

Chapter 1: When You Least Expect It

The Zelkova trees lining the pavement swayed as if they danced with the gentle winds of the summer evening. The pattern of Zelkova trees got disrupted by newly planted saplings. Some of the adult trees had their roots pulled from the ground. Parts of the pavement and asphalt road had visible cracks. Stray pieces of rock were strewn along the sides of the road. The damage was months old.

The neighbourhood children were making a ruckus with their high-pitched laughs and screams as they kicked around a football. The housewives, mothers, and soon-to-be mothers, young and old, spoke in low voices cheekily as they gossiped with one another. Dark clouds floated in the ocean of orange sky. A young man with sanpaku eyes strutted along the asphalt road with a soft grin on his face. There was no doubt that this was a day like any other.

“Ah! Yakuza-san! Can you kick the ball back here?”

“Don’t call me that!”

The young man with the scary sanpaku eyes kicked the ball to the children.

“Oh, Takasu-kun! You look really happy today! Did something happen?”

“Is your wife well? Also, your cleaning advice worked like a charm!”

“Hey, we should set up a play date in the future! Taiga-san’s as far along as I am!”

“Ladies, please, I’d love to talk again sometime but I’m in a bit of a rush right now.”

The young man with the friendly smile passed through the group of women standing in his way. That man, who was in his early 20s, was none other than Takasu Ryuuji. With a face that could make any predator flee, but a softness of a mother caring for her child, Ryuuji made a name for himself in the neighbourhood.

Maybe it was because of the confidence that people got from talking to someone that looked so fearsome yet spoke so kindly, or the endless knowledge on housekeeping he was never afraid to share, that Ryuuji attracted the attention of everyone around him, and with the news that someone so young and pleasant was going to be a father, his friendly neighbours couldn’t bear not to chime in.

It seemed the neighbours knew that a wonderful future was about to spring forth for the Takasu family, and Ryuuji knew that himself.

With a spring in his step, Ryuuji climbed the stairs to the little rental apartment he had lived in his whole life. While some of its balusters were missing, Ryuuji was able to hold

onto the railing as he did everyday. He turned the knob and pushed the front door open. With a toothy grin, he shouted into the miniature kitchen after the entrance.

“I’m home!” After he pulled his shoes off, he walked towards the entrance of the living room. “Taiga, are you ready—” However, the excitement on his face was quickly washed away by what he witnessed.

Takasu Taiga, formerly Aisaka Taiga, was sitting at the short table in the centre of the living room. Her little back and luscious brunette hair faced her husband. Sitting adjacent to her was a woman with blonde hair. She wore shiny pearls around her neck and donned a white suit, its blazer tight enough to reveal her deep curves and voluptuous bust, and its skirt that covered only half her thighs.

“Ah, Ryuu-chan. You’re back~” The blonde woman said casually. Takasu Yasuko, Ryuuji’s mother who was still in her 30s, faced him with chopsticks in her hand. His heart almost stopped when he saw what was sitting in front of her. It was a cardboard dish containing something circular and pancake-shaped. It was drenched in a thick, glossy, dark brown sauce, with what seemed to be mayonnaise draped over it.

“Taiga...?” Ryuuji uttered, causing Taiga’s shoulders to jolt. Slowly, she turned. She had chopsticks in her mouth, and splashes of okonomi sauce all around her lips. There was only a quarter of the okonomiyaki left in front of her. She looked up at Ryuuji like a toddler that just broke a vase.

“Gaaah!” Ryuuji shrieked while ruffling his hair. “Taiga, didn’t I tell you not to ruin your dinner!?”

“I was starving, Ryuuji!”

“It’s true! I could hear her tummy rumbling from across the room,” Yasuko added.

“Can’t I just have a little snack?”

“I was only stepping away for an errand! You could’ve eaten all you wanted tonight! Didn’t you say you were excited at the thought of savouring the food from that new restaurant? How’re you going to do that now that you won’t be hungry? Do you even know how hard it was to get a reservation there!?” Ryuuji held his hands out in front of him in his frustration. The unexpected factor of Yasuko’s presence had thwarted his plan to let Taiga eat her heart out at the 1-Michelin-Star restaurant that opened in their town, as a part of their evening date.

The place gained its popularity after the town saw months of drought in the local economy caused by an earthquake that happened earlier that year. The surprise of a new

restaurant, let alone a fancy one, was what got so many of the locals to swarm the place. It was a sign of life returning to its natural, peaceful order.

It had only been a few years since the couple graduated from high school. They married only a year after that. In the time that followed, Yasuko had graduated from her job as a bar entertainer and Taiga had secured a well-paying job in IT. Ryuuji remained the caretaker of the house while working part-time at the same fancy bakery he did back in high school. Now, still in their early 20s, Taiga and Ryuuji were going to be parents through a one-in-a-million type of pregnancy.

“Hmph!” Taiga pouted and turned away before putting the last bit of okonomiyaki into her mouth. She chewed loudly and defiantly, refusing to argue over something so trivial. Ryuuji sighed and turned to Yasuko.

“How could you do this?”

Yasuko only giggled while she rested her chin in her palm. “Well, I just happened to finish work early, so I wouldn’t have expected her to pounce on me for the leftovers. You know I can’t stop her when she’s hungry.” It had been over a year since she worked as the manager of Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven, an offshoot of the previous place she worked at. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for her to bring some okonomiyaki made from the leftover batter at the end of the day. It made for a nice evening snack.

“Ugh...” Ryuuji groaned and pinched his eyes.

“Stop making a fuss, Ryuuji,” Taiga said while she shuffled out from under the table with the empty cardboard dish and chopsticks in her hand. However, she didn’t immediately get up. Ryuuji instinctively went over to pull her up from under her shoulders to help her on her feet. They both let out a sigh.

“I’m still seriously craving something fancy,” Taiga said while she rubbed her belly.

Taiga was huge. There was no understating it. In fact, she was much bigger than what was usual for women pregnant with triplets, the obstetrician told her. They were identical triplets at that. Her belly had grown large enough to cover her knees when she sat down. Only her lower leg could get under the table in the living room. Everyone in the neighbourhood would watch in shock at the sight of someone so small carrying such a large belly.

She was remarkably heavy, too. The cushion she sat on had half of it completely flattened and stuck to the tatami mat. It became second nature for Ryuuji to help Taiga get on her feet due to the immense weight she had put on. She could barely waddle around without getting exhausted, so Ryuuji usually had to support her wherever she went. Even after all the exercise and yoga classes she attended, she was devastated to have reached this size.

However, she quickly accepted it after getting pampered by Ryuuji. It wasn't long before this pregnancy would come to an end, anyway.

"Do you still need more time before we go?" Ryuuji asked, holding Taiga's hands in his while caressing the back of her hands with his thumbs.

"I just need to do my hair and makeup."

"Is the makeup necessary? I think your casual look is good as is."

"Well, it's a special night. I should doll myself up at least a little," Taiga said while Ryuuji wiped the sauce off her face with a wet wipe.

Sure enough, Taiga wore a simple summer dress with a floral pattern, though due to her size, it only reached above her knees. Ryuuji himself only wore a plain and loose short sleeve button down shirt with long grey pants. Despite the air of fanciness surrounding the restaurant, the married couple were dressed as if on a day out to the public park.

"Alright, I'll wait for you outside—"

Knock, knock, knock!

Ryuuji was interrupted by three fast knocks at the front door. The moment he turned, he immediately heard the sound of a key turning inside the front door's lock. Every member of the Takasu family was home, so there shouldn't have been anyone else able to unlock the front door.

"Oh... It's her," Ryuuji mumbled.

"Huh? At this time!?" Taiga yelled out.

It didn't take long for Ryuuji to remember that Yasuko had given a certain someone a spare key to their apartment. Whoever this home intruder was, they were in a rush. The visitor barged through the door and dashed to the living room.

"Haah... Haah..."

The visitor stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room. The woman panted with her face towards the floor, her familiar brunette hair fluttering as her head rose and fell, and the ceiling light reflecting off her glasses.

"Haah... Taiga... I made it just in time..."

"Mom, what're you doing here!?"

Takagi Seina, formerly Aisaka Seina, looked up at Taiga with a grin full of bravado, a shiny drop of sweat running down her face and a wrinkle in her cheek. Taiga, however, wasn't having it.

"I'm here to check on you and your babies, of course! What else would I be here for?"

"I thought I told you I was going out tonight!" Taiga said with a stomp.

“Yes, so I decided to come before you leave,” Seina said nonchalantly as she approached her daughter. “You can’t miss a weekly checkup from me.”

