

## Chapter 2: Takagi Seina

The early morning sun shone through the little cracks between the curtains in Taiga and Ryuuji's bedroom. Their digital clock started beeping and flashing "8:00 AM" on its black and red screen. Awoken by its high-pitched sounds, Taiga groaned while she slapped her hand on its top, switching it off.

Ryuuji lifted his back and sat upright, rubbing his eyes after a deep slumber. He shifted to the side of the bed, pulling his legs over the edge. His left lower leg was covered in a cast. Taiga followed, a massive bump rising beneath her chest from under the covers. She pulled the covers off, revealing her heavily pregnant belly protruding from her long-sleeved pajama top. It was only able to cover the top half of her body. Her eyelids were still heavy after a night's rest.

Taiga shuffled off her bedside and walked around to Ryuuji's side. She took her husband's arm and draped him over her shoulders. Her legs trembled from lifting the weight of both her husband and her baby, but she quickly stabilised once Ryuuji was on his feet. They staggered towards the bathroom in front of their bed, with Taiga's back slouched and Ryuuji sliding his left leg across the laminated wooden floor.

"Hey, I need help washing underneath."

"I got it."

The couple stood underneath the warm water spraying from the shower head above them. They faced each other in the shower while they coated each other's bare bodies with soap suds. Taiga stood directly underneath the shower, with most of the water hitting her hair and the rest of it splashing onto her husband, who was sitting on a stool in front of her with a plastic covering around his cast. His head reached up to her belly. Taiga rubbed her shampoo-covered hair while her husband washed the underside of her belly.

After leaving the shower, Ryuuji was sitting on the front edge of the bed. His wife's back faced him while he helped her pull her maternity pants up. He then draped her short maternity dress over her torso, her body now fully covered. In turn, Taiga helped pull up her husband's soft denim pants, buttoning his waist while he put on his ocean blue polo shirt. He stood up and took his wife's hand, both of them leaving their bedroom fully dressed.

However, a challenge would come upon them. They stood at the top of a staircase, gazing at the floor at the very bottom. The couple groaned at the obstacle before them. They

both took a deep breath, preparing themselves to move down the staircase with their less-than-mobile bodies.

Ryuuji faced his back to the stairs, holding the handrail such that his unharmed leg was right next to it. He gripped the handrail with one hand and held his wife's waist with the other. He took a few steps down the stairs before his wife followed. Taiga held his shoulder with one hand and the other on the handrail to maintain her balance. Her round belly pressed against his face. The couple slowly went down the steps one-by-one.

"Just so you know, it's your fault that *both* of us are in this situation," Taiga hissed.

"Hey, that biker came out of nowhere! That crash was in no way my fault!" Ryuuji hissed back, but Taiga snarkily raised an eyebrow at him. "Err... Okay, well, I guess the other thing is my fault. But still!"

The couple continued making their way down the stairs. Ryuuji would step first, drag his left leg down, then wait for his wife to follow. He stepped, dragged, and waited, until suddenly, his right foot slipped.

"Uwaaaahh!" The couple shrieked in unison as Ryuuji fell backward, pulling his wife along while they rushed down the stairs. He struggled to stop himself from sliding down, hopping with his right foot while he tried to regain his balance. His hand slid down the handrail. Taiga fearfully hugged her arms over her husband's shoulders as she felt the shock of falling overcome her.

Finally, Ryuuji's right leg quickly stabilised and planted itself on a step, bringing their descent to an abrupt halt. The couple stood still and panted while their hearts raced. They took a deep breath before continuing the loop of stepping, dragging and waiting. The couple safely reached the bottom of the stairs, breathing a sigh of relief. Taiga carried her husband by the shoulders once more as they walked through their living room.

"How're you feeling, Taiga? Are you feeling dizzy?" Ryuuji asked.

"You don't have to worry so much, Ryuuji. I might be feeling the effects of my older body, but I'm still much healthier now," Taiga answered.

"Okay... Then, have you been getting any contractions lately?"

"Just a few false ones during the night. But I don't think the baby will be coming soon. Not this week, at least."

"Are you sure? It's getting really close to your due date. Don't you think we should start getting ready?"

"I'll be fine. I think I can get Ya-chan to send us to the hospital when the day comes."

"Yasuko? What about your mom?"

“Why would I ask her?”

“Well, she *is* here, after all.”

The couple arrived at the dinner table, where a freshly cooked breakfast was served. Steam levitated from the plates and bowls of food. At the table was Takagi Seina, Taiga’s mother, who had taken the Takagi name after remarrying. She was reading a book before her eyes met with Taiga’s.

“Ah, Taiga, Ryuuji, I hope you two slept well,” she said before sipping a cup of tea.

“Well, at least she’s got breakfast settled,” Ryuuji added.

“Ugh... When are you going back home, Mom?” Taiga groaned.

“Not anytime soon. Who else is going to take care of both of you?”

“Not you.”

The two women pouted and glared at each other. Ryuuji looked at them cluelessly. “She’s right, you know. Yasuko isn’t available to help us since she and her parents had gotten sick,” he interjected.

The couple recalled the day they saw Yasuko and her parents off at the airport. In her furry leopard coat, she gave Taiga and Ryuuji a peace sign while standing with her parents outside the entrance to the departure hall at Haneda Airport.

“Annyeonghi gyeseyo! I’ll be back from Seoul in a few days, yo! Don’t get into trouble, alright? Bye byeeee!!!” She said while she waved her hand frantically and walked towards the checkpoint. Naturally, Taiga and Ryuuji waved back.

Unfortunately, Ryuuji fractured his leg a day later, leaving Taiga as the only one able to care for him. When it seemed like the Takasu family’s luck couldn’t get any worse, when the couple returned to the airport, Yasuko and her parents looked pale and sickly. She slouched wherever she walked, and her legs moved sluggishly.

“We all got food poisoning, so I’m staying with my parents to watch over them. I think I’ll be fine, but my parents are super old! What if Dad suddenly passed away?”

“Don’t tempt fate, you idiot!” Seiji, Ryuuji’s grandfather, interjected.

That was the gist of everything that happened over the span of the last month. The Takasu family was left in an unlucky situation, with both caretakers of the family rendered immobile and nobody present to help them or care for their children.

“Why didn’t you call me, Taiga? I could’ve taken care of the girls for you,” Seina asked her daughter.

