

Chapter 1: Aisaka Rikurou

The birth of the universe was one of the most unlikely events to ever happen. The odds of all the variables aligning to form the space we live in now were astronomically low, and yet, here we are. What is most unlikely to happen, given enough time, will be guaranteed to happen. And when a person feels the wind's breeze at the right time, when a child is born on just the right day, or when a phone call reaches someone in just the right place, the smallest, most insignificant of factors can create something great.

Thus, the stars had finally aligned for Aisaka Rikurou, who stood in the doorway of his home's entrance. The man was in his 50s, streaks of grey hair stretching across his head of brunette hair and lining his short and bushy beard. Deep wrinkles sat beneath the bags of his eyes as the life of one that had fallen from grace aged him greatly. It was eight in the morning and he was caught in his pajamas; a plain, dull blue T-shirt with a little oil stain on his chest, and some baggy, checkered pants made of a thick and scratchy fabric.

Standing before him in the cold winter morning was his daughter, Takasu Taiga, now in her early 20s, who had taken the name of her husband. Grains of snow littered her long, brunette hair and topped the pink scarf around her neck. It was February, a snowy month for Niigata. She donned a thick, beige coat, with a beanie on her head, to protect herself from the cold. Her coat remained unbuttoned, revealing the maroon winter dress behind it. Bursting from the curtains of her coat was a large bump under her dress, larger than an overgrown watermelon. Taiga was heavily pregnant.

Surrounding Taiga's waist were the heads of three little girls. One of them clinged to her right arm timidly. Another held her left hand securely, and the last one peeked over the shoulder of the second, with a stick in hand. Their faces were obscured by their large scarves wrapped around their faces and their oversized beanies drooping down the back of their heads, their big, glittering eyes peering through the gap between their accessories.

It had only been a little over two years since Rikurou had met Taiga's daughters in person, that moment being the day they were born. They weren't even fully three years old yet, but they already seemed so tall. They were over half their mother's height, estimated to be around 100cm.

"Hey," Taiga greeted him.

"Oh, you're here."

Rikurou gave an awkward, befuddled stare with his bug eyes to an otherwise mildly irritated Taiga. A lump had formed inside his throat. This was the first time they'd seen each other in person for months now. His granddaughters simply looked at him idly, with child-like curiosity. A strange silence lingered for a moment.

Taiga finally breaks the silence when she releases a heavy sigh, blowing a cloud of misty breath from her mouth. She shivered a little. The sight of Taiga feeling the winter cold broke Rikurou's trance.

"O-oh! Right! Come in, come in!" Rikurou said, trembling to the side of the doorway, making way for Taiga and her daughters. How careless of him to let a pregnant woman and three little girls stand in the cold for so long.

Rikurou lived in a modern, single story detached house. Upon entering through the front door, the girls would find themselves in the living room. Its walls were painted a dull white. Despite being a modern home, the paint was rather old. Rikurou couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten it repainted.

"Hey, TV!" One of the little girls exclaimed excitedly, pointing at the flatscreen TV mounted on the wall with the stick in her hand. The little girls stood in front of the screen, enamoured by just the thought of the TV being part of the house, rather than being separate and sitting on a stand like at home.

Taiga immediately helped herself to Rikurou's grey sofa, letting herself sink into the cushions while she rubbed her sore feet against his old, feathery carpet, covered in an abstract black and white pattern. She let out a big sigh, finally able to relax after walking around with a heavy baby inside her. It was a ten-minute walk from the station to Rikurou's home, but for Taiga, it felt like an hour.

Rikurou pushed aside Taiga's luggage while averting his eyes from Taiga's gaze. However, no matter how much he tried to shrink himself, he could never seem to leave his daughter's sight. He could feel the big, brown eyes he had passed down to his daughter glaring into the back of his head.

"So, dad... Uh... How've you been?"

"I'm... alright."

Silence immediately flooded the room. Rikurou's hand rested on Taiga's luggage. Taiga's daughters were busy poking at the TV screen, trying to find a way to turn it on.

"Okay... I guess, for me, things could be better. Uh... Ryuuji's still in the hospital, and it's pretty hard for him to move around, so I'm usually alone at home most of the time. I

think I'm more used to moving around like this compared to when I was carrying the girls, but... Sometimes, I get into tough situations that I'd have to figure out on my own..."

"Oh... Th-that doesn't sound very good," Rikurou's chin scrunched up while his lips were quivering.

"Yeah, it's the worst. At home, I—..."

Taiga's words stopped when she noticed Rikurou walk into his kitchen without a word, nonchalantly opening and closing the cupboards above his head.

"C-could I get you some tea? Chamomile, maybe?" Her father shouted.

"The doctor told me to avoid that kind of tea!" She shouted back.

"Really? Right, I should've known!"

Rikurou planted his fist against his forehead. Taiga could see him taking a deep sigh from where she sat.

"I think water should be fine!" She shouted again.

Rikurou emerged from the kitchen with a tray containing a jug of water and some glass cups. His arms were still and his legs were unnaturally brisk, as if he were actively forcing his legs to move forward. His eyes were plastered open, and a drop of sweat was running down the side of his cheek.

He set the tray onto the coffee table and poured Taiga a glass of water, before pouring one for himself. He quickly took a sip from his cup and turned his head away, while Taiga's cup was sitting in front of her.

Taiga, still exhausted from her walk, sluggishly shuffled forward, lifting her back from the cushions. She stretched her arm towards the cup, but with the baby sitting between her legs, it remained just out of reach. Rikurou glanced back and noticed Taiga's struggle.

"Ah, sorry," Rikurou mumbled as he trudged towards the cup.

"No, I got it," Taiga said. The tips of her fingers just barely touched it.

"I'll help, don't worry," her father frantically snatched the cup into his hands.

"I told you, I got it."

"It's okay, I'll pass it to—"

"Just sit back, and—"

"Uwah!"

Rikurou suddenly stopped with the cup in his hands. His shoulders tensed up. The motion of his frantic movements had caused the water in the cup to tremble and spill onto Taiga's dress. Taiga raised her arms, seeing the huge wet spot spread across her dress and feeling the coldness of the water soak into her skin.

She sighed and gently took the cup out of her father's hands.

"It's fine. Hopefully it dries up before I go outside, otherwise my belly's going to be really cold..." she said as she gently rubbed the wet spot with one hand.

Rikurou silently backed away, his mouth reflexively sealed shut. He promptly picked up his own cup and continued sipping, avoiding his daughter's gaze once more. His eyes gravitated towards Taiga's daughters, who were standing in a row by a window, looking at the snow falling outside.

Taiga, having to break the silence again, awkwardly chuckled while she swirled her cup around by its rim, making a little whirl in the water.

"You know, on my way here, I had to yell at an older guy who was sitting in the priority seat. The man looked to be in his forties or fifties, and he was clearly able to stand on his own. When I asked him if I could take the seat, he said, 'maybe having to stand is what you get for being such an irresponsible teen.' The man mistook me for a high schooler. Can you believe that? The nerve of some people. At least being pregnant hasn't stopped me from dishing out beatings."

"Oh, that's um... that's terrible. I'm... not sure what I can do about that," Rikurou mumbled, caressing his finger around the rim of his glass cup.

Taiga's plastered smile began to fall.

"You don't need to do anything. I just... thought it would be funny to share."

"Is that so?"

Frustration brewed inside Taiga after being met by such short and dull responses from her father. At that point, she couldn't even tell if he was listening to a word she was saying. She squinted and noticed how tense her father was. His body was stiff and rigid, like that of a highly detailed wooden statue.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Taiga raised an eyebrow.

Finally, Rikurou turned to face his daughter, still wearing that awkward and anxious look on his face. He held his cup tightly with both his hands while he used his facial muscles to pull his mouth up, forming a shaky grin.

"O-of course I am! Why do you ask?"

"Come on, Dad. It's written all over your face. What's wrong?"

"I don't know what you mean!" His voice was upbeat, but his words were rushed.

"It's okay to talk to me, you know. I don't bite... Well, sometimes I do, but not now."

Rikurou's shoddily-put-together smile fell apart. He silently turned away again.

"Dad..."

“You don’t have to force yourself to talk to me, Taiga.”

Rikurou’s voice was eerily clear. Startled by her father’s sudden composure, Taiga lost the ability to speak. Not a sound could come from her mouth, so she just sat and listened.

“I’m alright, really. I don’t need your company, or your pity.”

He sighed.

“I am fine just where I am.”

Silence overcame them again. Taiga’s lips moved and shifted, trying to find the right words to say to her father. But she eventually ceased. Her search was fruitless. Unable to continue, she huffed and turned to her daughters instead.

“You’ll be staying here until Saturday, is that okay?” She asked them gently.

“Okay!” The three girls answered in unison.

They each removed their winter accessories and tossed them on the carpet, freeing their brunette hair from their oversized beanies, the only part of their appearance that differentiated them. Their faces were identical, with puffy chipmunk-like cheeks and sharing their mother’s big, doll-like eyes. Ryuuji’s genes had done no work at all, it seemed.

The timid girl from earlier, Mitsuko, sat herself down in a beanbag near the TV, making herself comfortable. Her hair was short and curly, almost looking like a yellow onion that stopped peeling midway through. Then there was Haruko, who was arranging all their discarded winter wear into a neat little pile. Her wavy hair reached below her nape. Finally, there was Katsuko, who had just found the TV remote, struggling to decipher what the little symbols on the buttons mean while she held her stick in her other hand. Her hair was all over the place, like that of a hedgehog. Shortly, she tossed the remote aside and continued playing with her stick, dragging it around the carpet.

It took a moment for Rikurou to realise what he had said, but the conversation was quickly getting off track, so he tried to open his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Taiga, I—”

“Oh, the girls are already making themselves at home.”

The voice of a mature woman interrupted him. The woman, in her early thirties, strutted into the living room from the corridor leading to the bedrooms. Her ash brown hair was long and wavy, reaching just above her elbows, and her skin was smooth and bright. Her hourglass figure and slim limbs were that of a doll. Despite being in her homewear, it was obvious she was quite the distinguished woman. This woman was formerly known as Aisaka Yuu. However, the “Aisaka” name was no longer attached to her.

“Oh, Yuu...”

Rikurou felt his tense shoulders loosen. Whatever he was thinking before didn't matter anymore. Since he was no longer alone with his daughter, he hoped to bring less attention to himself. Their conversation had long passed.

"Hey, Taiga," Yuu greeted Taiga casually.

"Oh, hey."

The mold had shattered to pieces. Rikurou found himself tensing up again at the sight of the two women, who had the most hostile arguments he had ever seen in his life, speaking to each other like they were good friends. Even though Taiga had been courting Yuu for quite a while, he could never get used to seeing them that way.