She immediately started fiddling with her daughter’s body in quick succession. She grabbed and stared into her face to see if her skin was a healthy colour. She stretched both her eyelids and even looked into her mouth. She took both her wrists to check her pulse. It was no different from receiving an examination from a doctor.

“Mooom, don’t you know when to stop?” Taiga groaned as her mother got on her knees to then check on her babies. She’d rub her belly in three different spots before putting her ear against her belly, making sure to check every baby in her daughter’s belly. Once she felt their movement, she was assured of their health. However, even after checking on the babies, she squinted her eyes as she grabbed her belly with both hands.

Fwoosh!

“M-mom!?”

Seina swiftly lifted her daughter’s dress and looked at Taiga’s bare body underneath. Her eyes widened before dropping the hem of the dress, letting it flutter back down.

“Taiga, there’s a lot of stretch marks here.”

“Y-yeah? So what?”

“I thought you hated them. You told me they were incredibly ugly. What happened to the gel I gave you? Did it run out?”

“I got used to them! I can’t be bothered to apply that all the time!”

“Nonsense,” Seina uttered before pulling out a tube of moisturizer. She squirted some of the gel onto her hand. Just the sound of the air leaving the tube was enough to make Taiga stumble backward in fear.

“No, no way. I am NOT letting you apply that. I hate the weird, cold feeling, and I hate when you do it for me, and I especially hate it when you’re doing this right before I’m going out with Ryuuji.”

Seina stepped closer. “Come on, Taiga. Don’t fight it.”

Noooo!

You know it’s good for you, Taiga!

The living room quickly turned into a shouting match between the mother and daughter. Somehow, Taiga instantly ended up on the opposite side of the table, creating distance between the two women.

Why do you always have to be so troublesome?

Why can’t you just leave me alone!?

Yasuko remained at the table while the two women would orbit around it, awkwardly eyeing them every time one of them would pass her. Every time Taiga moved, Seina followed, like the two moons, Phobos and Deimos, orbiting Mars. This quarrel wouldn't last long though, as Taiga would quickly exhaust herself.

Don't strain yourself, Taiga! You could go into labour!

Haah... Stop chasing me then...

Taiga's legs gave out in front of the kitchen, causing her to fall to her knees. Seina immediately caught her and grabbed her arm. She whined as her mother pulled her into her and Ryuuji's bedroom. The door was shut behind them.

Iyaaaah!

Ryuuji listened to Taiga's squeals from behind the door, remaining blissfully unaware of what was actually happening in there. He only looked at the closed doors and sighed, before combing down his hair that he had messed up earlier. He walked outside to wait for the women to finish their silly squabble.

Ryuuji leaned over the railing at the staircase landing outside the front door. He gazed up at the dark blue sky, riddled with clouds that were just a shade away from pitch black. His ears picked up the rumbling of thunder in the distance.

"Ah... It looks like we can't stay out too long..." He mumbled to himself. He spotted the neighbourhood kids dispersing from the playground at the intimidating grumbling in the sky, screaming at the top of their lungs. Some of the neighbours yelled at them to quieten down. *It's just thunder, you brats!* The neighbours were usually more irritable when it was this late.

"Ryuuji."

A stern woman's voice came from behind Ryuuji. He turned around to find his mother-in-law standing before him. Taiga was left in their room getting herself ready like she said she would before she got interrupted by her mother's sudden visit.

"Come down the stairs with me. Let's talk while Taiga's busy."

Ryuuji obediently climbed down alongside Seina. Once they reached the ground floor, they stood on the outer side of the railing. Ryuuji casually leaned against it. They faced the length of the road in front of them. Seina spoke with great formality, as if she were a principal and her son-in-law was a student.

"Taiga's C-section is scheduled for next week, is that correct?"

"Yeah, we wanted to have it on a weekend so everyone could be present when our daughters eventually arrive."

“I’m surprised you even managed to get one. I heard a lot of the hospitals in this area are still recovering from the earthquake.”

“Well, Taiga and I know how to plan ahead,” Ryuuji smirked.

“You two definitely could’ve planned a little better,” Seina said firmly. “Taiga’s in prime condition for labour. What’s the plan when she has an emergency? Shouldn’t you have scheduled the C-section earlier to get it over and done with?”

“She hasn’t been showing any signs, so I’m sure she’ll be fine. Besides, she’s been enjoying the pregnancy. I think we can take it easy for now,” Ryuuji shrugged as he rested his arms behind his head. He couldn’t notice the glare that Seina gave him.

“You’re only worrying me more, Ryuuji,” Seina said under her breath. She watched the swaying Zelkova trees while letting out an exasperated sigh.

“Why? Is there something wrong with what I said?”

“With how volatile my daughter’s situation is, I can hardly see why you could be ‘taking things easy’.”

“Well, I’ve taken good care of Taiga throughout her whole pregnancy, and I’m ready to handle her postpartum care, too. It’s not so different from what I usually do for her, anyway. I’m sure I can face any trouble that comes my way.”

Seina scoffed as her eyes watched Ryuuji from the side. “While you’re handling three crying babies? Be serious, Ryuuji. There’s no way you have the strength to care for three newborns, physically and mentally, especially for someone as young as you.”

“Come on, Seina-san. It’s not like I’ll be caring for them all on my own. I’m sure Taiga’s ready to fit into the role of a mother. We’ve got Yasuko helping us, too. Isn’t that great? That’s one parent for each baby,” Ryuuji said with a natural smile while his eyes nudged upwards towards his apartment.

“For the first few weeks, maybe,” Seina muttered while she bit her finger. “I doubt Taiga would even be able to hold her babies while she’s recovering from her C-section. The burden would be much larger than you think. She’ll cry a lot when the pain becomes unbearable. Her mood swings and hormones would drive her to act irrationally, and that would last far longer than the physical pain.”

The thought of Taiga struggling with her postpartum recovery never made Ryuuji falter. When Taiga cried, he knew he’d be ready to relieve her pain. While Seina was droning on about how difficult Taiga was going to be, his own assurance calmed him.

“Well, I’m sure I can figure something out—”

“And what’s with that reliance on Ya-chan? Sure, she could probably do a better job as a caretaker, but as the man of the house, the family you’re building is your responsibility, not your mother’s,” Seina said snarkily, now looking up at her son-in-law with contempt.

The comment disgruntled Ryuuji. He could only turn to face Seina with wrinkled brows. He was happy with letting Yasuko take care of his family if it meant their bond would strengthen. Even though he preferred being independent, he couldn’t just push Yasuko away from doing what she loved. He’d never once been judged for this choice until now. His confusion turned into irritation.

“So what?”

“Well, if Taiga’s too weak to be a mother, then the burden of the whole family rests on you, doesn’t it? Is that really something you can carry?” Seina held herself highly as she asked him scornfully.

Ryuuji sighed.

“Look, Taiga and I have it all figured out. We may be putting ourselves through a lot of trouble, but neither of us are going to have any regrets. We’ll just keep doing what we think is best for us. That was what we promised each other.”

“And how far can you really bring that promise?” Seina uttered. A car drove by with its headlights illuminating the road. With the heavy clouds and setting sun, the sky had darkened until the lamp posts promptly lit up.

“What are you talking about?”

Seina turned her whole body to face Ryuuji head on. “When it all goes wrong, when it gets too difficult for you and Ya-chan, who’s going to be there for Taiga?”

“There’s nothing so difficult that would stop me from caring for your daughter,” Ryuuji firmed up his voice and stepped forward. Seina did the same.

“How can you be so confident that you won’t even consider the possibility?”

“Because I’d do anything for her. That’s why.”

Ryuuji exclaimed as he stared straight into Seina’s eyes with her furrowed brows. The two had gotten close enough to look like two animals intimidating each other for territory. Ryuuji’s fearsome appearance never fazed Seina. After Taiga and Ryuuji’s days of running away together came to an end, the mother had more power than the son-in-law.

Seina sighed haughtily.

“Alright, let’s put that to the test.” Ryuuji felt her shoot an intense, yet arrogant, glare through his face. A chill ran up his spine as if he could actually feel her gaze, though he

couldn't help but think about how much it reminded him of his wife. "If there is ever a moment that you fail to properly look after Taiga, then I'll be taking her with me."

"Wait, you mean..."

"During the time she's recovering, I want her to stay with me. Once she's well again, you two can go back to living together and getting all lovey dovey," Seina uttered while remaining collected.

Ryuuji opened his mouth and breathed in as if he were to viciously object. However, fighting with his wife's mother was the last thing he wanted to do, so his instinct for battle had immediately disappeared.