“Because if I did, you would’ve ended your trip to Gunma early and come all the way back home!” Taiga shouted. Indeed, the Takagi family was out of town to visit Seina’s

in-laws, who happened to live many kilometres away in Gunma. Only shortly after returning did Seina find out what had occurred while she was away. She clenched her teeth and stood up, creating a loud screech as she pushed her chair backward.

“Of course I would! What kind of horrible mother wouldn’t stop everything they were doing to help their own daughter? You should’ve just called me, told me you fainted and that you were going to see a specialist, then let me babysit for you while you were in the hospital and getting all those weird tests run on you! But instead, you went to that awful man and left your precious children with him! How could you, after everything he’s done!?” Seina shouted back at her daughter frustratedly.

“Dad took care of the girls just fine! He’s not like that anymore, Mom!” Taiga leaned forward as she projected her voice. Her mother crossed her arms and scoffed.

“Oh, please, that bum could take care of a house plant if he really tried. That doesn’t make him any better than what he was before.”

Taiga grunted loudly at Seina’s stubbornness, but Ryuuji inched forward to speak.

“Okay, I think we’re getting a little out of control here.”

The two women immediately quietened. He focused his sights on Seina.

“Is it alright if you could move out once Yasuko’s well? She does live here. I’m sure she’d want to be sleeping in her bedroom again.”

“Actually, I’d like to stay here a little longer. I’m sure your mother will be fine staying with her parents for a while.”

“Okay, how long?” Ryuuji asked.

“Mmh... Once Yuuchi is old enough to walk,” Seina uttered. Yuuchi was the name that Taiga and Ryuuji had picked out for their baby boy that was soon to arrive. Taiga felt a blood vessel burst at the thought of her mother living in her house for that long.

“What!? No way! You’re moving out *today*!” Taiga interjected.

“Oh, stop being so stubborn, Taiga!” Her mother said scornfully.

“*I’m* being stubborn!? How dare you call me that, you squatter!”

“Don’t call me a squatter!” Seina stepped forward and leaned to her daughter.

“I’ll call the police! I’ll do it!” Taiga followed, getting in her mother’s face.

“L-ladies, let’s be reasonable here!” Ryuuji intervened, getting between the two women and creating some distance between them.

“Reasonable? *She’s* the one that needs to be reasonable!” Taiga barked in Ryuuji’s ear.

“Do you seriously think you’ll be fine on your own!?” Seina leaned to face Taiga.

“I didn’t say I was against getting help! I just don’t want *your* help!” Taiga leaned too.

“There isn’t anyone else to help!” Seina inched forward again.

“I’ll find someone, then!” Taiga followed.

“You won’t!” Seina moved forward again. Ryuuji was getting squished between the two women while they shouted in his ear.

“I will! Look, I’ve already got names! Aiko, Ami, Suzuki–” Taiga counted each of the names on her fingers before getting interrupted.

“Oh, enough of that nonsense–” Seina moved again. Ryuuji felt his body get compressed as the space between the women closed. He held their shoulders as his breathing got tighter from the lack of room.

*“I’ve had enough of your–”*

Finally, Ryuuji snapped.

“Can you two just shut up!?” Ryuuji shouted as he pushed the women apart again. For a moment, the women were silenced. However, like two mules, they stubbornly continued their squabble, stretching their arms out all the way and pointing at each other’s faces.

“Her first!” They shouted in unison. Ryuuji sighed and fell to his knees, dropping his head low, unable to handle the women’s vitriol any longer. One man wouldn’t be enough to calm these tigers down. Thankfully, their battle would soon be interrupted.

“Hyaaaaaaaah!!!”

The adults’ heads were raised at the muffled sound of high pitched screaming coming from above them. They turned to the stairs and heard the pitter-patter of three sets of little feet running down the stairs.

“Kyaaaaaah!!! Hahahahahaah!”

The now unmuffled squealing of three little girls, with incessant laughter mixed into the cacophony, rang into the adults’ ears as Taiga’s identical triplet daughters made a beeline for their mother with bright smiles on their little faces. The three girls reached their mother’s waist and tugged excitedly at her maternity dress.

“Mom! Mom! TV! TV!” Haruko blabbered incessantly.

“Turn it on! Pleeaaase!” Mitsuko tried to ask kindly through her excitement.

“We need it! We need TV!” Katsuko yelled while roughly tugging on the dress.

“Okay, okay, I’ll turn it on! Let me get the remote,” Taiga said. She carefully stepped onto the living room’s lowered floor beside the dining table and waddled to the coffee table. She picked up the remote and switched on the TV. Her three little daughters scurried to her feet and snuggled up behind the coffee table, still in their pajamas and eagerly waiting for their mother to change the channel. The time on the TV screen read “9:00 AM”.

After pressing a button on the remote a few times, Taiga switched to a local channel that displayed a kids' show's mascot on the screen. The character was a panda made entirely out of bread. The sisters' eyes lit up at the sight of the cute creature.

"Yaaay! Pan-panda! Pan-panda!" The girls cheered together happily. Taiga returned to Ryuuji to help him stand up. The adults watched the children joyfully sing along to the show's theme song. Taiga and Seina felt the rage inside them get washed away as they took in the adorable view of the little girls enjoying their TV show. They couldn't help but smile along with them.

"Ever since I put it on for them, they've begged us every morning to turn on the TV," Ryuuji added.

"Aah... How adorable," Seina said.

"You just can't get enough of them," Taiga sighed.

Everyone's ears pricked up when a young woman in a dainty costume appeared on screen. The background was littered with flashy visuals of the titular mascot behind them. The three girls quickly stood up at the coffee table and leaned closer to the screen.

"Hey! If you love Panpanda, then we've got something special for you! Panpanda's Special Day Of Fun is happening near you! Come meet Panpanda in person and participate in our games for an exciting day of adventure for all Panpanda lovers! Parents and kids can play to win the special limited edition Jumbo Panpanda Plushie! It'll be a day of fun for everyone! Don't wait! Start booking now!"

The woman spoke enthusiastically while gesturing at all the visuals behind her. There were videos of kids and adults playing games with many colourful props, like balls and balloons. Once the announcement was over, the girls turned to their mother.

"Mom, are we going? Are we going?" Katsuko asked excitedly, hopping on the spot.

"Don't worry, we're going. I already booked a slot for us," Taiga told her calmly.

"It looks like there'll be a lot of physical activity. Are the kids going to be playing on their own? I don't see how either of you could play along," Seina asked.