"You look exhausted," Yuu said, leaning against the side of the sofa's backrest.

"Yeah. No kidding," Taiga groaned sarcastically.

"So..." Taiga sighed, "you two will be fine taking care of the girls?"

"I'll be fine. I can't say the same for him though."

"You really didn't have anyone else to turn to?" Rikurou asked.

"We really didn't," Taiga said. Katsuko approached her mother with her stick in hand, standing by her legs and pointing her stick at her round belly.

"Everyone else was just so busy—" Katsuko jabs her stick into Taiga's belly, "Yasuko was— overseas with her parents— My parents were— out of town— Stop that!"

Taiga yelled at Katsuko and snatched her stick away.

"Hey!" Katsuko whined.

"Uugh!"

Taiga groaned as she felt a strong push towards the top of her belly from inside.

"Look what you did! You woke your brother up!" Taiga scolded Katsuko while rubbing the top of her belly, attempting to soothe the discomfort. She turned to Yuu.

"You see what I have to deal with here?"

Yuu chuckled. "Yeah, I see it."

Yuu swiped Katsuko into her arms and spoke in a friendly voice.

"You really love to play, don't you?"

Katsuko didn't respond and, instead, started grabbing at Yuu's squishy face, pinching her cheeks and stretching her mouth with her little fingers.

"Haha... You're a cheeky one. Go play with your sisters. The adults are busy now," Yuu said while she lowered Katsuko to the floor and lightly shoved her in the direction of her sisters. The toddler promptly ran off.

“My goodness, they’re big. I don’t remember Taiga being that big at their age,” Rikurou murmured to himself with his eyes on Taiga’s daughters. The girls weren’t even three years old, yet they were almost half their mother’s height already.

“They were already big before they were born, remember? It was one of the reasons the delivery was so tough,” Yuu recalled. She turned to Taiga.

“You think the next delivery will be easier?”

“Definitely. Unlike his sisters, this baby is actually normal-sized,” Taiga answered.

Yuu saw Mitsuko and Haruko sharing a beanbag. She moseyed over to the girls with a soft grin on her face, then knelt down to their level.

“Are you going to miss your mom?” She asked.

Haruko gave a little nod. Mitsuko raised her arm and pointed to Yuu.

”You’re pretty,” she blabbed. Yuu’s heart melted.

“Oh, you!” She exclaimed as she started rubbing the girls’ heads.

Seeing Yuu already so friendly with his granddaughters, Rikurou couldn’t help but wince. It was like there was a weight chained to his ankle, keeping him from going over and speaking to the toddlers. Maybe it was the shame he felt from what he said to Taiga, or the embarrassing lack of self awareness he’d display if he just ignored his daughter, but he couldn’t bring himself to do anything but sulk.

After a good rest on the sofa, Taiga stood up beside her father.

“Well, I’m off. Don’t get into any trouble, alright?” She said while adjusting her coat.

“We won’t,” Rikurou muttered. His mouth was shut tight after speaking.

Taiga gave her father a reassuring grin with smiling eyes. For a moment, it seemed as though she were waiting for him to say something, but she frantically turned her face away and walked towards the front door. Before her face could leave his sight, Rikurou noticed the shift from Taiga’s smile to a frown. He could sense some pain and disappointment from Taiga. *Was she waiting for me to say something?*

“Everything you need is in the luggage. Toys, clothes, lotion...”

Taiga said, wrapping her scarf around her neck. She turned to her father one more time. He stared blankly back. Something was tugging at her, away from the front door. She bit her lip. She didn’t seem ready to leave, but she was already feeling dejected after hearing what Rikurou had to say. She could tell from the look on her father’s face that he was not going to utter another word.

But, at the very least, she wanted to see *something* from her father.

“Oh, and one more thing.”

Taiga looked Rikurou dead in the eye.

“If anything happens to them, you’re dead.”

She said with furrowed eyebrows as her glare of death instantly pierced right through him. Rikurou felt a chill quickly run down his spine, causing him to briefly shiver while Taiga strutted to the front door, huffing brattily and composing herself.

“Bye, mom!”

The sisters called out, standing in the doorway and waving their little arms in the air while Rikurou and Yuu stood over them. Taiga waved back at them while walking into the falling snow, pulling on her scarf to reveal her little smile to them. Once she faced forward, she hugged herself as she shivered.

“Byeee mooom!” The sisters continued calling out and waving to their mother. She was still in sight, but she was too far to hear them. Rikurou looked ahead as the distance made Taiga’s figure grow smaller and smaller. He turned to his granddaughters, staring at them blankly. The only words he could speak remained in his mind.

I pushed her away again... How could I let things end up this way?

“Aisaka!”

“Oi, Aisaka!”

“Aisaka, we need you!”

Rikurou marched down a corridor of his company’s office building with his eyes locked straight ahead and his eyebrows stretched forward. Amongst the cacophony of ringing phones, arguing coworkers and panicking employees running past him, dropping their documents all over the floor, he maintained his face of determination, moving past the people calling his name. His assistant scurried behind him hugging a stack of documents to her chest, neither of the lenses of her glasses aligning with her eyes.

“Sir, we have another problem!” She said as she held up her phone to Rikurou to show him the screen.

“Not now!” He told her, still looking forward.

“I really think you need to see this!” She pleaded.

“We’ll worry about it later!”

Rikurou reached the end of the corridor, bursting through the double doors in front of him. Rikurou and his assistant found themselves in his office, an open carpeted room as large

as a high school classroom, lined with glass panes displaying a view of the city from high in the sky. In the very center was his desk, with stacks upon stacks of papers on top of it. The doors shut behind them, drowning out the chaos.

“Sir... What are we going to do?” Rikurou’s assistant asked desperately.

Rikurou turned around with his head held high and his posture straightened.

“I will do everything in my power to keep this company afloat! Mark my words, there is no way this company will ever fall through!”

A week passed since the company fell into chaos. Rikurou sat under the orange light of his desk lamp, resting his elbows on the study desk in his pitch black bedroom. Eye-bags had formed, his hair was ruffled and sweat was condensing around his head. He was still in his work attire, with his collar button undone, the top of his neck tie drooping down and his shirt littered with creases. In front of him was a single letter. His half-open, dispirited eyes were locked onto just one phrase.

“Filed for bankruptcy”.

Rikurou stepped out of the shadows of his room and found Yuu standing in his face. The light in his eyes had left him. It was as if he had just witnessed a horrendous car crash with no survivors.

“Hey! What the hell happened!?” Yuu pressed him. He could only look at his wife’s deeply irritated face and sigh.

“Yuu... I give up.”

Yuu’s face immediately changed to a look of concern.

Rikurou sat at the dinner table with a tall bottle of whiskey next to him and a half-full shot glass in hand. Yuu sat opposite of him with a lit cigarette between her fingers, the ash tray in front of her already containing two extinguished cigarettes. She blew out a puff of smoke while Rikurou was resting his elbow on the table, using said arm to pinch his eyes.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do... It’s all my fault... What is wrong with me?” Rikurou groaned sorrowfully.

Yuu huffed her cigarette and blew out another cloud of smoke before speaking.

“Hey, you told me not to divorce because it would be inconvenient for the company. What am I supposed to do now?—”

“It doesn’t matter. There is no company,” Rikurou said sternly.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment.

“Shit... Taiga. She can't stay in that apartment anymore and I can't pay for any of her expenses... Even if she moved back here, I wouldn't be able to pay for her school fees... You wouldn't mind if she came back here, right?”

“I don't care. I probably won't be here by then.”

“Right... She'd be the one that would refuse to stay with you anyway... Not that she'd accept me, either... Whatever, it's for the best. This house reeks of tobacco.”

Yuu glared at Rikurou before taking another huff of her cigarette.

“I need to get everything back in order quickly... I'll have to sell off my designer clothes... You wouldn't mind if we—”

“Don't touch my Louis Vuitton,” Yuu uttered firmly.

“Sure, whatever.”

“Huh!? Your salary is that big?”

Rikurou and Yuu stood outside the front of their house. Yuu had a lit cigarette in one hand and a cup in the other. Rikurou was still in his postman uniform with his bicycle leaning on his waist. His eyes widened at the sight of the cheque in his hands, signed for a hefty amount of money.

“What? Never seen a woman stand on her two feet before?” Yuu said scornfully.

“While you were out making chump change delivering letters, I found a job that paid enough for me to buy my own designer,” Yuu boasted as she blew a puff of smoke into Rikurou's face and put out her cigarette inside her ceramic cup. Rikurou, unfazed by the cloud of smoke, couldn't get his eyes off the slip of paper in his hands.

“Huh... So, you're the one with the higher income...” Rikurou affirmed in disbelief.

Yuu snatched back the cheque and turned into the house.

“There's a cleaning crew and painters coming in tomorrow afternoon. I need to get the stench of tobacco out of the house or it'll rub off on me. It's not a good look for a distinguished woman like me,” she said as she fiddled with the cheque between her fingers. Rikurou stood in place and continued to stare at the air in disbelief. Perhaps the work of a postman just wasn't fulfilling enough.

“Take a look, Yuu!” Rikurou called with an enthusiastic grin. At least a month had passed since the reveal of Yuu's salary. He was in his room, sitting in front of his computer. Rikurou sat to the side of his chair while Yuu leaned down to look at his screen. She saw

some sort of strange graph going upward, filled with numbers and values that Yuu could barely discern. To her, it was like reading hieroglyphs.

“What am I looking at?” Yuu asked as she squinted her eyes.

“It’s called cryptocurrency, Yuu! It’s an investment for the future! I’ve invested some of my savings into it. Today, it’s worth a dollar. But in a few years, I could be a millionaire!” The man exclaimed.

“... Uhuh,” Yuu nodded, not understanding a single thing Rikurou said.

Rikurou had found it; the one thing he needed to return to his former glory. He arrogantly imagined pulling into his driveway with a brand new sports car with all the money he’d earn from his get-rich-quick scheme. Not to mention, finding another young woman for a wife. With Yuu already supporting herself, there was no reason for their marriage to continue. Indeed, the future was looking bright for Aisaka Rikurou.

The afternoon sun was held back by the thick curtains drawn in Rikurou’s room. He sat at his computer slouched down, his pensive face pointing at his keyboard in sorrow. The light of the computer screen cast onto his hair. On the screen was a graph, the line coloured red as it went all the way down. Yuu leaned against the side of the bedroom doorway with her arms crossed, casting a shadow with light coming from behind her. Her face was blank, but she was filled with unsurprising vindication.