"I guess that *is* a good idea. Family has to help one another, right?" Ryuuji said with his finger on his chin as he pondered the benefits of Seina's proposition.

"That wasn't an offer, Ryuuji. That's an order."

Unfortunately, Seina wasn't here to make peace. Ryuuji swiped his arm to gesture to the apartment again, as if pointing to his own children.

"Wait, but what about the babies? You can't possibly separate them..."

"They'll come with me, too."

Ryuuji bent forward in befuddlement.

"But didn't you just say it was a lot of work? Don't you already have a son to care for? It'd be a larger burden on you than it would be for me!"

Seina narrowed her eyes at the mention of Taiga's half brother, Takagi Masato, the son of her and her current beloved husband, Takagi Naru.

"The fact I have a son is exactly why I'd be more suited. I took care of Taiga when she was just a little girl. I've birthed and raised two kids. I'd certainly make for a much better caretaker than you would," Seina said sternly.

"Cut me some slack, Seina-san. I'm supposed to be their father."

Seina glanced at him up and down. "Your attitude doesn't look very fatherly, Ryuuji. I've worried for Taiga at every single moment, and even more so while she was pregnant! Even after the earthquake, you're as calm as ever! You won't even consider the possibility that things won't go your way. How do you expect to handle the life of a parent like that?"

"But... I'm Taiga's husband! It's my job to look after her. You can't just separate us like that!" Ryuuji shouted with his hand against his chest

"Well, I'm Taiga's mother. I had a job to care for her yet you took my daughter from my hands the very first moment we met," Seina said nonchalantly.

"You're bringing *that* up!?—"

Seina put her hand up, cutting him off.

“I know, Ryuuji,” she huffed. “For a long time, I haven’t been acting like the mother I was supposed to be. But after seeing all the danger Taiga was in, I had to step up.” Her voice suddenly lowered as she spoke to her son-in-law earnestly. “I’d do anything for her, and I won’t let anything get in my way, not even you.”

Ryuuji frowned to the ground. He couldn’t find the will to come up with a rebuttal. Seina wasn’t a bad woman and she loved Taiga as much as he did, and he knew Taiga loved her as well after they went through so much effort to make up. It wouldn’t be fair of him to get in the way of that. It wasn’t like she was going away forever, either.

At the same time, he didn’t want anything to disrupt the domestic life that he and Taiga were already happy with. He didn’t like doubting his ability to care for his wife, either. He wanted to be the one to watch over Taiga when she was sick. That was his purpose that only he needed to fulfil.

Ryuuji’s shoulders jerked when Seina suddenly caressed his cheek.

“I’m sorry, I know how much Taiga means to you. You’re a good boy and a great husband, I’ve seen it. I wouldn’t have let Taiga marry anyone else. That’s why I need you to do the right thing. When the challenge becomes too much for you to bear, leave her to someone that really knows how to look after her.”

“What about Taiga? Does she get a say in all this?”

Seina’s hand rested on his shoulder.

“Taiga doesn’t always make the right decisions either, but she trusts you a lot more than me. A lot of the danger surrounding her, she put herself in, especially with this pregnancy. She’s unnaturally big, even for a girl with triplets. Can you imagine how devastating the delivery would be for someone as small and frail as her? I can’t believe she decided to let it go on for this long, and it’s all because of your pampering!”

Even though she was holding him so gently, she nagged annoyingly in his face.

“There’s always something about me you need to complain about, huh?” Ryuuji mumbled exasperatedly. Seina softened her gaze and tilted her head to the side.

“You’re a sensible boy, Ryuuji, but you’re also young. You need to be the one to guide Taiga away from danger, but you can’t do that when you can’t even guide yourself. That’s why I’m giving you a set path to go down. If you just leave Taiga to me, neither of us have to worry about her safety.”

“I... I won’t doubt my ability to guide myself. Taiga and I decided to follow our own path. We don’t need anyone telling us what we should or shouldn’t be doing,” Ryuuji looked straight into his mother-in-law’s glistening eyes.

“Then so be it. But if you find yourself going in the wrong direction, then I won’t be hearing any objections. If Taiga ever cries or gets hurt under your care, she’s coming with me,” Seina nodded her head overbearingly as if she were talking to a child.

“I...”

However, before Ryuuji could even say a word to his mother-in-law’s declaration, they were suddenly interrupted by a girl’s voice.

“Oooiii! Ryuuuji!”

Their attention was brought to the top of the stairs. Taiga was there, panting and holding tightly onto the railing. She had applied some skin-coloured lipstick and foundation. Yasuko was carrying her with her arm over her shoulder as Taiga’s massive belly weighed the two women down.

“How do you expect me to get down the stairs like this!?” She shouted, her voice echoing at the top of the stairs. Ryuuji gave one last look at Seina.

“Think about what I’ve said, alright?” She said firmly. They nodded to each other before Seina would turn away and depart, following the path along the line of Zelkova trees. Ryuuji quickly hopped up the stairs and roped Taiga’s arm over his shoulder. With one hand on Taiga’s lower back, he slowly moved her heavy self down the stairs.

“Enjoy your date!” Yasuko cheered and waved at the couple. Taiga and Ryuuji waved back briefly before continuing down the stairs. Once they reached the bottom, Ryuuji took Taiga’s hand, expecting to bring her along. However, Taiga continued to hold on to the railing while she panted like a dog.

“Ughh...” Ryuuji’s heart skipped a beat when Taiga suddenly let out a groan and fell to her knees. She held her belly in her hand.

“T-Taiga! Are you—”

“Hold that thought!” Taiga yelled and held up her finger at her husband. “M-my mom totally tired me out when she chased me... I... I can’t walk... I swear, if you ever ask me *that*, I’ll punch you.”

Ryuuji stared at Taiga with his mouth open in disbelief. It looked like she was in pain. However, not wanting to irritate Taiga any more than her mother had, he simply sighed. He then bent down and reached his arms behind her back and her knees. He lifted his pregnant

wife into his arms. Taiga pushed her dress down and held his tough shoulders. Finally, the couple could begin their journey to their date spot.

The restaurant was just in town, so it wasn't far. Ryuuji's already carried his pregnant wife over a dozen times, so he had built up the strength to carry her at least halfway there. However, as they left the premises of their apartment, Taiga noticed that Ryuuji was already sweating. He was strangely silent, too.

"Oi, Ryuuji."

"Hm?"

"Look at me, moron."

Ryuuji turned his face to his wife.

Chu!

"H-hey—"

Chu! Chu! Chu! Chu! Chu!

"Haha! Hey! Not in public!"

Taiga showered Ryuuji in kisses, from his lips, up to his forehead and down to his neck. Lip-shaped marks from her lipstick were left on his skin, but they were hard to see thanks to their colour blending in.

"My mom terrorised you again, didn't she? Sorry about that," she said with a smile.

"It's fine, really."

"What were you two talking about, anyway?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Huuuh? You can't hide things from me!"

Ryuuji chuckled as Taiga got up in his face. The weight he felt from the conversation he had with Seina had been quickly lifted by Taiga's endless supply of love. He walked along the road with a smile that couldn't be wiped away. Taiga snuggled underneath his chin with a comfortable smile as well.

Suddenly, Ryuuji huffed.

"Hooh... You really have gotten heavy."

"Huh!? Give those kisses back right now!"

"Haha!"

Flurries of raindrops tapped incessantly against the window. Taiga and Ryuuji were in their nightwear underneath the heavy covers of their futon. He had one arm wrapped over her chest, another hand on her belly, and his face buried in her neck. She had her cheek brushing against his. She gripped the back of the hands that rubbed her belly and groped her chest. Her body pushed into his to siphon more of his warmth. There wasn't a bump in the night that could wake these two up.

In his comfortable slumber, Ryuuji was placed into a dream.

He wore shades to block out the blaring sun shining over him. In nothing but swimming trunks, he laid in a sunlounger with his head resting against a folded towel. His chin rested on a head of brunette hair while a weight as heavy as a house cat pressed on his body. It was none other than his wife, who laid atop him in a skimpy black swimsuit and a skirt made of a soft and translucent fabric wrapped around her waist. His hands rested on her bare belly, which, strangely, was completely flat.

Taiga ran her hand through the white sand reflecting the light of the sun underneath them. They listened to the calming repetition of the ocean's waves crashing into the ocean before receding and crashing again. They smiled as they basked in the serenity of the beach setting. However, the peace was disrupted when something came to his mind.

You can't hide things from me!

