting. Constant, yet all too unstable.

And then, all of a sudden, it went dark, and stayed that way for… Yutaka couldn't figure out how much time had passed, but however long it had been, it was too long. *Far* too long for her liking.

Yet, her consciousness persisted. Over time, the frenzied crackles decreased, gradually reorganising into a stable current, as if her brain had to remember how to cope with the outside world after experiencing such unimaginable agony.

Gradually, the world returned to her in pulses. First came the distinct, antiseptic smell that had been iron-branded into her unconscious mind since she was a toddler; a miasma that Yutaka had grown to despise at her young age. Next came the beeping of the various machines behind her, and occasionally the sound of desperate, heartbroken voices speaking in hushed tones.

After that came a sudden, unexpected tempest of sensation. Every sense she could remember flooded back into her once-slumbering mind, dragging her out of the depths of the void and causing her to awake with an almost frightened jolt.

…Where…. Where am I? Where did—

It was the first thought she had experienced in days. Yet, it was snuffed out almost immediately as she began to frantically glance around the room, sitting upright and briefly noticing that her muscles weren't as sore as they used to be before the flagging memory of that night dissipated into dust.

The room was almost completely empty. Her mother's handbag remained on a chair that was drawn up close to her bedside. Leaning against that same chair was her father's briefcase, which was slowly slipping down the chair leg and would soon end up slumped on the floor. Sunlight streamed in through the open windows, painting the room in orange-gold hues as birds tweeted merrily in their nests

Yutaka squinted, lifting a gold-dyed hand to block out the sun, immediately noticing that her hand was wrapped up in a bandage, a thin tube trailing out of a gap in the dressing and leading up to the gigantic bag looming over her head. Not just that – what was that gown she was wearing? She did not remember putting that on at all! Behind her, she took notice of the flowers lining the space behind her bed, stretching across to the window and painting the room in vibrant, vivid colours.

She was alone. Surrounded by natural beauty, bathed in the sun's rays (she forgot how nice it felt to have its warmth caressing her cheeks) – yet simultaneously hooked up to a myriad of machines and plunged into solitude.

"...M…Ma…?" Her voice was weak and gravelly from disuse. At once, she coughed heavily, her chest burning in pain as she hacked up phlegm into her hand. "Where… *Mama?"*
The only response she received was the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor. She attempted to raise her voice, but was sent into another, horrid coughing fit, before–
"Mama?!" Her throat burned. Her chest ached, and felt strangely light. Her mind was still clouded with fog, having just woken up from a prolonged slumber – yet, she was already panicking a little. Where was she? Where was *anyone? Mama? Dad? Konata? Yui—*

The door swung open, and before she knew it, Yutaka was staring her mother directly in the eye.

The older woman nearly stumbled back in shock, but forcibly steadied herself, though she was as pale as a sheet. In her mind, she may as well have witnessed a ghost. Yutaka could sense the disbelief in her eyes.
"Where…?" Yutaka pressed a hand to her forehead, trying carefully to piece together her next sentences. It proved to be unusually difficult. "Where… were you–"
"Yutaka!"

Her mother practically launched herself across the room. Behind her, her father trailed in, walking briskly over to the other side of her bed, biting his lip as he removed his glasses.
"Yutaka– honey—" Her mother hugged her tightly, now utterly inconsolable. "You're— *oh god– you're—"*
"Ma…?" *Why wasn't anyone telling her what was going on?* "What… what *happened?* I– *ugh–* I was… I was in bed… and then everything hurt, and now I'm—"
"No," Her mother cupped her cheeks, her voice trembling with horror, "No, dear. No. You

don’t need to remember, okay? Mama would be happier if you didn’t. No one should remember anything like that.”
“But– *why?”*
“Because…” Her mother paused, searching for the right words, “Some memories… they hurt. And sometimes they don’t stop hurting for a really long time. So it’s a good thing you don’t remember.”
“What…?” Yutaka’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Was I… Mama, was I sick?”
Her mother gave a firm nod. “Yes, dear. *Very* sick. I was—”

Her mother paused, furiously wiping her eyes as she tried in vain to stave off another spell of tears. Eventually, with a shaky breath, she inhaled deeply through her nostrils, steadying herself as much as she could.