“They... They sold everything... The rug got pulled...” Rikurou bemoaned.

“That’s the fourth time this has happened,” Yuu informed him.

Rikurou huffed deeply.

“It’ll be the last... I’m done,” he said with resignation.

“You know, if I weren’t here, I think you’d just be a pile of bones by now.”

Rikurou tilted his head only slightly in Yuu’s direction.

“Why *are* you here? Didn’t you want a divorce?” he asked with listlessness. Yuu averted her gaze, pondering the question.

“I still do,” she said, “But there just weren’t any men in the area that were like you... before you became like this, I mean.”

“Right...”

“Well, I can support myself now, so it doesn’t matter. I’m only staying because I don’t want to leave you here to die.”

“But... I don’t have the money to take care of you anymore. Why would you even bother with someone like me?”

“Let’s just say...”

Yuu approached Rikurou at the computer. She rested her hand on Rikurou's shoulder.

"I wouldn't be where I am without the money you've spent on me."

Rikurou finally turned his head to face his soon-to-be ex-wife.

"All the care you've given to me wasn't for nothing. After I married you, I was living in a better house and I had more work opportunities in front of me. I really didn't have much before that. My parents were getting sick of me because the only things I knew were drinking and smoking. That's how we met, remember?"

"Yeah... It was after a Christmas party. You were the sexy bartender serving me."

"Remember what you said while I was getting a smoke?"

"That I was going to spoil you like a princess."

"And it felt good to be spoiled for once."

Yuu stared off into the wall in front of her.

"But it's time to wake up, Rikurou. Those days of sex, wealth and parties are over."

She focused on her husband's sullen face once more.

"Getting this job and learning to support myself was what did it for me, and I wouldn't have been able to if I hadn't married you, so I thought I'd return the favour and give you the chance to pick yourself up, too."

She leaned closer to her husband.

"But don't take too long. I don't want to get held down by you for the rest of my life. I'm going to leave eventually, so you better do it before then," she said firmly.

Rikurou turned his face back to the keyboard.

"Alright. I heard you." His voice was muffled, but Yuu understood him well enough. From that point onward, Yuu would be the one that would be taking care of him.

Rikurou cycled home after a cold, spring morning of delivering letters around the neighbourhood. After securing his bike to the rack near his front door, he stepped through the entrance to his home.

"Ah!" Rikurou flinched at the sight of who was in his living room. The short stature, long brunette hair, brown eyes and slim body made it abundantly clear. His daughter, who he had not seen in more than a year, was sitting at his coffee table.

“T... Taiga...” Rikurou’s voice trembled and his lips shivered as his feet slowly staggered forward. Taiga simply looked at him with a glare. She waited for him to process what he was seeing before opening her mouth.

“It’s been a while, Dad,” Taiga spoke, her voice composed and stern.

“What... What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be with...”

“I came to check on you. I guess it’s good to see you aren’t... dead,” Taiga said while scanning her biological father from head to toe.

“How...”

“Yuu let me in. She left for work right after I arrived.”

“But... She only starts work in two hours...”

“Is that so?”

They watched each other in silence for a moment. Then, realising what he had just insinuated, Rikurou quickly straightened his posture and attempted to relax his tone of voice.

“S-so, Taiga, can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?” He asked with his hands clasped.

“No, I’m fine,” Taiga answered bluntly. A drop of sweat ran down her father’s head.

“Are you going to sit down?” Taiga asked impatiently.

“O-oh! Right,” Rikurou mumbled as he quickly shuffled to the end of the coffee table opposite of Taiga.

“So, Taiga, uh... How’ve you been?” Rikurou let the words leave his mouth and quickly realised how ridiculous of a question it was, as the last time he had seen Taiga in person was right before he ditched her on the day of her high school cultural festival in her 2nd year. *Terrible. She has been terrible.* That was what he was thinking. He had already answered his own question. His mouth sealed shut.

“I’ve been fine. I actually moved in with Ryuuji after I graduated,” Taiga said. Her eyes occasionally drifted away from her father’s gaze.

“Ah, right! Graduation! Congratulations on that! ... Eh, how old are you?” Rikurou asked awkwardly. Taiga tilted her head. It seemed her father’s mind still hadn’t been swept out of the gutter.

“I turn 20 later this year,” she answered sarcastically.

“Yes, of course, of course...” Rikurou blabbered. So much had happened in the year he was away from Taiga that he had lost track of time. All the stress he had experienced over just one year had tampered with his memory. It’s not like Taiga had changed much in that time either. They were then met with another round of uncomfortable silence.

“So, uh... How’re you holding up? Have you gotten into college?”

“Actually, I’m working now. I just got a job in IT.”

“IT! I see. I hear those jobs pay well.”

“They do.”

The air quickly grew still. The father and daughter had run out of words to say to each other. Rikurou tilted his head down at the coffee table while twiddling with his fingers. He could only assume that Taiga was there to discuss one thing. He strained his jaw muscles to mouth the words.

“L-listen, Taiga about what happened back then—”

“Forget about it,” Taiga interjected, causing Rikurou to recoil.

“B... but—”

“I said forget about it.”

Rikurou held his tongue. His daughter promptly let out a sigh.

“I already have my whole life ahead of me. I can’t spend it getting bogged down about what happened in the past,” she said as she rested her elbow on the table.

“Besides, it already looks like you’ve been through a lot. It wouldn’t be reasonable to ask anything more of you. So I won’t.”

“I’m sorry, Taiga,” Rikurou muttered. His voice grew timid. Hearing his apology and seeing the pity in his eyes, Taiga furrowed her brows in disappointment. There was a deep irritation formed by the helplessness in her father’s voice. She turned her head away.

“I want to believe what happened back then wasn’t your fault, but regardless, the outcome and my feelings are all the same.”

Her pain slowly began to reveal itself with her scrunched up chin, but she immediately flattened out any wrinkles in her face, maintaining her composure before she opened her mouth.

“If you can’t be there for me, then don’t. Don’t leave me waiting for you to do so. But if you think you can, then just show me. That’s all I really want.”

Rikurou sat in silence and let his daughter’s speech repeat itself in his head. Taiga finally stood up and began walking to the front door.

“That’s all I have to say. Good luck with whatever you have going on here,” she said as she put on her shoes. Until the moment she left through the door, Rikurou’s legs never moved, making no effort to continue speaking to his daughter. He simply watched her leave as if she were a ghostly apparition leaving his home. He wasn’t even sure if Taiga even meant anything she said, nor did he know what to make of it. It would be another long period of silence between them before they ever saw each other again.

“H-hey, Taiga.”

Standing in his bedroom, Rikurou had his cell phone held to his ear, connected to Taiga’s phone on the other end. Before this phone call, there were only two more instances of Rikurou and Taiga being in the same room. Given the distance, visits from her were bound to be rare. The chances of visits happening were reduced further with how awkward it was between them.

“Uh... What’re you calling for?” Rikurou asked.

“I... I need a favour. Are there any days you’ll be free?” Taiga’s voice emanated from the phone.

“A... favour?” Rikurou felt his words disappear into the air at the thought of taking a task from his daughter. He remained silent as he sunk deep into thought. *I need to turn her down. Maybe if I turn her away enough times, she’ll forget about me completely. I think that’s what I need, I think...*

“... Dad?” Taiga’s voice breaks him from his trance-like state.

“Y-y-yeah! I... I’m always free!” Rikurou blurted out nervously.

“Okay, great, I’ll... I’ll message you,” Taiga stammered apprehensively.

“Huh!?” Before he knew it, his fate was sealed.

“T-Taiga, wait—” Rikurou tried to interject but Taiga ended the call before any of the words could reach her. He could only stare at his phone screen, contemplating what he had just gotten himself into.

“RAAAH!!!” Katsuko roared as she lifted one of the bean bag chairs in the living room, which was three times her size, above her head.

“Iyaaah!!!” Mitsuko and Haruko let out high-pitched screams and laughs as they fled from Katsuko together, who was chasing them around. During the high-speed chase, the two little girls went opposite directions. Haruko tried to climb the sofa, but was struck in the back by the beanbag Katsuko had thrown.

“Uwah! Hahaha!” Haruko giggled as she picked up the beanbag and began chasing Katsuko with it. The two of them ran around the coffee table. Katsuko and Mitsuko grouped up and were now being chased by Haruko.

Rikurou stood to the side and watched as the little heads ran past him. He held his hands up like a Tyrannosaurus, preparing to reach out as he nervously tried to keep the girls under control.

“Haruko, Mitsuko, Katsuko, this is no place to play! I-it’s dangerous!” He tried to raise his voice, but not enough to be considered shouting. The girls couldn’t hear him with his throat on a leash as their powerful screaming and laughter overpowered his voice. It had been decades since he’d taken care of a toddler, let alone three.

“C-come on, girls, let’s calm down for a moment!” Rikurou gently tried to get the oblivious girls’ attention. He had to stop them from playing so roughly, lest they get hurt by the obstacles in the cluttered living room. His efforts were fruitless as they zipped past him again and again. The girls continued to play carelessly and ignore their grandfather’s words until the inevitable would happen.

Thunk.

Mitsuko knocked her head against a chair sitting under the dining table, causing her head to rock back and forth and make her fall on her butt.

“Aaah!” Rikurou shrieked at the sight of Mitsuko’s collision. Mitsuko held her head with her little hands as the pain began to set in. Her eyes began to turn watery, her mouth became downturned and her nose scrunched up.

“Mmn... Mnn...” Her whines started up as her face began to turn light red.

Rikurou quickly knelt down to Mitsuko.

“I-it’s okay, Mitsuko... D-don’t cry...” His hands trembled as he tried to comfort Mitsuko, but to no avail.

“Waaaaaah!” Mitsuko burst into tears, her wails echoing off the walls and becoming gradually louder.

“Uh... Uh...” Rikurou simply stood there, his mind racing, trying to figure out how to calm her down, but he was paralysed like a tree. Haruko and Katsuko stood beside him idly, watching their sister sob.

“Okay!” Yuu strutted in and swooped the sobbing Mitsuko into her arms.

“Does it hurt here, Mitsuko?” She asked as she pointed to Mitsuko’s forehead and gently caressed it in a circular motion. Mitsuko nodded vigorously.

“Then it’s not a problem, Mitsuko,” Yuu said reassuringly. She leaned her face in.

Chu. She planted a little kiss on Mitsuko’s forehead.

“All better?” She asked. Mitsuko sniffed and nodded again.

“Great!” Yuu exclaimed as she set Mitsuko down onto the floor. She kneeled down to the little girls standing before her.

“It’s very dangerous to play here, so don’t run around anymore, alright?” She spoke to them gently.