Right... Taiga was his wife. He couldn't keep anything from her. With that, Ryuuji came to. Only then did he realise he was dreaming. His eyes darted around. It really was just him, the sand, the sea, and his beautiful wife. It was the perfect place to talk with his wife uninterrupted, though he wasn't sure if it would count if it was in a dream. Perhaps it would make for some good practice.

"Taiga..." Ryuuji lifted his back, prompting Taiga to do the same. His wife was now sitting in his lap. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Hm? What is it?" Taiga looked up at her husband with her big, cute eyes.

Ryuuji rubbed the back of his neck and looked off into the sand before his eyes wandered to his wife's smooth thighs. His hands caressed them like they would with an exotic fabric.

"Are you... scared?"

"Of what?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

Taiga indifferently shrugged her shoulders. "There's a lot of things I could be scared about. My mother could show up and annoy me again. Or maybe Inko-chan could fly all the

way from your grandparents' house just to peck at my belly until I bled. Seriously, I don't want to go through that again."

Ryuuji chuckled. "I guess we'll just have to hope she's friendly again when our daughters are born..."

"She'd better," Taiga uttered sternly like how her mother normally spoke.

It was a hostility born from a sudden display of aggression towards the bird from one of Taiga's daughters. Inko was only happily sitting on the end of Taiga's belly. *Oi! Get off there, you dumb bird!* She heard the woman yell when she suddenly got a strong and painful kick in the face from one of the babies. Based on the positioning of the kick, Taiga knew immediately which baby was responsible for it. Thus, bad blood was formed between Inko and Taiga's third daughter.

"But we've got bigger things to worry about. The weeks after our daughters get delivered are going to be tough. It'll be our first weeks as parents and we'll have three more mouths to feed. Your recovery from your C-section is going to be a huge pain, too. You're not worried about any of that?" Ryuuji's hands rested on Taiga's shoulders.

"No? Why would I be?" She scoffed.

"Because it'll hurt, that's why. You'll be too weak to even nurse your babies and too sore to even move around. The pain could get so bad you cry. How are you going to endure any of that?" Ryuuji spoke like a nagging mother.

"I have you."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"You could hold me while I'm in pain."

"That alone won't help..." Ryuuji sighed.

"It's enough for me."

Taiga snuggled underneath Ryuuji's chin like a house cat tucking itself to bed. Her head nestled into his neck and her own neck absorbed the warmth of Ryuuji's chest. She shut her eyes as if preparing to take a nap.

"Maybe it'll seem enough to you, but... Is that really okay?" Ryuuji leaned over her, casting his shadow over her body.

"Don't overthink it. Otherwise, you won't be able to enjoy this amazing beach," she said with her eyes still closed.

"Isn't that the problem? What if the tide rises before we even notice? What if we get caught in the waves? I can't let that happen..."

"You won't," Taiga said. "So just relax. Listen to the sound of the waves."

And so he did. He kept his mouth shut and watched the seafoam splash around the seashore. The monotonous loop of the beach's uninterrupted natural sounds certainly put him at ease, but his mind was too clouded by worry to truly enjoy them. In the back of his head, there was always something warning him of something getting between him and his wife.

"Your mother told me that if I can't look after you properly, she'd take you away," Ryuuji interrupted the silence.

"So that's what you two were talking about..." Taiga finally opened her eyes again. "Ryuuji, you know better than to listen to anything my mother says."

"A lot of what she told me wasn't wrong, though. Taking care of you and our daughters is going to be a tall order, and I can't afford to make any mistakes."

Taiga sat up to face her husband. "It'll be fine. You can't be expected to shoulder all that on your own."

Ryuuji then stared at Taiga with deadpan eyes.

"Are you really okay going back to your mother for a few weeks?"

"Hell no."

"Me neither! That's what I'm afraid of!" Ryuuji held his wife's shoulders. "And if it isn't your mother that would take you away, then what if it was something else..." His eyes wandered off into the sand and his words trailed off.

"Ryuuji." Taiga suddenly grabbed his face and pressed the tips of their noses together. "Ryuuji, my hubby, my pervy mutt, my love."

"What?" He said with his cheeks squished by his wife's hands.

"You have to make sure, by any means necessary, that my mother doesn't take me."

"R-right! You're my wife! I want to be the one to look after you! Our home would just be too quiet without you!" His grip on his wife's shoulders tightened. Taiga leaned in further, pushing her husband backward a little.

"And I can't stand my mother's nagging! Your nagging is at least somewhat tolerable! You remember what we promised each other when we got married, right!?"

They pulled their faces apart and looked into each other's shining eyes.

"Yeah! We'll always be by each other's side, no matter what anyone says!"

"You've never once failed me! I know you won't!"

"R-right... But..." Ryuuji looked downward, his hands falling off the side of her arms. "Is that really the right thing to do?" He looked into his wife's eyes with sincere concern. "We're going to face the trials of parenthood soon, and we've been so easygoing... What if something bad really does happen because of that? I feel like we might be

underprepared for how tough it's going to get..." Ryuuji rubbed his neck again. "I'm not even sure if I'm ready to be a father at all."

"Haah!?" Taiga suddenly exclaimed, causing Ryuuji to jump. She yelled angrily. "You're saying that just before you're about to meet your daughters!?"

"What? It's normal to be nervous, right?" Ryuuji said defensively while Taiga stood up on the sunlounger. She looked down at her husband and shouted.

"I can't let a nervous wreck look after my babies! I seriously can't believe you!"

Fwoosh!

"Uwah!"

Taiga tore her skirt off, unwrapping it from her waist, and threw it in Ryuuji's face, revealing her black bikini bottom. The size and lightness of the fabric made it a struggle for him to pull off his face.

"Taiga!" He called out, but by the time his vision cleared, his wife was already creating distance between them, running off towards the ocean.

"Shut up! You can sit in the sun all you want! I'm going in the water!" She yelled frustratedly without looking back. Her husband promptly jumped from the sunlounger and chased after her. She ran and ran, the wind of the beach carrying her along. With her light weight and small body, it felt as if she were flying along the clear white sand. However, her legs could only handle so much speed.

"Iyaaah!"

Splash!

After accelerating beyond what she was capable of, she lost her balance and fell forward. Her face fell straight into the mixture of water and foam. She laid flat in the sand for a few seconds, the little grains sticking to her bare tummy while her face stayed dipped in the water. She felt two hands wrap around her body before she was lifted from the ground.

"Bleeehhh!" Taiga coughed and stuck her tongue out. Her tongue was stinging from the saltiness of the seawater. Ryuuji carried her little body at his side like he would with a long piece of lumber. Taiga was hanging from his arm like a house cat.

"Taiga! Don't do anything stupid!" He yelled.

"Shut up! I'll do whatever I want! I don't care what anyone else says!" Taiga flailed her arms and legs around like a child.

"So what if someone small like me might get swept up in the waves!? You can't live if you don't dip your toes in the water every now and then!" She shouted over the sound of the crashing waves.

“I won’t hold myself back from happiness anymore! I’ll make the future I want, and I’ll do it whenever I want!” She pumped her fist up into the air like a superhero, before thrusting that fist into Ryuuji’s side. “And I want you to be by my side when I do it!”

As her knuckle poked her husband’s skin, Taiga gazed up at him and waited for a response. She panted after losing her breath from the shouting.

“I... Woah!” All the thrashing and squirming made Ryuuji lose his grip, causing Taiga to fall on her knees back into the ankle-height water, creating a little splash. Neither of them paid any mind. Ryuuji knelt down and held Taiga’s hands. “I want my future to be with you, too! I think it’s what I was made to do! That’s why I have to do everything I can to protect it! But... If I can’t do it properly... If I fail to look after you, am I really worthy of it?”

“If you fail, then do it. I’m not afraid of that,” Taiga leaned closer.

“H-how can you say that?”

“Because even when that happens, I’ll be alright in the end. When it all goes wrong, you’ll be there to set everything right again,” Taiga said gently as she caressed Ryuuji’s cheek. She leaned even closer until they pressed their foreheads together. With their legs in the water, they held that position.

Hehe... Ryuuji noticed Taiga stifling a giggle. It seemed she suddenly remembered something. “I know I can always count on you, Ryuuji,” she said cheekily under her breath.

Ryuuji pulled his face away. “Wh-what was that?”

“N-no, I just...” Taiga paused before looking up to her husband with her big, shiny, doll-like eyes. “Do you remember the day the earthquake struck?”

“Yeah, it was scary. You were three months along, and it was just after you announced your pregnancy. We were both huddled under the desk in my room while everything was shaking...” The dry sand in the distance began to move as it created strange solid formations. The formations imitated the memories of the disaster that Ryuuji was recalling like some kind of puppet show.