"Ryuuji's sitting out, but I can definitely handle it," Taiga said.

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, come on, I'm not going to miss a day of family fun just because I'm pregnant."

"Right... Don't come crying when your son arrives in the midst of all the games."

The two women pouted and snarkily turned their faces away from each other.

"We should get going," Ryuuji intervened again.

"Where to?" Seina asked.

“We’re just buying something for a baby,” Taiga said.

Haruko enthusiastically approached her father with his crutches in hand. He lifted himself from Taiga’s shoulders, lightening the weight she was carrying. The couple made their way to the front door. Seina followed them.

“Maybe I should go in Taiga’s stead. I can carry a few things,” Seina suggested.

“You should stay and watch the girls. We’ll be fine on our own,” Ryuuji said.

“Oh... Okay.”

Taiga sat at the ledge by the front door while Ryuuji knelt down and helped her put on her shoes. She would then do the same for her husband. The couple waved goodbye to their daughters, who waved back before turning their focus back to their TV show. After shutting the front door behind them, Seina was left alone with the children. She raised her chest and arrogantly smiled with her fists against her hips. She was the woman of the house now.

The girls were giggling at a joke that Panpanda had said. Their eyes remained glued to the screen until suddenly, the screen cut to black. They turned to Seina, who was pointing the remote to the TV with her finger over the power button.

“Hey!” The girls shouted together.

“Now, now, I think you’ve had enough of this show for one day. How about we play outside, instead? It’s a wonderful morning today,” Seina said, waving around the remote.

“But... I want to watch...” Mitsuko whined with her bottom lip jutting out. She seemed close to crying.

“Playing outside is good for you. You’ll get lots of exercise. You want to play those games on the Special Day of Fun, don’t you?”

The girls nodded, unable to come up with a rebuttal.

“Alright, get dressed, girls. We’re going to the park!” Seina said, pumping her fist.

“Okay...” The girls spoke dispiritedly.

The glaring morning sun floated in the deep blue sky, which was littered with fluffy white clouds flowing by. The surface of the Shingashi River was glistening under the bright rays of sunlight. A circular shadow is cast onto the ground by a frisbee flying across the green grass. Its trajectory was halted when Haruko, now in a little orange dress, jumped into the air to catch it with her tiny hand.

“Nice catch, Haruko!” Seina said from a distance, wearing a sports jacket and visor.

“Now throw it back to me!” She shouted with her hands in the air. Mitsuko and Katsuko were standing idly to the side. They stood an equal distance away from one another,

forming a neat square. Mitsuko watched the frisbee fly by as she fidgeted with her pink skirt. Katsuko was sitting in the grass wearing a red T-shirt and denim shorts. Her eyes focused on some ants crawling between the green blades.

“Okay Mitsuko, it’s your turn!” Seina shouted after catching the frisbee. She tossed it towards her. As she watched the frisbee get closer and closer, Mitsuko raised her hands high in the air and stood on her toes.

*Thunk.*

It was a sound similar to hitting a coconut. The frisbee knocked Mitsuko on her forehead, causing her to fall backward and land on her butt. She placed her hands over it while she formed a deep frown.

“Mm... Nn...” She began to whine. She started to sniffle.

“Mmmnnnnn!!!” Her whining raised in pitch while tears streamed down her cheeks.

Seina quickly ran over and held Mitsuko’s forehead, analysing it.

“It’s okay, Mitsuko. You aren’t injured,” she said.

“I don’t want to play anymore...” Mitsuko said, her lips quivering.

“You can sit down, then,” Seina told her. Mitsuko did as she said, sitting on the moist green grass. Seina turned to Katsuko, who was staring at a couple walking their dog.

“Katsukooo! It’s your turn!” She shouted, catching Katsuko’s attention. She tossed the frisbee once she saw the little girl’s head turn to her. Then, she watched it fly away. Strangely, Katsuko had decided to get on all fours. As the frisbee drew closer to her, she used her legs to push herself forward and reached her arms in front of her, just like how a dog would run. While on all fours, she jumped into the air and grabbed the frisbee with her mouth.

“Katsuko!?” Seina shrieked.

“Awoooo!” She raised her head and howled with her teeth against the frisbee.

Seina’s head darted around as she noticed some passersby from afar laughing at Katsuko’s unsightly impression of a dog. *What a crazy child.* That was what she believed they were thinking, but she couldn’t hear what they were saying from that distance.

“K-Katsuko! That’s not how you’re supposed to do it!” Seina yelled as she marched towards the dog in a girl’s body. She sat on the grass with her hands in front of her chest, imitating a dog’s paws. She wiggled her hips to mimic a wagging tail.

“Give it here!” Seina said as she grabbed the frisbee. But it wouldn’t budge from Katsuko’s strong toddler jaw.

“Grrrrr!” Katsuko growled and pulled away from Seina’s hand. She furrowed her brows to intimidate her grandmother while they played tug of war on the plastic frisbee.



“Stop, Katsuko! It’s bad for your teeth!”

“Grrrr!” Katsuko growled even louder. Sweat ran down Seina’s cheek as she looked around again. More passersby were giggling at her struggle to keep her “dog” under control. She tugged harder on the frisbee, but Katsuko pulled harder in response.

“Stop being so troublesome!” Seina demanded. But Katsuko only pulled harder.

“Uwah!” Seina shrieked when she lost her grip on the frisbee and fell backward. With the frisbee now fully in her grasps, Katsuko ran around the field of grass, still on all fours. She panted just like a golden retriever. Seina quickly chased after her while Haruko and Mitsuko watched from afar. More passersby guffawed at the sight of the old woman struggling to catch the little girl.

“No! Katsuko! Get back here!”

But there was no stopping a dog that was off its leash.

While the sun was still out, Taiga and Ryuuji had returned to their neighbourhood, now walking along the road towards their home. The couple walked side-by-side, with Ryuuji in his crutches while Taiga held her left hand to his back to keep him stabilised. She carried a large box under her right armpit, which contained a disassembled baby walker. With both of their movements handicapped, it wasn’t difficult to match each other’s pace.

“Was your mom always so on edge?” Ryuuji asked.

“What? No! She wasn’t always like that,” Taiga answered. “She only started acting this way some time after I’d given birth to the girls. She was calling and messaging me almost everyday.”

“What did you two talk about?”