“Alright!” The three girls spoke in unison.

Haruko walked briskly towards the carpet.

“Haruko, you’re running!” Katsuko yelled mockingly at her sister, who she had noticed was ahead of her.

“No I’m not!” Haruko stopped and yelled back.

“You are! Look!” Katsuko yelled again, now pointing at Haruko’s tiny feet.

“I’m not!” Haruko yelled back defensively.

“S-stop yelling!” Mitsuko interjected.

“Tch... Haha...” Yuu chuckled at the sight of Haruko and Katsuko getting up in arms.

“You... You calmed Mitsuko down instantly... How?” Rikurou asked in awe.

“Oh, Taiga taught me that. She told me a kiss from someone cute calms them down. It worked with one of her friends, that’s how she found that out,” Yuu boasted obliviously.

“What were you doing? You act like you’ve never handled a child before.”

Rikurou sighed.

“My ex-wife usually handled these situations... To be honest, I don’t think I remember anything about taking care of children. I don’t know what I was thinking when I decided to take these girls in. I should’ve just told Taiga I wasn’t free,” he sulked.

“Hey, lighten up. The girls just got here. You’ll be fine,” Yuu said as she patted Rikurou on the back.

The Takasu sisters sat silently at the coffee table. With their play restricted, they struggled to figure out what they could do for fun. On one side of the table, Haruko rested her head and faced her back to the TV, patting the laminated wood with her little hands. Behind her, Mitsuko fondled her wavy hair. On the other side of the table, Katsuko was fiddling with the buttons on the TV remote. The TV wasn’t on, so it didn’t do anything. They all had blank, bored faces.

Rikurou stood over them.

“Don’t you want to watch some TV?” He asked, seeing their lack of enthusiasm.

“Not time,” Katsuko blabbed. The girls were still toddlers, so they struggled to properly sound out their words, but it was just enough for adults to make out.

“Not... time?” Rikurou asked.

“Our show,” Mitsuko answered.

Haruko slowly lifted her arm and pointed at Rikurou’s face.

“Why do you have that?” She asked bluntly.

“Hm? Have what?” Rikurou asked.

“A beard,” Haruko said as she stroked her little chin.

“Haruko!” Mitsuko whined and pouted while lightly shaking Haruko, but Haruko’s eyes stayed on their grandfather.

“What’s wrong with my beard?”

“It’s ugly,” Katsuko added.

“Pff–” Yuu, sitting at the dinner table with her laptop in front of her, chortled.

Rikurou, with a nerve struck, flusteredly defended himself.

“My beard isn’t ugly!”

“But... Mom said. Beards are ugly,” Haruko politely informed her grandfather.

“O-okay, if I’m ugly, then what is Yuu?” Rikurou said as he pointed at her.

Immediately, in unison, the girls cheered.

“Yuu is pretty!”

“BAHAHA!” Yuu burst into uncontrollable laughter as Rikurou stood there with his heart in pieces.

“Ah,” Katsuko suddenly exclaimed. She got out from under the table. Her tiny feet made a little pitter patter sound as she ran to her grandfather and tugged at his shirt.

“Playground” was the only word she uttered.

“You want to go to the playground?”

“Yeah! Playground!” Mitsuko and Haruko cheered.

Oh, right, the playground. They must’ve passed it by on the way here.

“That’s a good idea. It’d be a lot safer than playing here,” Yuu added.

Rikurou put his hands on his hips and huffed.

“Let’s get changed, then.”

The family, with the addition of Yuu, strolled along the pavement underneath the grey skies of winter, feeling the specks of snow fall against their faces. Katsuko held out a new stick she had found and dragged it against the concrete.

Finally, a long, yellow tube slide came into view. The girls’ eyes lit up and their pace sped up, the sound of tip-tapping becoming faster and faster. They squealed excitedly at the sight of such a massive playground. Katsuko was excited enough to leave her stick behind in the grass. Rikurou and Yuu jogged after them.

The playground was equipped with high platforms for children to climb and slide down, a teeter totter with little patches of snow on the seats, swings with chains that are cold to touch, and so much more, enough for a child to get lost in. The place had plenty of space to run around, almost as large as a public pool. It was built to let many children play at a time. However, today, it was just the girls that would play here.

Yuu smiled as she watched the little toddlers squeal happily while they went around and enjoyed themselves with the playground equipment. Rikurou, who was sweating profusely from handling the girls earlier, slowly felt his shoulders relax as the girls immersed themselves in their little games.

Rikurou went to sit down on a bench at the side, letting out a little sigh as his back rested on the cold wood. Perhaps, with some rest, he'd forget the mishaps he had with the girls and simply relax while he'd watch them. However, his rest would be cut short when Katsuko suddenly scurried up to him with her little feet.

"Un..." She whined as she pulled on Rikurou's arm sleeves.

"Huh? You want something already?" Rikurou asked with his back still against the bench. Katsuko continued to tug at his sleeves, whining more irritably.

"Alright, alright, what is it?" Rikurou groaned as he slowly lifted his old body from the cold bench. Katsuko looked up at his face, then turned down to his feet. Like a little pomeranian, she energetically ran behind him.

"Huh?" Rikurou turned his upper body as Katsuko had escaped his view, only hearing the tapping of her feet against the rubber ground. Then he heard her climb the bench and plant her feet on its wooden material.

"Uwah!" Rikurou shrieked as Katsuko pounced onto his back, wrapping her legs underneath his arms and holding onto his wide shoulders.

"So this is what you wanted? A piggyback ride?" He asked while he tried turning to get a look at Katsuko, now latched onto him like a koala.

"Woah!" He huffed as Katsuko continued to climb his body. She was now sitting on his nape, her legs hanging over his shoulders and her hands on the sides of his head.

"Uwaaaah!" Katsuko spread her arms out and roared in amazement. Rikurou was quite short, so she wasn't very high in the air but to her, it was like conquering a dragon, that dragon being a man in his fifties experiencing a midlife crisis. Hearing Katsuko's battle cry, Haruko and Mitsuko immediately stopped what they were doing and ran to their grandfather with their eyes widened.

"Me too!" Haruko shouted.

“H-hey, wait! Aah!” Rikurou shrieked as Haruko began climbing him as well. She lunged onto him, clinging to his shirt. Following in the way of the spider, she climbed all over his body. She was underneath his arms, going across his chest, clasping at his shoulder. She and her sister had enough energy to power a city.

“Hey! You’re going to tear my shirt! Uh...” He feels another toddler tugging at the bottom of his shirt and looks to the side of his waist to find Mitsuko, whose toes were still on the ground. Her arms and body were stretched out, as if attempting to climb like her sisters.

“Nn...” She whined as she tried to lift herself off the ground.

“Wah!” She gasped as Yuu swipes her up into the air.

“Up you go! Haha...” Yuu laughed as she let Mitsuko climb up from her arm to her head, now in a similar pose as Katsuko.

“Is this what I am now? The monkey bar man?” Rikurou said with his arms spread out, looking at his body infested by his little granddaughters.

“Relax, Rikurou. They like you!” Yuu said as she bounced her shoulders with Mitsuko on top of her, making her bounce as well. The little girl giggled excitedly as she tried to hold on.

“I look ridiculous... Hey, stop moving!” Rikurou shouted at Katsuko, who was now climbing down from his neck and was clinging to his left arm. Haruko was directly on the other side. The two girls clinging to his arm sleeves made Rikurou look like a perfectly balanced scale. Rikurou’s face began to turn red as the weight of the girls placed strain on his old and flabby arms.

“Okay... Enough... Please get off...” He begged as he held his breath. The girls were oblivious to his pleas and continued giggling as they held onto his arms. However, their joy would quickly take a sharp turn.

“Waah!” Haruko and Katsuko gasped in unison as they felt their bodies suddenly move lower.

Riiiiiiip.

“Unf!” Haruko and Katsuko’s butts hit the ground. In their hands were the torn off fibers of Rikurou’s winter jacket. His entire sleeves had been separated from the torso. They sat in place for a moment, processing what had just happened.

“Wha—... Ag—...” Rikurou choked on his words as he stared at his exposed arms, appalled by the damage done to his apparel. Thankfully, his arms were still being warmed by his long-sleeved sweater, but his body was frozen in place.

“M... My jacket...” He mumbled. Haruko and Katsuko quickly got up and placed the sleeves in each of his hands, then they quickly backed away, each of them fiddling their hands together nervously. They had gone silent.

“I... I was supposed to use that for work,” Rikurou mumbled again. Yuu quickly lowered Mitsuko to the ground, seeing the devastation.

“Haruko, Katsuko, say sorry to Grandpa,” Yuu said firmly.

“Sorry...” The girls shamefully said together.

Rikurou took a good look at the damage.

“Sorry isn’t going to fix this...” He bemoaned. The girls held their heads down.

Yuu nudged the girls towards the equipment nearby.

“Don’t worry about it. Just go play somewhere else,” she told them softly. They quickly scurried away without a word. Rikurou sat back down on the bench with his head low, frowning at his now orphaned sleeves. Yuu sat beside him. She rested her arm on the back of the bench and let out an exhausted sigh.

“I bought this jacket in Tokyo...”

“You bought it for 1500 yen three years ago.”

“Tch. That’s not the point,” Rikurou furrowed his brow.

Yuu sighed again. She stretched out her arms and legs.

“Well, no point in sewing them back on. I already told you the material was bad.”

Rikurou continued to silently gloom at the sleeves in his hands, huffing with sorrow. Yuu leaned forward to get a look at his face.

“Come on, Rikurou, they’re just girls. Let it go,” Yuu said as she tugged at his sleeve.

Silence.

“I can *buy* you a new jacket.”

Rikurou clutched at his sleeves. He lifted his head with a frown still pasted on his face and watched the girls climb all over the playground equipment.

“I’m really not cut out for this...” Rikurou muttered.

Rikurou felt his frown deepen. He then turned to Yuu.

“Do you think we can just place them in a childcare centre for the next few days?”

Yuu gently leaned back and raised an eyebrow at the question.

“All the childcare centres nearby are closed because of this weather.”

“Maybe the ones out of town?”

“That’s way too far... They’ll be fine at home. Isn’t the whole point for us to take care of them? Your work finishes before mine starts, so it’s not like we need to send them anywhere.”

“Maybe you should just take leave since you’re so good with them,” Rikurou scoffed as he slouched and looked at the snowy ground, averting Yuu’s gaze.

Yuu leaned in towards the old man with a wrinkled brow. She raised her voice.

“Rikurou, They’re your granddaughters. You should be spending time with them.”