“The shaking even put a hole in the roof of our room. If we were in our futons, we would’ve been crushed. Yasuko was so worried for us when it was over. You two were really badly injured after that.”

“What do you mean? You had a million splinters in your feet. All I got was a cut along my arm. Well, the blood running down the side of Ya-chan’s face was quite a fright,” Taiga added. “I really was afraid for our lives when we were under that table, but... I felt something else during all the shaking, too.”

Taiga's face turned a bright shade of red as she leaned the side of her soft face into his hard, bare chest.

"I was pressing my cheek against your chest while you held me tightly, and the whole time, I could hear your heart racing," Taiga snickered. "And it just got me thinking about how brave you were, protecting your wife and children just from under that table." Then, Ryuuji's face became just as red as Taiga's. "When I noticed that, I realised that I'd never have to worry about you leaving my side. That's the one thing you definitely won't fail at, Ryuuji."

When Taiga raised her head to see Ryuuji's face again, she couldn't suppress her laughter. "Haha! What are you doing..."

Ryuuji had his face turned away. The colour of his skin was no different from a tomato's. His lips quivered and his breathing was frantic. It was like he was holding in the urge to break into tears.

"Taiga... You never flatter me this much..."

"Oh, Ryuuji..." Taiga said. Her grin widened. "You did a great job patching my arm up, you know. You looked very handsome while you did it, covered in all those scratches and dust while you wrapped my arm in a bandage, like in an action movie!"

"Taiga, please!"

Hehe! She giggled like the cute little brat she was. Her flustered husband huffed.

"Fine, if you want to be like that, then I'll show you!"

Ryuuji closed his eyes and dove his face in, pushing his lips against hers. Her eyes widened, but after a moment, their mouths gripped each other and connected like a coupler. The couple stood up with their arms wrapped around each other as Ryuuji pulled her body into his chest. One of his arms slithered down her bare body. His hand rested on her rump while the other pulled her head in.

It was only Taiga's faith that he needed. Nobody else could decide whether he was worthy of taking care of her or not. Nobody except Taiga herself. Even if she was in pain, even if she cried, even if the path forward was uncertain, as long as they were together, she would be okay. As long as there was nothing between them, they would both get what they want, and they would both be happy.

Taiga ran her fingers across her husband's hard back. Ryuuji was leaning so close to her that she needed to lean backward just to stand. He kept coming closer until she jumped up and wrapped her legs around his body as well, like a baby sloth would with its mother. Ryuuji carried her with her rear in his hand while they continued to kiss, until after a minute, they pulled their faces away from each other.

Haah... Haah... They caught their breath. Their faces were absolutely flushed. While he was still carrying her, he tried to dive in again, but she placed her hand in front of his face.

“S-sorry, Ryuuji. I don’t think I can...”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to hold back...”

“Yeah, but... isn’t this place a little too open for that kind of thing?” Taiga mumbled while she twirled her hair.

“O-oh... Right...” Ryuuji mumbled back with a face as red as a tomato.

Taiga promptly climbed down. They scratched their heads and looked in opposite directions for a moment, before Ryuuji took her hands.

“Taiga, I... I’m not going to hold back, either. We’ll keep moving forward, no matter what anyone tells us,” Ryuuji spoke as he looked into her pleased eyes with determination.

“As long as I’m by your side, everything will turn out alright! I can promise that!”

“I know you can,” Taiga said before placing her hand on his heart. “And I know that I can trust it.”

The beach winds gently blew Taiga and Ryuuji’s hair as they basked in the serenity of this peaceful dream. The waves continued to splash at their feet. However, one splash in particular made them jolt. It felt like something had latched onto their ankles. They felt a sharpness poking into their skin. It was only after hearing the strange organic sound that it fully caught their attention.

Nyaaaaaaa!

Taiga and Ryuuji looked down. There were two little tiger cubs clawing at their feet. They bared their fangs as they roared, or, more like meowed, at them.

“Aaaww!” Taiga exclaimed before kneeling down to scoop one of them into her arms. She wiggled her finger above it as it tried to paw at her hand. “You are so cute!~”

“Where did these come from?” Ryuuji said while the one at his feet started climbing him. *Ow! Ow!* It sunk its claws into his skin to stick to him, but none of them could actually pierce it, so he remained unharmed.

Then, Taiga and Ryuuji were drawn to another sound.

Taaaaiga-chaaaaaan! Ryuuuuu-chaaaaan!

It was a blonde woman running towards them along the beach. She was happily waving as she closed the distance between them. In her hand was another tiger cub, which she cuddled as it kneaded her chest comfortably.

“Oh, Ya-chan!” Taiga exclaimed when the blonde woman arrived.

“Hey, you two! Ryuu-chan, look at this!” Yasuko raised the tiger cub she was holding towards them. Its legs and paws dangled idly. “Taiga-chan, you gave birth to such cute cubs! Don’t you think so, Ryuu-chan?” She said with a bright smile.

“So that’s where they came from...” Taiga said as she looked at the adorable tiger cub in her hands. “That must be why I feel so motherly towards them.” She nuzzled her cheek against it, feeling its fluffy fur against her skin. Ryuuji, however, had another thought.

“Hey, wait, I remember this,” he said. The tiger cub climbing him had reached his shoulder. “Weren’t you supposed to have puppies?”

“Ehhh?” Taiga looked at him smugly. “Why? Are you sad they don’t look anything like you, you pervy mutt?”

“Wh-what!?” Ryuuji got flustered again. “They don’t look anything like you, either!” He crossed his arms while the cub on his shoulder gnawed at his cheek.

“That’s not true! They’re tigers, just like me! Isn’t that right?” She said as she tried to nuzzle her nose against the cub’s. Unfortunately, the cub would refuse. *Nya!* It scratched at her face, causing Taiga to stretch her arms out to keep it away. “Ow! Hey! Who do you think you are, you little brat!?”

Ryuuji took the cub on his shoulder to stop it from biting his face off. He carried it in the air and let it flop its legs about as it struggled to escape his grasps. “Whatever! They aren’t our real children, anyway!”

“Alright then, let’s have a bet!” Taiga said as she stood up. They held their cubs next to each other. “Our daughters will look like me, and only me! They won’t have your creepy sanpaku eyes, either!”

“Oh, please!” Ryuuji exclaimed defiantly. “I don’t mind them not having my eyes, but you have to admit that our babies are quite big for a girl like you to carry. They definitely won’t be as short as you are when they’re grown up.”

“Hmph, that’s fair. We’ll just have to wait and see!”

“Right!”

After Taiga and Ryuuji settled their little bet, Yasuko set her cub on the ground and held her hands out for the ones in their hands. “Come, little kitties! Come play with Ya-chan!” She said with a cheeky, motherly voice. The cubs suddenly had the strength to jump out of their hands, surprising the couple. Once the three cubs were together, Yasuko ran past Taiga and Ryuuji into the horizon, where the cubs would follow.

Ahahaha! Yasuko’s laughter would trail off the farther she got. Once she was out of view, the couple turned back to the ocean. They held hands again. They didn’t seem to notice

the sky getting darker and cloudier, the waves getting strong enough to make them stumble, or the fact that the water had reached just below their knees.

“I can’t wait to meet our daughters,” Ryuuji said.

“Me too,” Taiga responded.

The winds blew Ryuuji’s hair at high speeds. Ryuuji shielded his face with his arm as he felt the strands of hair flopping around, worried they’d get in his eyes.

“Hey, Taiga, don’t you think this place has gotten a little—Aaaah!”

Ryuuji was hit in the face by a splash of water from an incredibly heavy wave. When he came to, he realised the water had gotten up to his waist.

“Taiga, I think we should—” He turned. Taiga wasn’t there. She wasn’t holding his hand, either. He looked around to see if he could find the familiar brunette hair, but he couldn’t even see the shore.

“Taiga?” Ryuuji uttered. “Taigaaaa!” He shouted, but his voice couldn’t travel far as the crashes of the waves overpowered his sound. His heart began to race. He dipped beneath the water, but he couldn’t see anything. His breathing got faster and heavier. He tried to move towards where he last saw the shore, following the ocean’s current, but no matter how far he went, the water just got higher and higher. It came up to his stomach.

“Uwah!” Suddenly, the ocean floor was gone. He was floating in the treacherous waters that carried him around. He tried to swim with the currents, but he couldn’t control where the water was taking him. He was stuck in place. He at least tried to tread water, but even that wasn’t working in his favour. “Guugh!?” The uneven and ginormous waves caused his face to occasionally dip beneath the surface. He breathed in as much air as he could before he’d go below the water again.