“...Well, I knew you’d be okay, my dear,” She ruffled her daughter’s messy hair, “You always would be.”

“...okay.”

Yutaka still didn’t have all the answers to her questions, of course. Though, by the time her mother’s warm, familiar hand rested atop her head, her fingers slowly trailing through her hair, whatever questions she may have raised in her mind quickly vanished, her eyes drifting shut once again.

Unfortunately, merely being conscious did not at all mean Yutaka could finally return home. Far from it, in fact; she was still very ill, after all.

The doctors were cautiously optimistic, given that she had made a recovery to begin with, but remained rather sceptical about how well her immune system functioned. Simply put, they just could *not* figure out what was wrong with her. Consequently, this meant regular, daily blood tests – and, for Yutaka, a daily horror which she never got fully used to.

Yet, even after a myriad of blood tests, the doctors *still* could not figure out what the hell was going on.

She was immunocompromised. This was a well known fact; her immunoglobulin levels were well below the normal numbers, and Yuki was aware of her near-constant sniffles. But that wasn’t all that the doctors were looking for. Most other people who had similar conditions to Yutaka’s often experienced repeated chest infections, as was the case with one child a few rooms down from hers, who had experienced enough cases of pneumonia that they were left with severe and permanent damage to their lungs. To complicate matters even more, every immunisation Yutaka had received to date was, for the most part, effective in generating an immune response.

So… no one really knew what was happening to her, nor did they know how long her recovery would truly last. For now, however, the young soldier was on the mend. She appeared to be in much brighter spirits, to add; the dark circles around her eyes had largely faded, and her skin was rich with colour, as opposed to the pale and sickly visage she sported just a few days prior.

Yutaka remained in her bed, clutching a teddy bear close to her chest, sulking as she idly picked at the plaster on her arm. Even with the cold spray, the blood tests were never any less painful for her. She was beginning to question if the spray worked at all in the first place.

“Yutaka?” Her mother asked. Soujirou was there, too. He seemed a lot happier than he had been in a while. “Are you okay, honey? You haven’t said a thing since the test…”
Yutaka grumbled. “I hate needles.”
“I know, I know,” Her mother reassured, “It’s hard. I know. But the doctors aren’t trying to hurt you, okay? This is just something they do to see how they can help.”
“Then *why* does it hurt so much?” Yutaka clenched her teeth, “They said the cold spray would help! It didn’t!”
“Now, now–”
“And they’re gonna do it again *tomorrow,* too!” Tears welled up in the corners of Yutaka’s eyes as she ranted, “And the day after, and the day after that, and the day after THAT one!”
“Honey– please, calm down, okay? I know you don’t like it, but–”
“I *don’t* like it! I wish it would go away forever!” She furiously rubbed at her eyes, sniffling heavily, “Or– Or– I want the doctors to put me to sleep before! I know they can’t! But… b-but…”

Gradually, Yutaka slipped back into silence, clutching her chest as tears continued to blur her vision. She tried to control herself; to put an end to the endless emotions that swirled within her brain… however, it was no use. Tears quickly began to stream down her cheeks, and Yuki swiftly scooped the girl up into her arms, gently stroking her hair as she wept endlessly into her arms.

In the midst of the emotional storm, Soujirou had returned with a freshly refilled, steaming-hot cup of coffee in his hands, playing hot-potato with the cup as he quietly tried not to burn his fingertips. Though, upon noticing the state Yutaka was in, he quickly shoved whatever words that were about to spill from his lips down his throat, tiptoeing up to the table next to Yuki’s seat and gently placing the warm cup onto the coaster, before moving to find a seat of his own.