“I’m sorry, Yuu, but I’ve run out of patience. I just... don’t want anything more to do with these girls,” he said with his groggy voice.

Yuu stretched a frown across her face. The sound of Rikurou’s gloom had irritated her deeply. She raised her voice higher in an attempt to pierce her words into his ears.

“Your daughter came all this way from Tokyo because she trusted you with something so dear to her. She had nobody to help her this entire time and yet, you’re just comfortably resigning before you’ve even stepped up?”

Rikurou wrinkled his frown further. He held his breath, then coughed out the words.

“That was all Taiga’s mistake! She should’ve never called me in the first place! Seriously, it would be better for both of us if she just never spoke to me again.”

A fire began to rise in Yuu’s throat. She opened her mouth, keeping a firm chest.

“Tell me you don’t mean that, Rikurou.”

The man kept his mouth glued shut and pouted. He grasped his torn-off sleeves tightly and steadily lifted himself from the bench, walking in the direction the girls had gone, leaving deep footsteps in the snow.

“Rikurou!” Yuu shouted demandingly as she left the bench to follow him. Rikurou stomped with his arms wrapped around himself. He let out a heavy and forceful sigh.

“Where are the girls? We’re heading home. I’m getting cold out here,” he said sternly.

Yuu’s arms tensed up as she pleaded to him.

“Taiga wants you. Why can’t you see that? She’s already been through so much. *We’ve* already put her through so much.”

Rikurou’s lips moved quickly.

“That’s all the more reason for her to leave me be.”

He sighed, his voice becoming gradually weaker as he looked around blankly at the playground space.

“It was never meant to work. She shouldn’t even be calling me her father...”

Yuu listened to the sound of his sorrow. She softened her voice, but her throat remained steady.

“Stop acting like this, Rikurou.”

Rikurou grunted.

“I don’t want to argue with you anymore...” He kept his head away from Yuu.

“Ugh, where are they?”

Yuu let out a tired sigh before she spoke.

“You can’t just...” Then she stopped in her tracks, her face loosening and her eyes widening when she finally noticed it.

“Wait... Where are the girls?”

The sky grew a darker grey and the clouds had gotten heavier. The shining lights of the town’s buildings glared between the falling flakes of snow. The white powder began to form piles on top of all the heads and umbrellas of the townsfolk walking on the pavement along the bustling streets. The buzzing of car engines and shouting of shopkeepers filled the air between the rows of buildings.

Three sets of little feet made soft taps across the concrete and stopped within a forest of taller legs. They had all arrived at a crossing, the glow of the red man catching the eyes of the three little girls.

“Oh... A road!” Haruko blabbered.

“Hm!” The girls, standing in a row, nodded at one another. Katsuko took Haruko’s left hand, followed by Haruko taking Mitsuko’s. Finally, Mitsuko wrapped her palm around a set of much thicker and longer fingers, dangling beside her head..

“Huh?” A stranger felt something grab his left hand. When he looked down, he saw three little girls standing together, one of them holding onto him without a thought.

“H-... Huuuh!?” The man’s jaw was left ajar, but before he could say anything, the green man flashed on the other side of the road. The crowd began to move, beginning the clattering of shoes against the asphalt.

“Eeeh...” The stranger silently groaned. He held his head low as the girls beside him walked without once looking up at him. He kept his eyes away from the faces of the passersby, but his ears picked up on passing comments.

“Oh, how cute!”

“Look at how little they are!”

“Is that their father?”

The stranger and the girls set their feet back on the concrete of the pavement. He immediately felt the grasp on his left hand leave as the trio of tiny girls giggled while frantically running away. The man was left with nothing but a thought. *Who were they?*

Rikurou stood outside a police station, the building’s bright lights beaming over him and forming dark shadows in the dark winter evening. He frantically looked around him, searching for any passersby.

“They’re two years old. They’re about this high. They always come in a set of three!” Yuu’s shaky voice could be heard from inside the station.

“Excuse me, sir, have you seen these girls?” Rikurou desperately asked a passerby and pointed at a picture on his phone screen. Unfortunately, every person he had asked had left him with a shaking head.

“Gaaah!” Rikurou groaned after the 24th person that shot him down. He bent down and leaned his arms against a brick wall, hitting the side of his fist against it. He panted heavily as he felt his heart begin to race. He had a head drenched in sweat. The dread of losing his granddaughters filled his veins like a venom.

In a moment like this, he couldn’t help but remember how big of an idiot he is.

It was a sunny morning. Rikurou stood outside his front door in his pajamas. His eye bags drooped as if someone had taken a blow dryer and melted his face, and his hair was standing like a bird's-nest fern. Yuu adjusted her work uniform one last time before standing up straight to face the man.

“From today forward, I’ll no longer be living as an Aisaka,” she declared. Rikurou could only silently and gently nod in agreement, maintaining a frown on his face.

“I’ll... be back in the evening,” Yuu spoke hurriedly before turning around and leaving her ex-husband at the door. She’d left for work. And she’d finally left him.

Rikurou looked up to the sky to bask in the sun. The glare of the sunrays penetrated his shut eyes, making his vision bright. His heart was as empty as the white light beaming into his eyes. *I have no career. I have no wife. I have no family.* He spread out his arms, soaking in the sunlight, as if he were hugging the air, as if something was supposed to fill the space but was replaced by the absent air.

I have nothing.

That morning, Rikurou found himself sifting through his freshly received letters. He glanced at Yuu's letters, his family name absent, before setting them aside for her to open herself. A little heap of envelopes formed before he got to the final letter.

Rikurou ran his finger underneath the opening slip, flipping it up. From the envelope, he pulled out a bright yellow piece of cardstock, folded into three parts to perfectly fit into the envelope. Unfolding it would reveal a text, with a header typed in big text and a cursive font.

Takagi Taiga and Takasu Ryuuji's wedding.

An invitation for Aisaka Rikurou and Aisaka Yuu.

Takagi, the family name of his ex-wife's current husband. Taiga was under her mother's care. *It was only logical.* Rikurou scoffed. His face had formed a smile against this will, while his brow was wrinkled. His family name wasn't even on the main part of the invitation to his daughter's wedding.

Beneath all the text was a photo of Rikurou's daughter and his soon-to-be son-in-law, posing together in front of some decor. Taiga was dolled up in a long, light green, frilly dress, with Yasuko's pearls wrapped around her neck. Her lips were covered with a soft pink lipstick. Ryuuji was looking sharp, wearing a suit with a black blazer and red undershirt. His hair was shining, like it had been gelled.

Rikurou saw the wide smiles they had as they held each other's hands in the photo.

It looks like everything is going right for them.

His grip on the invitation tightened, causing his hand to tremble.

Yet they chose to invite someone like me for their happiest day.

His eyes began to twitch.

Was it a mistake? ... No, the ink on this card is dry without a smudge.

He felt his shoulders tense up. His chin wrinkled with the deep frown he made.

Why would they do this? It's like... It's like...

Tears welled up in his eyes.

They're just shoving it in my face.

The tears dropped onto the letter, soaking his cheeks in the process. His body shook with each sob and sniff. His face had turned blood red and his eyes were sealed shut. He slowly shook his head, then placed the folded letter back into its envelope, struggling to fit it back inside with his trembling arms. The letter joined a heap of empty envelopes, which would soon find itself in his garbage.

Rikurou laid in bed, staring up at the dull, white ceiling, the only light coming from the window as the sun continued to shine outside. He rested in the shadows with his

blood-shot eyes wide open and his cheeks still damp. The only person he could talk to at that moment was himself.

Everything that has happened to me was my fault. I knew that when I lost the company. I knew that when I signed the divorce papers. I knew that when I gave Taiga to her mother. Those were all my choices. I willingly let all these people leave me and yet, what is this bitterness in my heart? Why...

His eyelids pulled in like curtains as he began to fall into a slumber, leaving his consciousness with one thought.

Why can't I just let go?

More than a year would pass since then. Rikurou and Yuu, both of them dressed smartly, strutted down the white corridors of a hospital, passing by the overwhelmed doctors and overworked nurses. They'd passed a repair crew working on a ceiling light, and more ceiling lights that weren't functional. They were stepping over little pieces of stray debris. They approached a door labelled "Takasu Taiga", and let themselves in.

Taiga had a little, square private room with a window stretching across the wall opposite of the entrance. Directly across from them was a little table filled with colourful gifts from previous visitors: Taiga's friends and family. Both of them would turn right to find, in the corner of the room, right next to the window, Taiga's bed.

In her position, she'd be able to get a view of the outside just to her right, but her eyes were softly shut, unable to appreciate the scenery. Her mouth and nose were covered by a mask of hard plastic, connected to a ventilator tubing. The only sound in the room came from the machinery that Taiga was hooked up to. Rikurou and Yuu could only stare.

Ryuuji, squeezing her hand by her bedside, turned at the sound of the door opening. Strands of hair were standing on his head. Dark circles formed underneath his blood-shot, sanpaku eyes.

"Y-you actually came!" Ryuuji exclaimed as he quickly stood up.

"Ryuuji... You look terrible," Rikurou uttered.

"Oh, the past few days have been rough, but I'm fine. Do you want to see them?"

Ryuuji gestured left, towards another corner of the room. Three transparent incubators were arranged in a row, each of them holding a sleeping newborn baby, their skin still red. Rikurou and Yuu stood over the machines, looking at the children that Taiga had birthed. Each of them were labelled with their names and birthdays.

Takasu Haruko, 26th August 2011, 3:39 AM

Takasu Mitsuko, 26th August 2011, 3.45 AM

Takasu Katsuko, 26th August 2011, 3.50 AM

Rikurou and Yuu joined Ryuuji at Taiga's bedside. Her father got a closer look at her ravaged body. Her skin had turned pale, her arms were reduced to bones. Her cheekbones were visible too. Rikurou started to feel an ache in his chest at the pitiful sight.

"Yasuko... is settling the papers for the new house. Once Taiga's well enough to be discharged, we'll be bringing everyone back to the apartment. After that, my job as a stay-at-home dad officially begins," Ryuuji rambled.

"How long has she been like that?" Yuu asked.

Ryuuji began stroking Taiga's hair.

"We had her on the ventilator shortly after she'd given birth."

Ryuuji looked down with narrowed eyes, but his eyes shortly curved upward when he turned to the visitors. He held his voice up high.

"We're really lucky, you know. A lot of things went wrong up until the delivery. Maybe we picked a hospital in a bad spot, but some of the roads were still closed because of residual debris from March. We weren't sure we were going to make it here in time."

Ryuuji's hand ran down Taiga's slender arm.

"The delivery itself was even scarier. They were having a serious staff shortage, so our obstetrician was really busy with other patients. Our girls just couldn't wait, so Yasuko and I ended up delivering them ourselves."