Something else was approaching. A shadow was cast over the ocean from behind him. Ryuuji turned around to find a giant wall of water that had grown past the clouds, and that wall was coming straight towards him. He could only watch with his jaw open as it got closer and closer. It was a hundred metres away. Then ninety metres. Then fifty metres. Then ten metres. Then, it was just a few centimetres away from his face.

It all went to black.

“Hnngh...”

“Haah!?”

Ryuuji gasped for air as he suddenly rose from below the heavy covers of his futon. He panted and panted, as if he had really been drowning and he had just resurfaced. He gripped his throat and felt his chest. His skin was wet, but it was just his cold sweat. He looked around. He was relieved to see it was just the dark room that he and his wife slept in.

“Hnnnnngghh...”

He swore he heard something. Was it a person? He couldn’t tell. The strong winds from the storm outside were pulling at his window, creating an incessant banging sound, as if someone was trying to break in. There was something else. He felt something wet around his waist and legs. There was a dark spot in the middle of the covers. He looked up at the patched roof directly above him, but there wasn’t any water dripping from it. His patchwork was thorough. No, it couldn’t be from the rain. This wetness was warm.

“Hnnnnngghh!”

Now he heard it. He got on his knees and turned to his wife before lifting the covers off fully. There was his wife, gripping her gigantic belly tightly while her legs and shoulders trembled. Her groaning was loud and painful. Ryuuji quickly leaned over and saw Taiga gritting her teeth while tears ran from her shut eyes. He gazed at the futon around her lower body. Her pants and shirt, his legs, the beddings, they were all soaked.

Her waters broke.

“Nnnngaaaah!!!”

“Taiga!”

It was August 23rd, 2011. At 1:43 AM, Taiga’s waters had broken. The little radio sitting atop the Takasu family’s television emitted scratchy audio, its deteriorated quality caused by interference from the raging storm outside. Through the distortion was a live broadcast that told of winds that could throw around small trees and rain so heavy you could only see a few metres ahead. Roads remained closed due to debris still leftover from an earthquake, as well as new debris caused by the ongoing storm.

“Aaaaaaahh!”

Taiga wailed as she bent her body over the short table in the living room. Her arm laid against the tabletop, her back hunched down, and her other hand gripping her heavy belly, which was getting pulled down by gravity, as she endured some intense contractions. Her

body was wrapped from her shoulders to her legs with the futon covers she had been sleeping in, still wet from her waters.

“Follow me, Taiga. Hoooh... Hoooh...”

“Hoooh... Hoooh... Hoooh...”

Ryuuji rubbed her lower back while he buried his face into the side of her neck, hoping to relieve her stinging pain while sharing some of his body heat. He breathed slowly and rhythmically to guide his wife in enduring her labour pains. Using this exercise, he wanted the flow of oxygen to release some of the strain on her body while also distracting her from the immense pressure in her lower body.

They raised their heads at the sound of the front door being thrown open. Taiga’s face was completely drenched in tears. They could hear the raging winds forcing the door open while whoever had entered struggled to shut the door. After the visitor successfully slammed the door shut, the sound of their dripping body approached the living room. It was Yasuko, who had been completely soaked by the rain. She stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, panting while she looked with strained eyes at her nervous son and her struggling daughter-in-law.

“Is an ambulance on the way?” Ryuuji asked desperately. Yasuko bit her lip. She took a deep breath before speaking firmly.

“All the roads that went directly to the hospitals are closed.”

“No...”

“What?” Taiga whined exasperatedly and winced as her head fell to the table.

“But... Help is still coming, right? Taiga can still give birth safely, right?” Ryuuji asked desperately again.

“That...” Yasuko gulped. “That depends on how long Taiga can wait for help to arrive. The ambulance would take almost an hour—”

“AAAAAAAH!!” Taiga screamed. “Haaaah... AAAAHHH!!!” The pain just wouldn’t stop. No matter how hard Ryuuji rubbed her back, no matter how warm Ryuuji made her, the pain was just intolerable. “Uuhuu... UuuAAAAHH!” She sobbed and shrieked as her body showed her no mercy. It was as if she was constantly getting stabbed in the back. Ryuuji looked at Taiga anxiously, before turning to his mother.

“Is there anything, *anything*, we can do to get Taiga help?”

“The landlady went into the storm on foot to go find help herself, but...” Yasuko huffed. Her voice quivered as she could only speak gravely. “She would still take a while.”

“But there has to be something we can do! I’m sure of it! Please, if we could just keep thinking...” Ryuuji’s words trailed off when he saw Yasuko’s scrunched up face.

“I’m sorry, Ryuuji... I’m sorry...” She shook her head. A tear ran down her cheek.

Ryuuji’s heart was racing again. Sitting there, he could only pant while he thought about what to do. He looked down at his wife, who was groaning from the excruciating pain. He had to do something. He had to make sure everything turned out alright. But no matter what he thought of, he couldn’t do anything that would give Taiga safety. His eyes strained shut and his teeth gritted.

“Aaagh! Damn iiit!” He roared before pounding his fist against the table. Taiga looked at him in shock as he wrapped her arm over his shoulder and carried her to her feet.

“We can’t wait for help to come to us! We just have to find it on our own!”

“No...” Taiga pleaded.

“In this storm!?” Yasuko interjected. “You’ll never get anywhere like this!”

“We don’t have any other choice!” Ryuuji shouted. “I’ll carry her for hours if it means I can get her help!” He grunted as he pulled Taiga towards the kitchen.

“No, Ryuuji, please...” Taiga croaked. Her throat was getting sore from all her screaming. “Nnngh... Ryuuji, I can’t...”

“T-Taiga!”

They couldn’t even make it out of the living room before Taiga slipped off Ryuuji’s shoulders and fell to her knees.

“GAAAAAAH!” She let out another bloodcurdling scream as she gripped Ryuuji’s leg and her pregnant belly. “I CAN’T MOVE! IT HURTS SO MUUUCH! AAAAAAH!” Taiga cried out. She sobbed and groveled at the tatami mat floor, her entire body trembling. “Please, Ryuuji... I can’t...” Her fingers dug into the skin of Ryuuji’s lower leg as she sobbed. Her tears dripped onto the mat.

“Taiga...” Ryuuji could only look down at her in pity. There really wasn’t anything he could do to relieve her pain. There was only one course of action left, but he couldn’t accept it. It was the only way to bring Taiga’s pain to an end, but it was too big of a risk, and it would make her suffer even more than she already was. As his thoughts were brought to a standstill, he could only turn to his mother. He needed guidance, or at least, comfort.

“Ryuuji...” Yasuko spoke gravely. “If she can’t hold on until help gets here, then you know what that means, right?”

Ryuuji bit his lip.

“Women with triplets rarely do it this way...” She murmured. “And the doctors said they were too big for her to deliver naturally...” Her voice was shaky. “Taiga’s too small and brittle to handle all that... But...”

Ryuuji took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He knelt down to Taiga’s level and wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back again.

“Yasuko, move the table. We need to do it here.”

“We don’t have any other choice, do we?”

Yasuko did as he said, clearing the space so Taiga had ample room to deliver her babies. Ryuuji pulled away from his wife to get things from the kitchen, but Taiga clinged to his leg tightly.

“N-no! Ryuuji! Don’t leave me!” She whimpered.

“Taiga, I need to get things to help you—”

“You promised, didn’t you?” She sobbed. “That you’d always be by my side...”

Ryuuji’s eyes locked onto Taiga’s pained face. He could see it in her shining wet eyes, the excruciating pain eating away at her. He couldn’t leave her after seeing that. *Right... No matter what happens, everything is going to be alright.* He thought to himself.

“Yasuko! Get our futons! There’s gloves and clean cloths in the bathroom! Prepare some hot water, too!” He shouted, before pressing his forehead against Taiga’s. With his hand stroking her lower back, they held each other and synchronously swayed their bodies as he guided her along the treacherous waves of pain she was submerged in.

The futons were laid out across the living room floor. Taiga knelt in the very centre. She was still in the T-shirt she wore as her pyjamas, while she was stripped from the waist down. The futon covers were draped over her body as she hugged her husband in front of her. They rested their chins on each other’s shoulders as they swayed like they did before. Yasuko sat behind Taiga and would look beneath the covers to check Taiga’s progress. She donned the rubber gloves and surgical mask that Ryuuji would use for cleaning. A basin of hot water sat next to her.

With a towel that was dipped in hot water hanging over her neck, and clean, larger towels to wrap the babies in, Taiga was ready to start pushing.