Quietly, he made a mental note to let Yui and Konata know how Yutaka was doing at the first chance he got. He knew full well that the two girls were likely still worried sick about her, even if Konata often kept her feelings tightly under wraps.

The days had grown long and arduous in recent times; yet, simultaneously, they were also brimming with a rich sense of hope; one which Yutaka had not felt since her first day in the hospital.

The blood tests, at first, were near constant, much to Yutaka’s disliking. It was a herculean task to try and ease the girl’s nerves before the needle even pierced her vein, and it wasn’t much easier to get blood out of her, either. One particularly slow and agonising occasion left her with quite a nasty bruise running down the length of her arm. However, thankfully, such tests grew few and far between as the days flew by, until they eventually stopped altogether.

They had even taken out all of the terrifying machines that monitored her vital signs. Gone was the heart monitor. The blood pressure monitor and the IV drip had, too, met a similar

fate; Yutaka made sure to remain brave as the tube hooking her up to the drip was taken out of her hand.

Then came a day, one week and two days after Yutaka Kobayakawa was initially rushed to hospital, where she finally received the news she had been waiting for.

“As of today, she is officially discharged,” The doctor explained, before turning to Yutaka, sensing the young girl’s confusion, “You can go home now.”
”...Really?” Yutaka breathed,
The doctor responded with an affirming nod.

The girl had no idea how to respond. Even though she had been eagerly waiting for this day to come, even when she had spent many near-sleepless nights endlessly asking her mother when she could go home, when she could finally *leave.*… she simply froze. A part of her had simply never considered it possible to leave such a place after a certain point. Not when she had been stuck in that same old bed for what, at this point, felt like an eternity and a half for her.

But then, a moment later, she *squealed* with delight – a wonderful sound, one which nearly sent Yuki weeping to the floor all over again – and hopped out of the bed, all but diving into her mother’s arms. She was still clad in the same pyjamas she had arrived in, now washed and thoroughly sanitised after last night’s bath; the first one she had received in many days.

Takashi chuckled to himself as Yutaka giggled and rambled with glee, giving the room one last once-over.

The cards had all been cleared away and stuffed into a carrier bag. Yuki would want to keep a few as a reminder for how lucky her daughter was, without a doubt. Soujirou had visited a day or so ago, alongside Konata and Yui, and had helped clean up what was left of the flowers. Most were, thankfully, still fairly healthy. Briefly, he checked the bathroom, giving a satisfied nod to himself once he confirmed that nothing had been left behind.

And so, off they went, the young girl securely cradled in Yuki’s arms, as they all grabbed their belongings and left the ward, walking down the halls of the hospital for the last time. The morning, as always, was unmatched in its beauty; the birds were still chirping their morning song, a crisp winter breeze trailing through an open window. The waiting room had largely cleared out; all that remained were a handful of concerned relatives, likely still waiting for any updates on their loved ones, and leftover belongings from those who were likely still staying the night.

It was strange. The hospital’s halls no longer seemed as oppressive as they once did, Yuki thought. The eternal stench of death she had been painfully observant to beforehand had, too, dissipated.

She clutched her child a little tighter as she giggled and cuddled her back, taking a moment to cherish the feeling of her own kin in her arms.

At one point, Yuki was convinced she was going to lose all of this.

She was convinced she would never experience such precious moments ever again. She would never be able to hold her child, or watch her grow up enough to get accepted into her dream university and leave home for a while, or watch her walk down the aisle at some distant point in the future, or… well, Yuki no longer needed to concern herself with such terrifying possibilities.

She still had her child, after all. And she was sure that, somewhere, somehow, Kanata was smiling down upon her.

Soon enough, the three of them had all piled into Yuki's car, which had been lying abandoned in the hospital's car park since the second day of Yutaka's hospitalisation. A chill cast over them, but neither minded. Yutaka quietly strapped herself into her seat, letting her head loll against the window as the car began to move, the scenery flying past, reduced to smudges across her vision. She let her eyes close a little – never fully falling asleep, but allowing herself to be comforted by the bumpy roads nonetheless.