Ryuuji looked down with a gentle gaze at Taiga's bony hand. He gripped its soft flesh tightly, feeling only a sliver of warmth.

"She was in so much pain. We were so close to losing her..."

Ryuuji looked up at his guests again with a bright smile.

"Thank goodness there wasn't an equipment shortage, huh?"

Rikurou silently rested his hand on the mattress, taking in the image of Taiga's body.

"It must be so difficult for the three of you," Yuu said.

"You seem awfully optimistic, though," Rikurou added.

"I don't see why I shouldn't. Yasuko and I are doing fine. The babies are healthy and ready to bring home. Taiga won't be working anytime soon, but we've got Yasuko's income and my savings. The only one we're waiting for now is Taiga, and I have faith that she'll come out of this a healthy woman."

The three of them sat in silence as they watched Taiga rest, letting the sounds of the air conditioning and equipment fill the space. Ryuuji's hand was now stuck to Taiga's like they had fused together. He suddenly broke the silence amongst them.

“You know, she actually reminded me to call you two during one of the few periods she was lucid. I really wasn’t sure either of you would come.”

Yuu tilted her head with a smile.

“Why wouldn’t we come? This is a really important day.”

“That is true...” Ryuuji said before tilting his head down. He spoke softly, his voice coming out rough like asphalt.

“It’s just that you two missed the wedding, so I feared the same would happen here.”

Rikurou’s eyes widened. Yuu blinked.

“The wedding? We were invited?” She asked.

Ryuuji looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Taiga sent you two an invitation. Didn’t you see it? We even had your names printed on the card—”

Rikurou suddenly grabbed Yuu’s shoulder and moved her aside. With a wide smile plastered on his face, he interrupted.

“Ah! Must’ve been an issue with the post, haha... Sorry, son.”

“Is that so... Well, it’s a shame. But it’s great that you came today,” Ryuuji shrugged. He turned to Taiga once more, with a bright grin and soft red cheeks. Rikurou looked at her daughter as well. His deep frown wrinkled his chin. His open eyes revealed his constricted pupils. Sweat was running down the side of his head.

“The past few months have been so stressful for Taiga. She was taking on so much work, thinking of what to prepare for the babies, even after I told her to rest. She’s always trying so hard to get what she wants. She’s been met with challenge after challenge while she was pregnant. I’d like to believe your visit today was like a little miracle for her. I’m sure she’ll be happy to hear you came.”

As Ryuuji spoke, Rikurou felt his skin turn cold and pale while the image of Taiga, hooked to the ventilator, burned itself into his eyes. Yuu simply smiled, unbeknownst of what was becoming of the man behind her.

“I’m sure that one day, we’ll have everyone together again, smiling happily.”

Ryuuji’s words hit the nail in the coffin. He turned his head up as he watched Rikurou suddenly stand from his stool, whose head was held down, hiding his eyes.

“Please excuse me for a moment. I need the restroom,” Rikurou’s lips moved quickly.

He walked briskly out of the room, his black leather shoes clacking against the floor. As he moved through the corridors, he could feel the contents of his stomach begin to rise. His arms and legs became stiff as his movements made him look like a wooden doll.

Rikurou slammed the door shut and frantically turned the lock, isolating himself inside a restroom stall. The only sound present was the echo of his heavy panting, bouncing against the walls of the cold grey restroom, as he bent over and leaned his arms against the stall door. He took in deep breaths, trying to calm his racing heart.

His mind raced. All the dreadful images flashed before his eyes. The divorce. The invitation. The garbage. He could only imagine the frown Taiga made as she was searching for him in the crowd at her wedding. Just like the day of the cultural festival. He then thought about how she was living as an adult, how she'd entered that bedridden state. Given everything Taiga had been through, he came to a revelation.

She has it so much worse than I do.

However, he thought about it a little more; the reason she asked for him to come, the reason she sent that invitation, the reason she even bothered to visit him. He wasn't wrong about just one thing. He really wasn't left with nothing after all. But with what he had, he inflicted only pain and disappointment upon it. The memories of his young daughter played in his head; all the joy he had given to her as a child, all the fun the two of them had, and all the hatred and sadness that came after. Eventually, his breathing slowed, as did his heart rate. With one last big sigh, he let his head drop before letting out a groan.

I'm the worst.

"Ma'am! Wait! Don't leave!" The voice of a police officer leaked out of the police station's swinging doors. Yuu dashed towards Rikurou.

"They spotted them at a park nearby. Let's go!"

Rikurou nodded and, in a matter of seconds, both of them were gone.

"Harukooooo!"

"Mitsukooooo!"

"Katsukooooo!"

Rikurou and Yuu walked through a park with its trees piled in white snow. The street lamps glowed a soft yellow light. Underneath the dark, winter evening sky, where the sun had set early, the atmosphere was given a dark blue hue. They held their hands up to their mouths, blowing clouds of misty breath, and shouted for the girls to come back to them. Rikurou shivered, rubbing his arms, which had one less layer of protection. He promptly put his hands up again.

“Katsukooooo– Agh!”

Splloosh!

Rikurou slipped and fell, landing his legs inside an icy, muddy pond.

“Iyahaaaaa!” Rikurou shrieked as he quickly shuffled his butt away from the pond, pulling his legs out of the freezing water. He was left panting on the cold ground. Looking at his soiled pants, he could only groan.

Yuu held her hand out for the sullen Rikurou, but he swiped her hand away and crossed his arms with a frown and furrowed brows, like a bratty child. Yuu simply grunted and pulled him up anyway, making him stand on his legs again. They went to a nearby bench covered in frost and sat themselves down, leaning in and resting their elbows on their knees.

“It’s over,” Rikurou muttered in despair.

“If something happens to those girls, she’d never forgive me. I’ll never see her again.”

“Isn’t that what you said you asked for?” Yuu said scornfully.

Rikurou couldn’t respond. He simply looked down and let his eyes drop. Seeing him like this, Yuu leaned back on the bench and stretched her arm over the backrest.

“The girls will be fine. The police will find them, I hope,” she said as she pulled out her cellphone, “They’ll return to their mother and everything will be back to the way it was.”

She held the phone screen up for Rikurou to see. He turned to find her phone ready to call a number belonging to “Takasu Taiga”.

“If you really meant what you said earlier, I can just call and tell her.”

Rikurou’s eyes widened. Yuu’s finger began to move over the “Call” button. He swallowed, hesitating to move until her finger completely covered the button. But before she could press it down, he suddenly raised his arms.

“W-wait!” He snatched the phone out of Yuu’s hand.

Yuu raised her eyebrow with her head tilted as Rikurou panted with her phone hugged to his chest. He looked at the phone, just realising what he had done. With his head down, he handed back her phone. Yuu didn’t speak.

“I’m sorry... I... I lied,” Rikurou stammered, then he sighed.

“There’s just... There’s this gut feeling constantly telling me to hold onto Taiga but... Every time I look at her I just think of... Ugh...”

He pinched his eyes.

“She keeps giving me all these chances to get closer to her, but I just keep trying to push her away. Now it’s like we’re running in circles.”

He started fidgeting with his fingers.

“I just think... If we eventually cut things off, we wouldn’t have to play this exhausting game anymore.”

Yuu pursed her lips.

“You know, how I see it, there’s only two ways you can get out of this mess. You can either make the call and end things for good... Or...” She leaned closer to Rikurou, causing him to turn to her.

“You can take the chance you have right now and stop pushing her away. And only one of these ways leaves you with nothing.”

“The choice is yours,” Yuu uttered as she leaned back on the bench.

Rikurou sullenly looks back down at his feet.

“I was hoping she’d just forget about me. After all, she’s got a wonderful life with her husband. I don’t see why she should keep me around, especially after everything I’ve put her through. If she forgot about me, she’d forget about all of that, too.”

Yuu gently shook her head.

“Taiga isn’t going to give up on you.”

Rikurou scoffed.

“How would you know that?”

“Because she never gave up on me.”

Rikurou looked up at her in disbelief. Yuu pulled her head back, looking up at the starry night sky. In her eyes, it was like looking inside an amethyst gemstone, each little speck of light dazzling before her. Yuu spoke gently.

“I won’t pretend that I didn’t have any involvement in this family mess of yours. When you ended up having to make the choice between me and your daughter, I should’ve just walked away. In the end, I became one of the reasons Taiga had to struggle so much. And despite that...”

Yuu shut her eyes, searching through her memories.

Taiga and Ryuuji sat on their knees by Rikurou’s coffee table, holding each other’s hands. Taiga was in a frilly summer dress, with a little cashmere cardigan over her upper body. Her soon-to-be husband was in an ocean blue polo shirt and beige trousers. The man of the hour, sitting on the opposite end, was wearing something similar. They’d all dressed for some sort of occasion.

“You’re... getting married?” Rikurou asked while rapidly blinking.

His eyes suddenly widened.

“Ah! Of course! It’s only logical. You’re the one that’s been taking care of Taiga during high school.”

“That is true,” Ryuuji said awkwardly.

“Well, we plan to. The wedding’s just left the planning phase, so we thought we’d come here and tell you about it now,” Taiga added.

Taiga’s gaze changed focus as Yuu passed the coffee table and left through the front door in a tight T-shirt that clung to her curves and bloomers that revealed most of her thighs, with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in her hand.

“Hey, so... About the last time we met...” Rikurou held his head low.

“Didn’t Taiga already talk to you about that?”

Taiga got up while the men spoke to each other.

Yuu leaned on a wall next to the front door, feeling the summer breeze blow against her hair and the glistening sunlight shine on her skin. She took a huff of her cigarette, the end of the stick slowly turning to ash as she inhaled. She gently blew out a large cloud of smoke, watching it dissipate into the air. She brought the stick to her lips to get another huff. However, before it could touch her mouth, Taiga chopped the stick with her hand, sending it down to the grass.

“H-hey!” Yuu shouted. Taiga stomped on the half-smoked cigarette before her eyes, putting it out.

“What the hell!?”

“Smoking is bad for you, you know!” Taiga yelled.

“What’re you bothering me for!?”

“Quit whining! I’m here to talk!”

Yuu stood there in disbelief. She promptly chuffed and returned to the wall. Taiga joined her.

“Shouldn’t you be inside with your fiancé or something?” Yuu complained while looking up at the deep blue sky. Taiga turned her head up, imitating her.

“I thought I’d let the boys talk.”

“Well, what do I have to do with any of this? Do you need something from me?”

Taiga gave no response. She simply looked forward and took a deep breath.

“No. I just wanted to ask... What’re you still doing here, Yuu?”