“Hopefully all those maternity books won’t amount to nothing...” Yasuko mumbled. “Don’t worry, Taiga. You’re in good hands! I’ve given birth before, so you can trust me. Haruko is ready to come out, so just push when you feel a contraction!” Yasuko said with her hand on Taiga’s back.

Taiga and her husband had already decided on the names of their babies during her pregnancy. Based on the photos from the ultrasound and the babies' positioning in her womb, they were able to determine who was coming out first, so they didn't have to worry about whose name was whose when they were born. Thus, Haruko, Mitsuko then Katsuko, was the order that they would be born in. Their names ended with the Japanese character for "child", just like their grandmother Yasuko's did.

"Haaaaannggh!" Taiga shrieked in Ryuuji's ear. They tightened their arms around each other as Taiga did everything she could to endure the pain. Her nails dug into Ryuuji's shirt. She sunk her teeth into Ryuuji's shoulder so she could keep holding on. Her eyes were tightened shut every time she pushed.

"Heeh... Hooh... Heeh... Hooh..." After pushing for a few minutes, she'd take a break, taking deep breaths while holding some of Ryuuji's shirt in her mouth. Her eyes stared blankly at the ceiling while tears streamed down her cheeks. She was drenched in her own sweat. The pain radiating in her lower body wouldn't leave, so Ryuuji would continue to stroke her back to relieve it.

"Come on, Taiga, you need to push harder!"

"Nngaaaah..."

Yasuko kept motivating her to continue, but after a while, she sounded like a broken record. The babies were too big for Taiga's small body, so she needed to put in more effort, lest her progress be undone. It happened a few times. She felt the urge to push even while she had so little energy, and anytime she did, it would amount to nothing but an intense sting in her lower back.

"Gaaaah..." Taiga whimpered again.

"Just rest a little more this time, alright?"

It was a perpetual loop of pushing and resting. Every round of pushing took more energy than she could regain from resting. The periods of rest after the pushing left her body trembling. The stinging pain only got worse as the delivery progressed. Both the toil of pushing Haruko out and the agony of her body stretching beyond its limits had placed immense strain on her.

"You're almost there, Taiga! I can see the head!"

"AAAAAAGGHH!!!"

It felt like she had been pushing for an eternity. Her lower body was on fire as the first baby finally passed through.

“Sh-she’s out! Haruko’s here!” Yasuko exclaimed as she reached beneath the covers to collect her newborn granddaughter. After cleaning her and wrapping her in a towel, Yasuko held her up for Taiga and Ryuuji to see. For a moment, Taiga and Ryuuji could smile. With their ruffled hair and exhausted eyes, they could finally focus on something that didn’t make them feel fear or dread. They admired their newborn daughter.

Haruko’s eyes were puffy and her skin was a fresh red. She was as huge as the doctors made her out to be. If Taiga carried her, she’d almost be as big as her torso. She was also quite fat, too. The couple took that as a sign that she was healthy and well cared for. Her arms flailed around as her legs were wrapped in the towel. And, most importantly, she cried. Her cries were loud enough to overpower the rain and thunder outside.

Taiga’s shaking hands were able to hold Haruko for a few seconds. The baby gripped and tugged at her shirt. The couple sighed with relief at the girl they had welcomed into the world. For a few seconds, all was calm.

“Nngh... Nnngh!” Taiga groaned again as the pain in her belly quickly became too much to ignore. Her little smile immediately faded. Her contractions had returned. There were still two more left to deliver. Taiga’s head fell as she grabbed onto Ryuuji’s shoulder. Ryuuji took the baby out of her hands and set their daughter aside.

“Ryuuji...” Taiga spoke weakly. She looked up at her husband with fear and exhaustion in her eyes. “I’m so tired... I don’t know if I can go on...” Her whole body was shaking. Her body was still agitated from the stressful delivery of their first daughter. Her trembling teeth, drooping eyes and wrinkled brows told Ryuuji that she was ready to resign. Her husband gently rested her cheek in his palm.

“You’re going to be okay. I’m sure of it,” Ryuuji uttered. However, the longer her labour went on, the more dangerous the situation became.

“O-oh...” Yasuko said suddenly.

“What is it?” Ryuuji looked at her with agitation.

“Taiga... She’s already bleeding a lot...” Yasuko responded. Ryuuji could see her stare at Taiga’s lower body with dread, sweat running down her face. She quickly grabbed clumps of paper towels she had prepared and shoved them underneath the covers. “I-I’ll try to stop the blood flow! You just keep going, Taiga!”

Ryuuji felt his stomach turn at every moment of the delivery. Every groan, every cry, every scream, and now, the news of Taiga’s serious blood loss. He looked at his tired wife’s face one last time. She was panting, struggling to even stay conscious. He immediately hugged her tightly again. They returned to the position they were in before, ready to deliver

their next daughter, Mitsuko. *It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright.* He whispered in Taiga's ear repeatedly, hoping to put her at ease.

The aggressive winds of the storm outside continued to violently pull at the windows.

"Aaaaagghh... Aaaaggh... Nnnngh... NNGAAAAH!"

Taiga's screams filled the room again. Ryuuji's heart was racing faster than ever. *She'll pull through. She'll definitely pull through!* He had to constantly tell himself that. He couldn't ever lose hope, because he knew that as long as he believed in her, she could get through anything. But his eyes suddenly widened when he noticed something while Taiga was pushing and crying. Her grip had gotten weaker. The teeth that stung his shoulder as they sunk into it started to feel more like a pinch. Fear hastily filled his head as he hugged his wife even tighter, afraid she would go off someplace else.

"Sh-She's here! Mitsuko's here!" Yasuko shouted. Taiga couldn't tell how long she was pushing. Nobody could. Time had come to a stop, and nobody was watching the clock. Whether help was arriving soon was out of the question. They just needed Taiga's labour to be over. They needed her to come out alright.

"L-look, Taiga! Our second girl's here!" Ryuuji pointed to their baby as Yasuko held her up in her little towel. She was as active and healthy as her sister was. However, even with the shrill cries of her second newborn, Taiga didn't look at her. She barely moved at all. "Taiga?" Her husband looked down at her worriedly. He couldn't even feel her grip anymore. After slumping over Ryuuji's chest, she suddenly tilted her head all the way back.

"No mooore! I can't take iiiit!" She shouted at the ceiling, a never ending river of tears streaming down her face. She felt her hands slipping from Ryuuji's shoulders, causing her to fall back even further. Her husband swiftly caught her, before letting her grab onto him again. "Aaaaaagghh!!!" She wailed with her face pressing against his shirt. "Make... it... stooop!" That was her limit.

Ryuuji held the back of her head and gently rocked her body to calm her. He stroked her long brunette hair and placed his chin on top of her. "It'll be okay. It will all be okay. You just have to hold out for a little longer and we'll be done, alright? After this, we'll get you treated, then we can all go home with our daughters. You can do it. I know you can," Ryuuji whispered with his words of affirmation. However, while he kept his voice calm and composed to avoid startling his wife, what she couldn't see was his deep frown and fearful eyes. *I want it to be over too, Taiga.*

The thunder in the sky mimicked the incessant rumbling of an earthquake.

“Nnnngaaaah!” Taiga struggled to even groan as her throat got clogged up by saliva she couldn’t bother to swallow. The painful sting of her contractions returned. It was time she delivered her third and final daughter, Katsuko.

Ryuuji only had the exasperated sounds of her cries to rely on to know whether she was still there. Her body had gotten too weak for him to feel her grip. He held her to his chest tightly. With every push she did and every shriek she made, the same thoughts repeated over and over in his head. *How much energy is she going to lose this time? Would she have anything left after this? Will the baby be out after this? How much longer?* His breathing grew heavier. He could only sit there and watch his wife suffer.

“Nnngh! Why... isn’t it...”

“Ryuuji...” Yasuko suddenly turned to him. “Katsuko... She’s stuck.”

Ryuuji’s heart sank while Taiga continued to groan under his chin.

“She isn’t moving at all... I think Taiga might need to push harder—”

“She’s pushing as much as she can!”

“But if she doesn’t give birth to Katsuko now, both of them could...”

Ryuuji’s mind went blank. He could only feel helpless in this situation. He didn’t want to push Taiga any further than she already was, but part of him was telling him that maybe somehow, Taiga could pull through. The thought hadn’t set in that if that part of him was wrong, what he was going to witness was far more agonising, far more tragic than anything he had seen before.

There just wasn’t anything else.