“Not much. She asked about work, my health, just the usual stuff. There were times where I couldn’t talk much and had to keep telling her ‘I’m fine!’ until she’d finally decide to hang up and leave me be.”

Taiga, feeling the box slip out from her armpit, readjusted its position. She sighed.

“The thing is, I like that she’s thinking about me. It’s nice that we’re keeping in contact with each other. But now? Now she’s just too much. I can’t do anything without her watching over me. She’s only acting this way because I’m pregnant. Well, I’ve already got this baby with me 24/7. It’d be nice if I had some space.”

Taiga huffed deeply while caressing her pregnant belly.

“I guess when she found out I fainted, that set things off for her... Well, I think she was more mad about the fact I didn’t tell her.”

“She had all the reason to, didn’t she?” Ryuuji asked.

“Well, yeah, but she gave me no choice. If I did tell her, she’d definitely overreact. Don’t you think it’d be a bit awkward if she dropped everything just to find out I was completely fine?”

Ryuuji wrinkled his brows.

“You can’t play around like that, Taiga. There’s no way you would’ve known that you were ‘completely fine’,” he said.

“Whatever. Even if I wasn’t fine, I would’ve preferred if she’d see me without going through the trouble of coming back home early,” Taiga muttered.

“Taiga, you were in danger. It isn’t right to think that way.”

“But it really would be unnecessary.”

“It doesn’t matter how necessary her reaction would be, it was an emergency!”

Taiga stopped in her tracks after hearing Ryuuji’s raised voice.

“Why does it matter that I feel that way? Is there something wrong with being annoyed by how overbearing my mother had been acting?” She said as she irritably turned her head to her husband.

“No, Taiga, but...”

Ryuuji choked on his words. Taiga chuffed.

“You can’t be serious... You really want to take her side of this?”

Ryuuji struggled to get the words out of his throat.

“Are you going to start acting like her, too?” Taiga whined.

Ryuuji felt his chest begin to ache as Taiga continued to rant. He huffed, offended by Taiga’s mockery. There was no way he could hold himself together after that.

“Ugh... Just when I thought you had my—”

“I still remember everything that happened!”

He yelled.

“I saw you close your eyes and fall on your belly in my hospital room. The nurses even heard the scream I let out when it happened. I climbed out of my bed and bruised my knee so I could crawl to you and...”

Ryuuji felt his lips quiver and shoulders tense up. He lowered his head and felt his eyes narrow and his teeth grit.

“The nurses... They came to find me crying while I was holding you in my arms! We thought we were going to lose you again! Do you really expect everyone to just be calm about that kind of thing?”

Taiga weakly opened her mouth, like a child being scolded by her mother.

“But that’s different—”

“IT’S NOT!”

Ryuuji shouted with his chest as his eyes met Taiga’s. Her lips were sealed shut after being interrupted so suddenly. He looked into her big eyes and noticed her constricted pupils. Though it wasn’t obvious to the average eye, he was familiar enough with his wife’s soft face to notice the skin around her lips beginning to quiver. He softened his gaze after realising how shocked his wife was.

Taiga gently placed the box down and then, like a magnet, hugged her husband’s arm and buried her face in his sleeve.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Ryuuji,” she said shakily. Ryuuji could feel a wet spot of tears growing in his sleeve. “I... I know how hurt you must’ve felt... Seeing me like that...”

His shoulders quickly lightened. “N-no, Taiga...” He let his crutch rest on the side of his body so he could lift his wife’s head. He gazed into her watery eyes and witnessed her scrunched up frown.

“None of this is your fault. What happened to you back then was out of your control, it’s just... I want you to think a little more about yourself and everyone around you. You need to look out for yourself, you know? Everyone cares so much about you, we don’t even want to imagine what life would be like without you. And let’s not forget...”

Ryuuji felt his hand on Taiga’s pregnant belly.

“You’ve got four children counting on you to be there for them, and you said it yourself that you wanted to be the best mother you could be. So... Please, be more cautious, alright? That’s all I ask.”

Taiga nodded quietly. Ryuuji wrapped his arm around his wife’s little shoulders to pull her in for a warm embrace.

“I can’t have a repeat of what happened last time,” he uttered in her ear.

Ryuuji scratched his head after letting Taiga go.

“I know you’re going to hate hearing this, but... I was actually glad that your mother came to stay. I hated the feeling of not being able to do anything when your life was at risk. It’s good to know that there’s at least someone that could help you if something went wrong. Maybe you could give her a chance?”

“I hear you, Ryuuji,” Taiga said gently. She leaned her head on her husband’s chest. Ryuuji lowered his head and let his face rest in his wife’s luscious hair.

“Life just doesn’t get easier for any of us, doesn’t it?” She said, “I know you’re worried, but I also don’t want my mother in our house anymore. I’ll let her stay until Yuuchi is born but if worse comes to worst, I’ll have to ask her to leave. I could probably call Ami over to stay instead.”

“That doesn’t sound like a bad idea,” Ryuuji responded.

The couple silently stood in the middle of the asphalt road for a moment. Taiga then wrapped her arms around her husband and started cheekily nuzzling her puffy cheeks against his hard, burly chest. Ryuuji exhaled bashfully.

“Ooh!” Taiga huffed, her eyes suddenly widening. She backed away from her husband and held her pregnant belly tightly with both hands. “Aah!” She exclaimed with a high voice. She looked down at her belly with her mouth agape.

“What? What is it? Is it time!?” Ryuuji asked anxiously with sweat running down the side of his head. His body tensed up. “Oh no, this isn’t good. We have to call an ambulance!” He exclaimed. His pants rustled as he tried to search for his phone, but in his nervous fit, he hadn’t noticed Taiga’s wide, open smile.

“What? No! Ryuuji, look!” Taiga said excitedly. Ryuuji stopped himself and watched his wife lift up her maternity dress to reveal her bare belly. There was a noticeable bump in the top of her belly, and another on her side. “Oh my goodness...” Taiga gasped with wonder as she watched her baby toss and turn inside her. The bumps were constantly moving about along her skin.

“Woah...” Ryuuji said with amazement. He felt his body relax as a wave of warmth washed over him at the sight of his son moving around.

“He’s so active! Ooh, I’ve never seen him so active before! Ah, remember when the girls were like this?” Taiga whispered excitedly. “Yuuchi... Yuuchi... Ooh! He’s responding to my voice!” She squealed quietly. Every time she said her son’s name, he would kick in the direction of her voice.