They arrived home later that afternoon. For a moment, Yuki wondered if she should have called Soujirou beforehand, so he could let Konata and Yui know of what was happening, but decided against it. The two of them would be overjoyed no matter what happened, she figured, but part of her felt it strange *not* to leave it a surprise.

She got out of the car and helped Yutaka out of the backseat after waking her up, the weary girl groggily rubbing her eyes as her feet landed on the ground, readjusting to her surroundings.
"Are you ready, dear?" Yutaka gave a firm nod in response.

Yuki chuckled to herself a little, glancing at the house down the road.

Yutaka had been missing those two a lot, hadn't she?

It was only natural, she figured. Those three were as close-knit as could be. From Yutaka's birth, Yui was all over her, cradling her in her arms as carefully as she could and swearing upon her life that any soul who so much as dared to wrong her baby sister would have hell to pay for what they did. She had done much of the same around the time Konata was born, as well. Yuki could hardly believe such a thing had slipped her mind – had she *really* been that caught-up in her internal battles, to such a point where the outside world seemed like it simply didn't exist to her?

Yet… she saw now. She could see the joy in her daughter's eyes as she gazed around and realised just where she was, beaming as she cast away the last of her sleepiness, jumping up and down with infectious delight. Soon enough, Yuki was the one being led to the front door as Yutaka took her hand, running as fast as her body would allow her to.

"Yutaka–" She called out, "Careful, honey! Don't tire yourself out so early!"

Of course, her words fell deaf on her ears. Within no time, the three of them had made their way to the front door. Yutaka stood on her tiptoes, reaching as high as she could, and pounded on the door with all of her might.

A commotion erupted almost immediately from inside of the house, the familiar sound of shuffling nearer and nearer, until, eventually, she was able to recognise the two voices chatteringly excitedly behind the door. Her heart pounded with anticipation, and she pressed her feet firmly into the ground to steady herself. And, when the door finally opened–

"...Yuu-chan?"
"...Yutaka…?!"

Standing in the doorway were none other than Konata and Yui. Konata was huddled close to Yui's side, still slightly groggy from the slow morning; yet, the remnants of her exhaustion burned away in an instant the moment she caught a glimpse of Yutaka, her eyes widening in disbelief as she tore away from her older cousin. Yui, on the other hand, barely had time to process her fleeting disbelief. Within moments, tears blurred her vision, and she began to tremble, rushing over in an instant as she scooped her baby sister up into her arms.

"Yu… Yutaka..!" She sobbed, her tears pattering onto the floor, *"I– You– You're here…! I–I was s-so… s-so scared– ugh– guh– I really thought you w-were gonna–"*
Yutaka simply giggled, hugging her sister as hard as she could. "Yui-nee! Don't cry! Don't cry anymore! I'm here now, it's okay!"
"Heyyyy! Yui! Lemme– I wanna hug her too!" Konata protested, attempting to barge in as she jumped as high as she could. It was at times like these the young otaku lamented her small stature the most.

Yui, despite her emotional state, caved to Konata's demands, kneeling down and freeing an arm to scoop up Konata, holding both girls close to her as her wails echoed through the halls of the Izumi household. Konata hugged her back, her own eyes a little misty as she cherished her baby cousin for the first time in what was, to her, an eternity.

At that moment, nothing mattered anymore. Every concern, worry, or troubling thought that could have possibly been clouding either girl's mind at that moment, vanished in an instant, giving way to an overwhelming sense of relief.

Yutaka could finally rest. *Finally.* There were no more scares. No more long, arduous nights spent in hospital. No more… well, as much as she hoped for there to no more blood tests, she knew that the doctors wouldn't let her off the hook so easily; although, she found that it didn't trouble her in the slightest. Not when she was in her sister's arms again, after so long.

She was home. She was finally, truly home.

And she was alive.

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