“Beats me,” Yuu shrugged.

“Aren’t you going to move out?” Taiga asked with her head tilted.

“I don’t have any plans to. I probably could, but... Your dad’s already had everything taken away from him. I can’t just take away his means of living too.”

“Are you... still in love with him?”

“What? No! He’s more like... a dog. Every now and then he’s fun to have around, but he’s nothing more. I still have to take care of him. If I leave before he finds an owner, he’ll probably starve.”

“Well, it’s great to see you have a heart. For animals, at least.”

“You thought I didn’t?”

Taiga shrugged. Yuu rolled her eyes.

“So... What’s it like living with an idiot like my father?”

“Well, he’s more than that.”

“How so?”

“A while ago, he lost his savings to some sort of Internet scam. And the thing is, that’s the fourth time it’s happened! He kept going, ‘This time it’ll work! This time it’ll work!’ and it just never did!”

“Yup. That sounds like him.”

“I swear, a wave of relief washed over me the moment he said, ‘I’m done.’ And you know what? That made me realise something. I could never have kids!”

“Pssh. What made you think that?” Taiga scoffed.

“Well, if I did, I’d be yelling all the time with how much stupidity I’d have to deal with. If a grown man is giving me this much stress, imagine what a kid would do.”

“Well, he did raise me.” Taiga said as her mouth began to form a grin.

“You were raised by a manchild? Bullshit. Your mom must’ve done all the parenting.”

Hearing Yuu’s rant, Taiga couldn’t help but widen her smile. Her grin began showing teeth as the sides of her mouth began to wrinkle. Yuu was too invested to notice that Taiga had turned her head away and was pressing her fist against her lips.

“I swear, I have no idea what to do with that man. It’s always something new with him. You ought to put him in an adoption centre—”

“BAHAHAHA!”

Taiga suddenly burst out laughing. She giggled uncontrollably, with her fist still in front of her mouth. Yuu could only look at Taiga after being cut off. As she watched Taiga’s beaming face, she couldn’t help but stretch a little smile as well. Soon, Taiga’s contagious laughter had spread to her as she chuckled at the banter she made about Taiga’s father.

Eventually, as the laughter had died down, they let out one big sigh, with a warmth residing inside their chests.

“I don’t actually mean any of that,” Yuu murmured.

“He’s... a really terrible guy, but... He still listened to all my spoiled whining.”

“Is that so?”

The two women silently watched the clouds slowly pass by.

“My parents passed away.”

Taiga turned to Yuu.

“It was after your father’s company fell apart. They’d gotten into an accident and it just... happened out of nowhere. The last time I saw them, I was storming off after getting into a heated argument. Now, it can never be resolved.”

Yuu grinned awkwardly.

“Later on, I realised that, besides Rikurou, I really didn’t have anyone left. And that just pissed me off. A man that I didn’t even love all that much was the only one that could take care of me. Can you believe that? Ugh...”

A gentle gust of wind blew over the two women.

“But, you know, he still took care of me. I wore a lot of nice clothes and ate a lot of good food. Sure, we argued, and being a housewife was annoying, but he still gave me so much when I had nothing.”

Yuu chuckled.

“It’s so stupid, you know, how you only realise something’s value when it’s gone.”

She sighed.

“I saw myself in Rikurou when I finally started earning my own money. I just couldn’t leave him after everything that happened...” Yuu admitted.

Taiga let Yuu’s story play out in her head while she continued to gaze at the deep blue sky above her. Despite everything the two of them had been through, Taiga remembered that Yuu was a person just like her, a person with her own struggles.

“I’m sorry,” Taiga said gently.

“What’re you apologising for?” Yuu asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Everything...” Taiga’s gaze drifted to the side.

“I caused a lot of trouble when we were living together. I feel like... If I had just been a bit nicer to you, I wouldn’t have gotten in the way of you and my dad’s marriage.”

“Taiga, you were a child. You can’t blame yourself for all of that. If anyone had to apologise it would be... me...”

Yuu's eyes widened as all the moments of animosity between her and Taiga began to resurface. She could especially remember the soreness in her throat as she stood over and yelled at the tiny, anguished girl in front of her, while her father was perspiring trying so hard to deescalate the situation. She immediately pulled back to the wall and pinched her eyes.

"Shit... I made such a mess of this family. I can't believe I let a kid like you just move away from your own father. You must've been so lonely, living on your own with nobody to take care of you. I should've never let your father choose between me and you... I don't even remember what we were arguing about," she said as she shook her head.

"What made you marry my dad anyway?"

"He was wealthy, that's why. I did all that just because I wanted a man that could buy me nice things. Ugh... I can't believe I spent my 20s acting like a bumbling idiot."

Yuu finally turned to Taiga and looked straight into her doll-like eyes.

"I'm sorry, Taiga. I don't know if I could ever make it up to you."

"Hm..."

A silence befell them as they turned their heads to the sky once more. Just for a moment, they let the singing of the birds enter their ears. Taiga's mind became as clear as the serene sky before them.

"It's okay," Taiga turned to the woman beside her.

"Thanks, Yuu... The last time we properly spoke to each other, we were yelling. I would've never conceived the idea that we'd be talking like this."

Yuu huffed.

"Me neither, but... I still don't get it. What changed?"

Taiga watched the fluffy white clouds stand above her like the gates of heaven.

"I got tired of holding grudges."

Yuu's ears opened as she focused her attention on Taiga.

"I've been quite happy with my life lately... I don't see any reason to continue dwelling on what's happened in the past. And from what I'm seeing, you've changed quite a lot yourself, Yuu," Taiga gave Yuu a warm smile, with her rosy cheeks puffed up. Yuu bashfully looked down at the grass and pouted as her face turned red.

Taiga then tilted her head and looked to the ground.

"I feel like if I continued wallowing in my self pity, I'd just be miserable for the rest of my life. So I want to move forward on better terms," she turned to Yuu, "Do you think that's possible, Yuu?"

Yuu's face slowly relaxed.

“I wouldn’t mind that.”

Taiga felt a wave of relief wash over her.

“Then I have just one last request.”

Yuu turned to Taiga. “What is it?”

“Right now, despite how it seems, you’re the closest person to my father right now. But I can’t expect you to be around forever. After that the only person he’d have is me and even then, I’m having a hard time getting through to him, so... In the remaining time you’re with him, do you think you could... Give him a little push?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Yuu gave Taiga a nod.

The stars occupied Yuu’s eyes, making them shine brightly.

“I believe... If Taiga and I could do it, so could you.”

Yuu turned her head, her eyes meeting Rikurou’s, who had his mouth left ajar. Yuu spoke to him gently.

“It’s time to move forward with us, Rikurou.”

He admired the woman’s starry eyes in awe. Suddenly, the sound of a bell rang into their ears, with a white light shining on them from the side. Yuu blinked as the reflection of the night sky in her eyes disappeared. Both of them turned to the police officer riding on a bicycle hitting the brakes in front of them.

“Oi! Ma’am, we told you not to leave!”

“Sorry, we got a little impatient,” Yuu scratched the back of her head.

The officer sighed.

“Your children are at the station. Let me walk you back so you can pick them up.”

“Th-thank you, officer,” Rikurou said.

Rikurou and Yuu followed behind the officer with the bicycle as they trudged through the park, frozen by the winter cold. The sound of snow crunching beneath their feet entered their ears and, eventually, the sound of cars in traffic followed. As they approached the blinding lights of the town buildings behind the park’s exit, Yuu turned to Rikurou.

“I... forgot to tell you this, but... I’ve been seeing someone.”

“Huh?”

“Someone from work. We’ve been dating for a long time now and we’ve already started saving up for a house, so I’ll be moving out in the coming years.”

“Oh... Does he... know?”

Rikurou asked as he pointed back and forth between Yuu and himself. Yuu chuckled.

“He’s a good man. He understands my situation.”

“I see.”

“But you’ll be on your own, you know. I won’t be here to pull you out of the rut anymore. Do you think you’ll be alright?”

Rikurou looked at Yuu blankly as a sour feeling developed in his mouth. But it quickly left as he turned forward and smiled with Yuu’s words in mind.

“Yeah... I think I will.”

The three girls sat in the lobby of the police station, each of them sitting on a chair too tall for their feet to touch the floor. Their gazes wandered around their environment as they analysed each item, light and piece of furniture with their bright, curious eyes. Their ears picked up the humming of the ceiling lights and the clicking of keyboards from behind the counter. They’d never been inside a police station before.

The girls turned their heads to the entrance as a police officer pushed open the glass door. He gestured towards them as Rikurou and Yuu frantically barged in. The eyes of the adults and the children lit up at the sight of each other. The girls jumped out of their chairs and ran to Rikurou and Yuu, as did the adults, who spread their arms open for a big hug.

“Yuu! Grandpa!” The girls cheered in unison.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Rikurou and Yuu cried out.

Rikurou had swiped Haruko and Katsuko into his arms, lifting them up into the air and swinging them around before gently putting them down. Yuu did the same with Mitsuko.

“You’re... you’re safe! Are any of you hurt?” Rikurou asked.

“Nope!” Haruko exclaimed.

“One of our stationed officers found them in a market,” the officer informed them.

Rikurou held Haruko’s head and took a close look at her face for any injuries, tilting his head left and right to see at different angles. He squinted his eyes at some sort of shiny white crystal at the side of her lip.

“What is this... Sugar?”

“Free sample!” Haruko shouted with elation.

“They’ve been very calm and cooperative,” the officer told them as he tipped his hat.

“Their mother must’ve taught them well,” Yuu delightfully added.

“It’s great to see that everyone– Uwah!” Rikurou suddenly shrieked as Katsuko pounced on his back again after getting on one of the chairs. She climbed up to his shoulder and started fondling his beard with his little hand.

“K-Katsuko, stop that! Please...” His voice trailed off as he got a view of the other two girls hopping and tugging at his pants, with big smiles and shining doll-like eyes on their faces as they tried to climb him again. He couldn’t help but chuckle and return a grin.

“You know what? I saw an ice cream parlour on the way here. How about we get some? I’ll let you three pick my new jacket while we’re outside too,” he said with his white, toothy grin.

“Ice cream!” The girls cheered with their fists in the air. As he set Katsuko on the floor, his gaze met Yuu’s. They could see in each other’s eyes: the comfortingly warm relief of being reunited with their joyful bunch of girls.

A moment later, they were standing outside the ice cream parlour, under the tiny, soft specks of falling snow. Haruko held in her hands a waffle cone with two big scoops of pink strawberry ice cream on top. The girls licked the sweet treat from all directions. Rikurou and Yuu stood over them, taking in the adorable view.