With a toothy grin, Ryuuji got on one knee and held his wife’s belly, resting his hands over hers. Taiga could feel his breath against her skin as he watched their baby wriggle about.

“My goodness... What a healthy baby!” Ryuuji exclaimed. He chuckled with relief.

“Look, Ryuuji! When I drag my finger along my belly, he follows it!”

“I can see! Hey, Yuuchi, Yuuchi...”

The lovebirds were enamoured by their little bundle of joy. While their baby was awake, they stood in that part of the road for nearly half an hour. Taiga leaned against a wall while they did nothing but play with their baby.

Eventually, the couple returned through the front door of their home. They entered with bright smiles that they were unable to wipe off their faces. However, those smiles started to fade when they returned. As they stood by the rows of shoes at their feet, they found their three daughters sitting at the coffee table in the living room.

Their heads rested on the table, except for Katsuko's. She was sitting up straight with her arms crossed wearing a dog cone around her head. The room was eerily silent. Something was off. Taiga used her feet to push her shoes off and approached the girls.

"Uh... Did something happen while we were away?" Taiga asked. Haruko and Mitsuko were visibly tired. Their arms were drooping to the floor.

"Grandma made us play outside..." Haruko groaned.

"I wanted to watch Panpanda..." Mitsuko bemoaned.

"Arf!" Katsuko only barked frustratedly.

"Okay..." Taiga mumbled. She looked at the cone around Katsuko's head before turning to the staircase with the large box under her armpit. *A cone actually isn't a bad idea.* She thought while she slowly waddled up the stairs. However, when she went to grab the handrail, she realised it was covered in some kind of thick, soft and rubbery material.

Something in the corner of Ryuuji's eye caught his attention. The entrance to the kitchen was installed with a baby gate underneath the archway.

"Huh... I don't remember that gate being there." With his curiosity piqued, he moved to the kitchen and struggled to open the gate with his crutches under his arms.

"Huh!?"

Once he entered, he was greeted by the shocking view of his entire kitchen littered with strange attachments. The cupboards were layered with soft rubber, especially around the edges. He tried to open one of the cupboards, but all of them were sealed with some sort of magnetic lock attached to them. The power outlets and stove knobs were covered in plastic locks as well. Ryuuji groaned at what had been done to his once beautiful kitchen.

As for Taiga, she was making her way towards her bedroom. When she opened the door, she noticed the locks on the window in front of her, with the crib sitting underneath it. To her right, she found her mother fiddling with the drawers beside her and Ryuuji's king-sized bed. She was taking out all her creams, ointments and lotions, leaving them by the mirror above her.

"Mom! What the hell are you doing?" Taiga snarled.

“Oh, Taiga. You’re back. I just thought, while you were away, that I’d take the liberty of childproofing the place before the baby would arrive. There’s a surprising amount of places the baby could injure themselves, you know.” Seina said nonchalantly.

“And what are you doing with my bottles, exactly?”

“Reorganising! I just thought all your lotions should be separated by category. I organised them based on body parts,” Seina started pointing at the bottles. “Those are for the face, these for the legs... Oh, this one is for your belly!” She said while gently shaking a large bottle of oil in her hand.

“I also childproofed the kitchen and rearranged the items in the fridge. Fruits and veggies go at the bottom, all the hazardous items go at the top, and pumped milk goes in the middle, where it’s just out of reach for the baby but easy for you to take,” she said, listing the items on her fingers. “Oh, but I still have more gadgets to add. They’re all in the garage. I should probably childproof the garage too—”

“Mom, you’re turning my house into a dungeon.”

“Well, you can never be too prepared,” her mother said, hands on her hips.

Just when Seina was done talking, the two women heard a muffled crashing sound from below them. They quickly left the bedroom.

“Girls, what was that?” Taiga shouted as she waddled down the stairs. Seina held her hand while they went down briskly. To Taiga’s relief, the girls were sitting just where they were. Haruko and Mitsuko had fallen asleep on the table. Katsuko was spread across the floor, laying motionless. The kitchen looked empty from where they stood, too, so they deduced that the sound came from the garage.

They went past the archway into the kitchen and turned to the passage underneath the staircase, leading them to the garage. The women were immediately greeted by a massive pile of boxes. Some of them had been opened, seemingly from the impact of a fall, causing childproofing material and gadgets to be strewn all over the floor.

“What is all this!?” Taiga yelled.

“Oh, that’s everything I bought for childproofing,” Seina answered.

“How much did you buy!?”

“Just enough for the house... Maybe some extras in case they break...”

“Ugh... I don’t need all this! All these boxes are going to collect dust in my garage!”

“Well, you might use them some day.”

“The girls would be in college by then! I’m getting rid of all this. I can’t stand looking at this mess anymore,” Taiga started stacking some boxes.

“But I already bought all of these. It would be a waste if we didn’t use them.”

“We’ll give them away. I doubt they’d use them, but they have to go somewhere. Let’s see... Maya’s as far along as I am... Yamazaki-san announced her pregnancy last month... Yano-san is having her quadruplets soon... Iwamoto-san is having her baby soon too. I heard she was struggling so she could use it.... Oh, and you’ll be delivering to them, Mom.”

“What!?” Seina shrieked.

“Well, you don’t expect me running around the neighbourhood with this pregnant belly, do you? I’ll give you the addresses later. Let’s just clean this up first.”

“Oh... Alright.”

As Taiga continued clearing the pile, packing the stray items into their boxes, she pulled a metal crutch from out of the pile, mistaking it for something Seina purchased that had fallen out of its box.

“Oh my god... Ryuuji!”

Taiga immediately began rummaging through all the boxes. She quickly came across a large foot jutting out from the pile. She started pulling on the foot, her face turning red as she strained her body.

“Ryuuji, get up!” She shouted. “Mom, help me out here!”

“Oh, right!”

Seina dug through the boxes to find a second foot. It took half an hour for them to pull Ryuuji out of the pile, due to his own weight and the added mass of the boxes. He seemed to have fallen chest-first onto the floor and was buried underneath the boxes. Once he was freed, he was left groaning and unable to move his body. Taiga sighed at the absolute mess that her mother had created.

Night would fall upon the Takasu household. Taiga and Ryuuji returned to wearing their pajamas, as did their daughters. Taiga laid under the covers with her back facing her husband. Ryuuji had his arms wrapped around her, his hands resting on her belly.