Ryuuji held Taiga’s soft cheeks with both his hands, handling her as gently as he would with a flower. He could feel the coldness of her tears left on her face. He looked firmly and reassuringly into her eyes. She barely had the energy to hold her eyelids up. Only pain and fear remained in them.

“Taiga, listen to me. As long as I’m by your side, everything will be alright. Can you remember that?” Ryuuji stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. Taiga silently nodded. “The baby is having a hard time coming out. You know what you have to do, right?” Taiga nodded again, biting her lip and squinting her eyes as she felt herself wanting to cry. She knew what she was in for was going to be far worse than anything that came before that morning.

“Then you have to promise me... Promise me you’ll hold on. As long as you keep holding on, you’ll always be with me. If you can do that, then we can start raising our children. We’ll move into our new house. We can all be happy. You just... have to do that...”

After getting overcome with fear and dread, Ryuuji finally began to cry. His tears dripped onto his wife's face.

"Nnn–Nnnnggghh!!!" Taiga's head fell again, causing her to break eye contact. The pain returned once more. Their moment of peace was over. Ryuuji hugged her close to his chest. Those words became his final sendoff before the worst arrived.

"Aaaaaaaaaggghh!"

The screams started up again. Ryuuji stroked her back while she pushed, but he was so anxious that his strokes were rushed and panicked rather than gentle and calming. Over Taiga's shoulder, he could see Yasuko worriedly checking his wife's progress underneath the blood-stained covers. She was in such deep focus that she wouldn't even wipe off the sweat tickling her face. Unlike him, she actually had a job to do.

"AaaaaaAAAAGGHH!"

"I can see the head, Taiga! It's moving! You're doing great!"

Ryuuji wrapped Taiga's arms over his neck. By that point, she wasn't holding onto him anymore. The strength in her hands had left. *That's okay. You'll be okay.* He thought. He only needed her to be conscious. He only needed to hear her pained cries and heavy breathing. As long as he had those, he knew Taiga was still there.

"AAAAAAAGGHH!!!"

"The head's out! Just the shoulders now! You're almost there!"

It felt like Taiga's screams had reached its peak. She was making progress. That was good. Ryuuji knew that. It was the only positive thing he could think of in that situation. Yasuko wasn't thinking of anything else, either. Her eyes were locked onto whatever was beneath the futon covers. But when he felt like something was wrong, it was immediately made clear what was.

Crash!

The sound of lightning exploded from outside.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGHH!!!"

Taiga's screams hadn't stopped. She hadn't even taken a break to breathe. Everything she had was getting put into this last push. *Everything.* Ryuuji realised what that meant. If she really gave everything she had, then there really would be nothing left. The thought couldn't be any more clearer when he suddenly felt a warm moisture at his knees. He didn't want to look at it. He didn't want to confirm it. The deep red patch in the futon had grown from beneath Taiga and had finally reached his legs.

Ryuuji closed his eyes and clenched his jaw while tears continued to pour from his eyes and down her back. *God... He started to pray. God, please... Please help her deliver this baby... Please let her be well enough to see how well she's done... Please stop her pain and let her smile again... Please... Save Taiga!* He felt around her body, rubbing his neck against hers. She was getting cold, so he wanted to warm her up. He didn't want to see anything. He only needed to sense Taiga's presence.

But soon, Ryuuji would be forced to open his eyes again. He heard a gasp from Yasuko and the flutter of the covers as she reached underneath it. *Was it over?* He could only wait for her signal.

It all happened in seconds.

"Ryu... Ryuuji..." Yasuko said under her breath. Ryuuji's eyelids slowly drew open. There was his mother with a look of horror as she stared downward. In her hands was a baby in a towel. Its skin was pale.

"Katsuko... She's... Not breathing..." Yasuko said weakly.

The mother and son's eyes met. *Not breathing? What? How is that possible?* None of it felt real to him. Then, another thought came to him. The delivery was over. His head swiftly turned down to his wife. He needed to see her face. He needed to see if her eyes were still open, if she was still breathing.

For a moment, she was. Her breathing was weak, but Ryuuji could see the movements of her mouth that confirmed its presence. But her head was facing away. She was looking at Katsuko, their third daughter, the one she struggled so much to push out. The baby didn't cry or move. She only laid there silently.

"No..." Taiga let out an inaudible sound before her hands slipped away from Ryuuji. Her arms drooped down her sides and her fingers dangled as her hands lost their grip. Her eyes peacefully shut while her body fell backward. Ryuuji quickly caught her back.

"Taiga!" He cried out. He held her together by her arms and gazed at her face. The flow of tears came to an abrupt end in the middle of her cheeks while dried tears left behind marks all over her smooth profile. Her skin had turned pale white. Strands of loose hair bent over the sides of the poor girl's face. Her eyelashes stood at the ends of her eyelids and slouched from the moisture created by her painful sobbing. Her little mouth was left open like a crack in a wall. There wasn't a patch of skin or a piece of muscle that moved. It was as if he were holding a realistic plastic doll with its eyes glued shut.

"TAIGA!" Ryuuji shook her body, her head rocking forward and backward while her hair flipped around. Maybe she was just asleep. Maybe, if he disturbed her enough, she

would wake up. Maybe she would punch him in the chin for irritating her. Maybe she would yell at him and call him an insolent mutt. But when the shaking stopped and her hair settled, he was only met with silence.

“Taiga... No...” Ryuuji’s chest heaved as the tears dripped from his eyelids. He laid her motionless body along the blood-stained futon and took a nearby pillow to rest her head. He took her hand and locked his fingers with hers. Her hand was as cold as the stale air surrounding them. “Taiga...” Ryuuji’s voice cracked as he whimpered. He held his head low, the ends of his hair touching her chest. His shoulders jolted with each muffled cry he let out. Water dripped down the tip of his nose.

The sight made Yasuko shuffle backward while she held Katsuko in her hands. She wanted to throw up, but seeing her son and daughter-in-law in such despair made her restless. She had to do something. She looked at the motionless baby in her arms. She turned her eyes away from her children and immediately began rubbing the baby’s body with the towel.

The baby’s body shook with the rigorous movements Yasuko made on it. She rubbed and rubbed as if she were going to start a fire. She moved around, even getting on her feet and walking about to see if she would be more successful in a different position. Ryuuji was too distraught to even look at what she was attempting. Eventually she settled next to Taiga, getting on her knees to help Katsuko. She pressed on her chest and blew into her mouth, hoping to resuscitate her.

Ryuuji’s hand shook while it gripped Taiga’s hand tightly. He brought it to his forehead and continued to pray. *Please, God...*

All the months that passed since he’d married Taiga were the happiest he’d ever been in his entire twenty years of living. It all happened only a year after they graduated high school. His dream of carrying her down the aisle while almost all their family and friends cheered them on had come true. He’d never forget the serene orange sunset he watched from their honeymoon hotel balcony while he stood beside. *All the time we’d spent together...*

When the fanfare of marriage was over, he’d even cherish the little moments of their monotonous everyday life. He’d remember the day Taiga came to his apartment with a big smile on her face before she’d tell him about the well-paying job she’d landed, and how she’d always try to treat him and Yasuko to dinner with her own hard-earned money. He couldn’t bear to think of a day where Taiga wouldn’t be there to eat with them in their living room. *The incredible life we’ve built...*

The excitement that came on the night of their first anniversary, when Taiga announced her miraculous triplet pregnancy; it followed him and Taiga throughout all the

months that came after. As he watched Taiga grow, he felt a deep pleasure in caring for her during her pregnancy. He'd feed her anything she wanted and change her when it became difficult. He got to listen to his children's beating hearts and felt their little movements inside Taiga's womb. He couldn't wait to raise these children alongside her. *This family I've built...*

And yet here he was, gripping his wife's cold hand from her motionless body. All he could do was try to hold onto her while she bore the agony of delivering the children they were so excited to have. The tears he shed ran down the sides of her arm as he pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. *Please, God... Don't take all of that away!*

Yasuko continued to press Katsuko's chest and routinely blew into Katsuko's soft mouth. Sweat dripped from her chin as she did everything in her power to bring her granddaughter to consciousness. She wasn't ready to live in the moment of grief that Ryuuji was in. It was her role as his mother to make sure that everything would be okay. She had to keep trying. She rubbed Katsuko's body profusely.

Suddenly, as if she'd pressed a hidden "On" button, an area she pressed on caused Katsuko's body to jolt. Yasuko took one deep breath and dipped towards Katsuko's little face, blowing straight down her throat.

Ack! Hack! Kaugh!

Katsuko coughed. And with each cough, something else triggered. Nobody could notice it over the struggling sounds of the baby's sputtering.

The tips of Taiga's fingers twitched.