As Rikurou looked at the girls grinning with ice cream around their lips, he couldn’t help but remember what Taiga looked like when she was their age.

“They really do look like their mother,” he said.

“I’d almost forgotten what Taiga had looked like when she was their age. She had big eyes and puffy cheeks just like her daughters do. They even have my hair.”

He looked up at the night sky, his mouth shifted into a frown. The glaring lights of the town buildings obscured the stars in the sky. A much darker and emptier sight compared to when they were in the park.

“She was so cute and innocent. She used to smile at me so often. Back then... Me and her mother... We were everything to her. A fulfilling life as a father was right before my eyes and I just threw it away for... whatever I was doing before this.”

Yuu watched him with a listening ear.

“I don’t think I can salvage whatever I had back then.”

He looked down at the girls. Their beautiful smiles and puffed up cheeks filled him with a warmth stronger than sitting in front of an open fire in the winter. It was a sight that was as bright and spectacular as the stars he had seen before, as if they had left the night sky and appeared before his feet.

“So perhaps it’s time I made something new.”

He uttered as he turned to Yuu with a cheeky grin as he spoke.

“She’s my daughter, after all.”

They shared one more smile for the night before they continued their journey through the bustling town.

The days flew by like the summer breeze. The temperature was low and the grass had wilted, but the skies were clear with a serene blue. The little sparrows flying across rooftops sang as the morning sun beamed down on the Aisaka residence.

Rikurou and Katsuko stood outside the front of the house in their baggy sweaters facing each other. On one side, Katsuko held out her hand with a large, leather mitt on it, large enough to hold her entire head. The mitt still had the price tag on it. On the other side, Rikurou bent down, holding a baseball behind his back with his legs crossed.

“Ready, Katsuko?” he shouted across the lawn.

“Ready!” she responded as she raised her mitt.

“Alright, here I go!”

Rikurou entered the pitching stance, then tossed the ball towards Katsuko. It flew across the lawn with enough force to ensure that Katsuko wouldn’t get injured upon impact, and he certainly made the right call as the ball hit Katsuko straight on the forehead, knocking her down.

“Katsuko! Are you alright?” Rikurou shouted, reaching out his hand. At the same time, Katsuko had quickly gotten up and giggled as she ran to the ball rolling behind her. He sighed with relief, creating a big cloud of cold mist in front of his mouth, as Katsuko returned with the ball in hand.

“Throw!” She suddenly shouted as the ball left her hand.

“Huh!?” Rikurou exclaimed before the ball flew straight into his eye.

Thud.

His head recoiled back as he fell on his butt. With one hand over his eye, stinging from the impact of the ball, he looked at Katsuko jumping up and down with glee, celebrating her excellent throw. He scoffed and picked himself back up. They were too invested in their game to notice the short, pregnant woman approaching them.

“It looks like you two are having fun,” Taiga stood in front of them with a smirk and her hands on her hips, donning a bright green maternity dress.

“Taiga...”

“Mom!” Katsuko raised her hands and ran to her mother to hug her.

Half an hour later, Taiga was rolling her luggage onto the pavement. She turned to her father, with his shoulders held high, and Yuu, with her arms crossed and a smirk on her face, giving them a soft smile with her puffed up rosy cheeks.

“Thank you for taking care of them,” she said.

“It’s our pleasure,” Yuu nodded at her.

Taiga began walking down the pavement with her daughters clinging to her waist. Rikurou’s eyes locked onto her. The sound of the little wheels on the luggage rolling against the concrete quietened as the distance between them grew. His head slowly rotated, always facing Taiga until she was no longer in view.

After a few seconds with Taiga no longer in sight, Rikurou couldn’t help but lower his shoulders and bite his lip. He took a step forward. Then another. And another. Until he was running down the pavement, with Taiga now in view again.

Taiga turned when Rikurou suddenly grabbed onto her shoulder.

“Hah... How about I walk you to the station?” He panted.

Taiga could only look at him with her eyes widened.

Rikurou found himself holding the luggage handle, rolling it along while Taiga’s hands were freed. The only thing she had to carry now was the baby inside her. She caressed her belly as she waddled beside her father. The little girls strolled together in front of them, pointing at all the critters that would pass them by, like the energetic neighbourhood dogs and mischievous stray cats.

“This might be a stupid question but... How far along are you?”

“Seven months. Almost eight.”

“Really? You’re already so big. I thought you were going to come back with my grandson in your hands.”

“Very funny,” Taiga said sarcastically.

“So how’s Ryuuji been?”

“He’s been making a swift recovery. Still can’t walk completely on his own, but at least Yasuko’s returned to help him. How’ve the girls been? Did they cause you any trouble?”

A drop of sweat ran down the side of Rikurou’s head as he stammered.

“Oh, uhh... No, they’ve been very well behaved.”

“Really?” Taiga tilted her head.

Taiga turned to the girls.

“What did you do when I left?”

“Playground!” Katsuko pumped her fists into the air.

“Ice cream!” Haruko hopped as she shouted.

“Explore!” Mitsuko cheered as she flapped her arms.

“Huh? Explore? When did we...”

Taiga looked at him with a smirk. He quickly cut himself off after realising what Mitsuko meant.

“Oh! Right! We went out and explored the town together! Yes...” He pointed his index finger upwards as he spoke. Taiga scoffed. Whatever happened didn’t matter. In the end, her daughters were safe and happy.

“It sounds like they had a lot of fun.”

“Well, you must’ve had fun too, huh? Being away on holiday and all.”

“I wasn’t on holiday! I didn’t even have Ryuuji around to help me...” She said defensively, but she immediately blushed and pouted.

“But I did sleep better even with this baby kicking me in the middle of the night...”

They walked with a moment of silence between them.

“Why *did* you choose to have another baby? Isn’t three already such a handful?”

“I have my reasons! I mean, it’s not like I was against the idea of a bigger family. And maybe it would be nice for the girls to have a younger sibling. They could learn to be more nurturing while they take care of their little brother.”

Taiga’s head tilted downward.

“But...”

Rikurou watched Taiga attentively.

“I guess... I did make a lot of mistakes in the first months of raising these girls... I want to take care of this baby with all the things I have learnt so far. Maybe it’ll be easier to raise this one.”

“But what about your daughters?”

“I haven’t forgotten about them. It’s just that... They always bring new challenges and experiences that I have no idea how to handle, so my only option with them is to... just try my best!”

“Is that so...” Rikurou mumbled. Hearing Taiga’s words made him think.

It’s been a while since I’ve properly acted as a father... Whatever comes my way, I have to try my best, too...

They arrived at the busy station, where the dissonance of stepping feet and beeping machines filled the air. They stood in front of the gatelines. There wasn't a second where a person wasn't passing through them. Mitsuko tugged at Taiga's dress with a disgruntled face.

"Mom, I'm tired..."

"You can sit on the train, Mitsuko."

Taiga turned to her father.

"Alright, we're off. Thanks again for taking care of the girls."

"No problem," he calmly uttered with his hands on his hips.

Taiga turned to the turnstiles, but before she could go through, Rikurou shouted with a hand reaching out to her.

"Wait, Taiga!"

She curiously turned around.

"What is it?"

Rikurou took a deep breath.

"Bring the girls over again, alright? You can count on me to take good care of them. I'll be the best grandfather I can," he exclaimed.

Taiga processed his words. She smiled and lifted Mitsuko into her arms.

"Girls, do you want to come back here again some day?"

"Yeah!" The sisters shouted in unison.

Taiga and Rikurou's eyes met again. They smiled at each other one last time as Taiga turned around and went past the turnstile, towards the train platform. Mitsuko waved to him from over her mother's shoulder. His gaze never left his daughter until she disappeared into the crowd.

A baseball flew across a green lawn, casting a circular shadow underneath the glare of the summer sun. A hard but feminine hand gripped the ball, halting its trajectory.

"Oi, that was a weak throw. Are you growing senile already?" An older Katsuko, now in her final year of junior high, tightly grasped the baseball with her bare hand. The friction of the ball scratched her skin a little.

Katsuko was towering over her grandfather with a body much more mature than before. She was already a head taller than him, reaching the height of her own father. Her spiky hair had accumulated in length over the years, resembling a thorn bush.

"What!? Where'd you learn to talk trash like that?" Rikurou, now with a fully grey head of hair, shouted from the other side of the lawn, playfully offended. This abrasive

character that his beloved granddaughter put on was his favourite part of her. A small, shiny piece of gold wrapped around his ring finger.

Katsuko chuckled. She swung her arm and launched the ball back.

“Gyaaaah!” Rikurou shrieked.

He only saw a white blur fly towards him, causing him to curl up his body and dodge. A loud crash of wood fell upon their ears. Rikurou turned to find the baseball lodged in his fence, leaving behind a crater filled with splinters.

“Yes!” Katsuko pumped her fist.

“Oh no... Hana-chan just painted that... She’ll be so mad...” He mumbled with dread. Aisaka Kohana, a woman reaching her fifties with a head of partly grey hair like her husband’s, was Rikurou’s new wife. Despite her aged and wrinkled face, she had a bright and irresistible smile that roped him in.

“Uwah!” Rikurou shrieked as Katsuko wrapped her arm over his neck and put him in a headlock. She rapidly rubbed her fist against his head, making his hair stand.

“Aaaah! Stop that, Katsuko! It hurts!”

“Losers get the loser treatment!”

As Katsuko wrestled her grandfather, a girl’s voice pierced their ears.

“Oooooiii!!!”

Katsuko and Rikurou turned to the girl yelling at them. It was Haruko, who was standing by the front door with furrowed brows and her arms crossed. She stomped her foot, huffing forcefully.

“Stop messing around! Mom and dad are coming, and we aren’t even close to being finished with our packing!” She angrily yelled as she marched towards Katsuko.

“Pipe down, Haruko! I want to spend the last of my time playing with Gramps here!” She shouted with Rikurou still in the headlock.

“You’ve been doing nothing but play all week!” Haruko shouted as she got in Katsuko’s face.

“And you’ve done nothing but bitch and whine!” Katsuko returned the hostility, pushing Haruko backward.

“Now, now, Katsuko. I think it’s time we got ready for you three to leave. You can always come again another time,” Rikurou pleaded with his index finger raised. Katsuko finally released him from the headlock, letting him slowly stand back up.

“But you live so far... Pfft...” Katsuko pouted.

“The time will come, Katsuko,” Rikurou responded as he started walking back into the house. Katsuko huffed and followed her grandfather, shooting brief glares at her sister as she followed behind her as well. The forces pulling Rikurou away from his family had long gone. Never again did he have to worry about whether he’d see his family again.