“Nn... Nnngh...” Both Taiga and Ryuuji had their faces scrunched up as they grimaced in pain together. Taiga was experiencing some painful false contractions in her abdomen, while Ryuuji’s body was covered in bruises from the incident with the boxes. Eventually, at the same time, they slowly opened their eyes. They were left half open from their exhaustion.

“Ryuuji, I can’t sleep.”

“Me neither.”

Ryuuji freed his wife from his embrace and fell back to his side of the bed. Taiga sat up and took deep breaths while she caressed her belly, enduring the pain and waiting for the pangs to subside.

“Is it time?” Ryuuji asked, his back glued to the bed.

“No, it’s not... Ugh... This happens way too much...” Taiga groaned. She let out one last deep breath before the bout of cramps finally left.

“How’re your injuries?” She asked, her hands still on her belly.

“I’m completely sore...”

Taiga promptly laid on her side next to her husband and rested her head on his chest. She hugged his muscular arm and gently kissed it.

“Does this help?” She asked.

“A little.”

Taiga sighed and shut her eyes, making herself comfortable.

“You know, I was expecting a little more shouting when you found me,” Ryuuji said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Taiga whined.

“You were trying to show some restraint, weren’t you?”

“What, did you want me to shout at my mom and go crazy over you?” Taiga teased.

“No, no, I thought it was good when you stayed composed.”

“Well, I do have my limits.”

Taiga started gently moving her finger on Ryuuji’s chest in a circular motion.

“We may argue a lot, but I would never want to lash out at her. Not unless she does something really bad, at least. She is still my mom, after all,” Taiga pouted.

Ryuuji smiled. He moved his arm over his wife to rub her head. Unfortunately, with his sore body, this would cause a sharp stinging pain to appear.

“Nngh! My back!” He winced.

Taiga sat up again and held Ryuuji’s shoulder.

“Alright, get up,” she said.

Ryuuji lifted his back from the bed. Taiga then pulled his shirt over his shoulders, gently placing it to the side while she pressed her fingers against the bruises on her beloved husband’s back.

“Does it hurt when I touch them?” She asked softly.

“Only a little.”



Taiga's fingers moved down Ryuuji's body. Her movements were as gentle as a feather. She observed all the faint red and purple spots that had formed on his body. However, after looking at his body for a few minutes, she realised something.

"Oh my god..." Taiga gasped.

"What? Is something wrong?"

"Ryuuji... Have you been going to the gym?"

"Uh... I had a little extra free time..."

"How have I not noticed this before... Why'd you choose to work out?"

"You said it in your sleep while you were pregnant with the girls... Something about me having the body of Ryan Gosling? Dreams really do come true, don't they?"

Taiga shuffled in front of her husband and gazed with amazement at his thick, hard pecs. She touched her fingers against it as if she were feeling a well-polished piece of cold, shiny marble. Ryuuji cheekily grinned back.

"It might be tough for both of us with the state we're in, but if you're struggling to fall asleep, this body's all yours—" Ryuuji's words were halted by Taiga grabbing his head and pushing her lips against his. The force of the kiss was enough to push Ryuuji down to the bed. Taiga's legs arched over her husband's body, her belly sitting between them, while their lips smacked against each other.

Then, Taiga pulled her lips away, leaving Ryuuji with a wide grin on his face. She shuffled her butt and sat on her husband's hips while she giggled and hurriedly unbuttoned her top. Her top was tossed over the bedside, followed by her pants, then her lingerie.

"Ahahahaha..." The couple giggled excitedly. However, just when Taiga could put her fingers over the rim of Ryuuji's pants...

*Knock, knock, knock...*

The shadows of two feet appeared through the light coming from under their bedroom door. The couple ceased all movement when the sounds of the door being knocked reached their ears. The person behind the door began to speak.

"Taigaaaa!"

Taiga's excited grin quickly turned into an irritated frown, her mouth left ajar and her eyelids hanging low. Her mother was on the other side of that door. Just when she was about to make love to her husband.

"I finished removing all the childproofing in the kitchen, but I left some in since I thought they'd be useful!"

Taiga's mother spoke from the other side of the door while Taiga herself shuffled off her husband's thighs and waddled to her closet.

"I also have some childproofing left in the sisters' room! I'll be removing them tomorrow in the morning—"

Taiga finally opened the door. Seina was greeted by her pregnant daughter pulling the lapels of her bathrobe over her body. Using the belt would've revealed too much with her belly in the way, so she decided against it.

"Oh, Taiga," Seina greeted her nonchalantly.

"Mom! I'm trying to rest here!" Her daughter shouted.

"Ah, sorry, Taiga. I didn't mean to disrupt your sleep. I just thought I'd talk to you before I forget."

Ryuuji tiredly shifted his body and sat on his bedside while the women squabbled. He sighed at such an embarrassing sight.

"Just talk to me in the morning! Can't you see it's late!?"

"Right, I hear you. That's my mistake," Seina bowed. However, looking into Taiga's dark bedroom, she noticed the pile of Taiga's clothes gathered at Ryuuji's feet.

"Wait... Were you two... About to do some hanky-panky?" Seina asked bluntly.

Taiga's face immediately turned red like a poppy.

"SHUT UP!" She shouted as she slammed the door in her mother's face. Somehow, her abrasiveness wasn't enough to elicit a reaction from her mother.

"Taiga, Ryuuji, make sure to be gentle with each other, okay? You might cause an accident if you get carried away!" Seina continued to shout from behind the door. Taiga dropped her bathrobe and marched to her husband with furrowed brows and gritting teeth. For some reason, her mother just wouldn't leave.

"Oh, by the way, Kihara-san told me she wanted to see you some time! She said your sons could become really good friends since they'll be the same age."

Ryuuji pulled his pants down while Seina spoke, letting them drop to the floor with Taiga's pajamas and lingerie.

"Also, Yano-san said thank you for the gifts! She also said she was going to send some of her home-baked sugar cookies to thank you for helping her when she got stuck in a gutter some time ago! I tried some and they were really good!"

Taiga approached her husband. They looked at each other awkwardly while Seina rambled in front of their door. Taiga rolled her eyes and sighed. Then, like a tiger hunting its

prey, she quickly pounced onto her husband, pushing his back into the mattress and brushing her tongue against his.

“Iwamoto-san is very thankful as well! She asked if she could do anything to pay us back, but I told her it wasn’t necessary.”

The sound of Taiga and Ryuuji’s kissing and moaning overpowered Seina’s muffled voice as they blocked her presence out of their minds.

“Did you get any of that, Taiga? ... Taiga?”

Seina would be met with no response. Taiga was too busy embracing her husband while she rolled around on the bed with him.

*Riiing, riiing...*

Another morning had arrived for the Takasu household. The sun was in the midst of rising, brightening the blue sky. Seina was sitting in the living room reading a book when her attention was caught by the digital ringing sound in front of her. Someone was calling the home phone sitting next to the TV.

A few minutes later, Taiga was waddling down the stairs while groaning and rubbing her eyes. With her hair ruffled, her pajama top only buttoned at her chest and her pants dropping below her waist, revealing the top of her underwear, she arrived at the landing of the stairs, attracted by the home phone’s ringing as well. It took her a moment to realise that the sound of the phone’s ringing had been replaced by her mother’s stern voice.

“People like you are the most heartless and cruel of all!” Seina exclaimed with the home phone to her ear.

“Hn...?” Taiga was unsure who exactly Seina was talking to, but she was too tired and uncomfortable to move closer.

“You shouldn’t ever expect a pregnant woman to work! Especially not someone as far along as my daughter! ... Don’t you speak over me, mister! You should be ashamed of yourself for even calling!”

*She sure sounds angry.* Taiga wasn’t able to make out all the words from where she stood. With her interest piqued, she finally decided to move. She slowly dragged her feet to hear the conversation better.

“What’s your name, sir? ... Suzuki? Alright, Suzuki-san, here’s what you’re going to do when Taiga returns to the office!”

“Su... Suzuki?” Her mind was still slow from being woken up so abruptly, so it took her a few seconds to realise her mother mentioned the name of one of her coworkers.

“Aaah!”

Hearing the name immediately woke her up, causing her eyes to widen. She knew that call was for her. Nobody but Ryuuji knew that name. “Aaaaaah!” A sting of dread struck Taiga when she realised that her own mother was berating one of her coworkers.

“You’re going to look her in the eye and apologise for calling. Then, you do a deep, deep bow, until you’re touching the floor—”

“STOOOOP!!!” Taiga screamed at the top of her lungs as she lunged at her mother and snatched the phone out of her hands, swiftly putting it to her ear. “Hello? Suzuki-kun? Are you there?” She asked worriedly. Seina watched Taiga blankly after she took over.

“Ah, Takasu-san! Uh... You finally picked up...” Suzuki’s voice vibrated through the phone. The sound from the phone’s speaker was scratchy.

“I’m so, so sorry you had to hear that, Suzuki-kun. I just woke up. Is there anything you need from me?” Taiga asked.

“Uh... I was just going to ask if you and your husband wanted to come to a dinner party I’m having with the rest of the team. I invited Ogawa-san too, but... I also realised that it’s probably not a good time for you to come after your mother mentioned how far along you are. We don’t want to have any accidents, you know...”

“R-right, sorry. The baby’s coming any day now,” Taiga patted her belly.

“Well, I’ll... invite you next time, I guess. See ya.”

Suzuki hung up. The phone left a long humming sound in Taiga’s ear. She took a deep sigh, letting the sound ring in her ear for a few seconds before the muscles around her mouth tightened and her throat was ready to blast.

“RAAAAAAH!!!” Taiga roared like a lion and angrily slammed the telephone’s handset into its stand multiple times. The outburst caused Seina to flinch. Hearing the impact of the phone hitting the holster was enough to make her fear for her life. Taiga turned to her mother. She glared at her mother with her mad, beastly eyes. “What the hell is wrong with you, Mom!?”

Seina gently raised her hands. “Now calm down, Taiga—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! DON’T! TELL! ME! TO! CALM! DOWN!” Taiga yelled and continued frantically slamming the handset into its stand, causing Seina to take a step backward. A little crack had formed on one of the ends of the handset. “You can’t just talk to my coworker like that! You can’t!”

Seina slowly opened her mouth, saying the words as if she were trying to calm an armed shooter. “I know, Taiga, I know. I was only trying to help—”

“I. DON’T. WANT. YOUR. HEEEEELP!!!” Taiga started hitting the telephone box rapidly with its handset. Her words hit Seina like bullets being emptied from a rifle. She pointed the handset at her mother. “I don’t care how much you bug me at home! I’ve already allowed you to stay here far longer than you needed to! But you NEVER barge into my work life. NEVER.” Taiga panted, recovering her breath before she could speak again.

“Okay, I understand. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken to your coworker like that. So... Just put the phone down, Taiga...” Seina said softly as if she were confronting an actual tiger in the wild. Taiga returned the phone to the box, but not before slamming it one last time. Taiga turned back to her mother and shot a death glare into her eyes. She did nothing but pant. She seemed to be waiting for her mother to testify.

“Listen, Taiga, I made a really big mistake. And I know you’re angry, but... You really, really need to relax. This stress isn’t good for your baby...” Seina murmured. Hearing her mother mention her baby, Taiga seemed to calm down unnaturally fast. She continued to pant as she looked down and held her pregnant belly. She even noticed her son do a little kick in the side. She let out a big, heavy sigh.

“You’re right. This isn’t good for me,” Taiga said. Seina nodded. “I just need to sit down and relax...” Seina nodded even more. “It’ll all be okay once I’m calm...” Seina’s nodding invigorated. “So... Before I can relax, I have to get rid of whatever’s causing me all this stress,” Taiga uttered.

“Yes, that’s right. You should do that,” Seina said.

*Plunk!*

Seina’s heavy luggage fell down the little stairs at the front door and touched her feet. Taiga, who was the one who tossed it, glared at her mother while she stood in the doorway.

“Eh?” Seina said.

“I’m calling someone else for help. I don’t need you,” Taiga declared.

The sound of a car rolling to the front of the house appeared behind Seina. The driver honked the horn, getting the attention of the two women.

“Naru!?” Seina exclaimed. Takagi Naru, Seina’s husband and Taiga’s stepfather, whose name she had taken after marriage, was sitting in the driver’s seat with his window rolled down.

“Hey! Ready to go?” He shouted from his car. His mouth formed a smile naturally.

“You called him already!?” Seina shrieked.

“Go home, Mom,” Taiga uttered before shutting the door. Once Taiga was out of Seina’s sight, she collapsed to her knees in disbelief at what had just happened.

Taiga dusted her hands after a hard day’s work of evicting her mother. She stopped when she ran into Ryuuji, who was standing at the foot of the stairs. Besides helping his wife pack her mother’s luggage, he was silently observing the ordeal taking place. Taiga looked up and glared at him too.

“You got something to say to me?” She growled.

“Nope. Nothing at all,” he said before leaning down and giving Taiga a long kiss on her rosy lips. They closed their eyes and stuck to each other for a few seconds before Ryuuji would pull his lips away, leaving Taiga pouting and blushing.

That night, Naru waited for his wife to join him in bed. She put on a light pink camisole and approached her side of the bed with her sullen face. After tucking herself underneath the covers, her husband nuzzled her bare shoulder.

“It’s great to have you back, Seina-chan,” he said softly. His wife sighed deeply.

“How could I let this happen...” she said. Her eyes were left half open.

“Maybe it’s better to leave her be for now. Yasuo missed you, you know. He was always asking when you were coming back.”

“I know...” Seina stared at the ceiling fan swirling above her in the dark. “But Taiga needs all the help she can get. It may be her second time being pregnant but it’s a very sensitive period for a woman.” She sighed. “I just wanted to be there for her as her mother. Ugh... I shouldn’t have gotten ahead of myself.”

“It’ll be alright,” Naru said. His gentle voice was as comforting as being coddled. “You’ll get plenty of chances to help after her baby’s born. Maybe Taiga just needs a little distance right now. You noticed how embarrassed she was last time, right?”

“What happened last time?” Seina turned to her husband.

“You don’t remember? You were making a fool of yourself at that daycare Taiga sent her daughters to. You know, the one you’re not allowed to volunteer at anymore. I remember that earful Taiga gave you when you wouldn’t leave her daughters alone. It still amazes me how you managed to escalate a squabble amongst a bunch of toddlers.”

Seina blankly tilted her head up, trying to remember the incident her husband was referring to. After a moment, it finally came to her.

The plan she had concocted to help watch over Taiga’s daughters by volunteering at their daycare, the scene of the sisters and a few other unknown girls yelling at one another

and the sea of wails that came when Seina tried to interject by yelling at one of the children. “Huh... That did happen... Hey, I had my reasons! That girl was trying to steal one of the toys they were playing with!”

Naru sighed. “You’ve got no self awareness, haven’t you?” He scratched his head. “It’s so weird. I’ve never seen you act this way with Yasuo before.”

“Yasuo’s never been through whatever Taiga has. He’s still a child. Taiga’s so much more than that.” Seina huffed before turning on her side. “There’s still so much more I need to do for her...” Naru puffed his cheeks as he tried to find something to say. He turned and reached over Seina’s arm, clasping her warm hand. He shut his eyes and gently rested his chin on his wife’s shoulder. “All that time she spent alone when she was under her father’s care... I’m far from making up for any of that,” Seina bemoaned.

“Wouldn’t she be over all of that by now?” Naru asked gently. Seina turned her head further away without a word. The whirring of the ceiling fan filled the room.

“I have no idea what that girl is thinking,” she groaned. “We used to joke about how much of a bum her father was. Now she just turns around and says everything’s okay with him? I swear, this pregnancy is driving her insane.” She narrowed her eyes. “Everything would’ve been so much simpler if I had just taken her from the start... If I had done everything in my power to claw her back into my hands...”

She gripped her husband’s fingers. “Her father was supposed to be a thing of the past, but she chose to hold on to it rather than just move on.” She sighed. “Now she just keeps pushing me away... If I’m not there for her, I’ll bet she’ll make another crazy decision like that. I need her to see that I’m just doing what’s best for her.”

“I think Taiga knows what she’s doing,” Naru said in her ear.

“I have no reason to believe that,” Seina chuffed. “The fact she trusts her father is enough for me to know that she’s completely lost her mind.”

“There’s no getting through to you, huh?” Naru mumbled. “So what are you going to do about the situation with her father?”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do about that. I just don’t want her to push me away anymore.” Seina turned her head to her husband with a smile. “But I won’t let getting kicked out stop me from helping. I’ve already got a new plan in store.”

“Is that so?” Naru mumbled again. “I suppose this is something that can only be resolved between you and Taiga...” His voice grew more groggy as his head weighed deeper into his wife’s shoulder. He gently closed his eyes.

“Yeah... I guess so...” Seina said. Her eyes fell shut as well. The couple felt their bodies sink deeper into their king-sized mattress as they were brought to a slumber. Seina waited for morning to arrive before she could set her new plan in motion.

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Under the heavenly rays of the early morning sun, families of different sizes and backgrounds gathered at an open space in a park filled with rich greenery and pink cherry blossom trees sprinkled around. A gigantic pond sat in the very centre, with a running track along its perimeter. The families could be seen in tracksuits, sportswear, T-shirts, and all kinds of clothes for a day full of fun and games.

They were all surrounded by the black eyes of the titular character known as “Panpanda”. Pennant banners with the character pasted on it were strung across all the trees. Balloons shaped like Panpanda’s head were floating over everyone’s heads, with a Panpanda bouncy castle filled with little children bouncing around. No matter where the families went, unless they left the park, Panpanda-themed music would always be blaring in their ears through the speakers.

Walking next to their parents’ legs, Haruko, Mitsuko and Katsuko were taking big bites into their Panpanda-themed treats, which were butter buns shaped like the character, filled with melted chocolate chips and chocolate used for the character’s facial features. Haruko had a treat in each hand, alternating between them. She unhinged her jaw like a snake to tear off Panpanda’s head. The girls wore their Panpanda-themed T-shirts, with headbands to resemble Panpanda’s ears.

With Panpanda-themed sunglasses on his eyes, Ryuuji walked alongside his wife with a crutch under one arm and a tall Panpanda-themed cup in the other filled with freshly squeezed orange juice. He sipped on the cup’s long straw while the family navigated between the gaps of the crowd. He turned to his pregnant wife, who was in a light pink maternity shirt and black yoga pants. Her hair was done into a ponytail with a white visor sheltering her eyes. She also had bright white sneakers on. While she seemed prepared to participate in the games, Ryuuji couldn’t help but notice how she was acting.

While the cacophony of the chatter coming from the families around them masked the sound of Taiga’s heavy breathing, it certainly couldn’t hide her reddened, grimacing face. Her eyes were shut and her cheeks bloated like a balloon as she took in large breaths and slowly



exhaled. Her hand was on her back, which she had tilted backward to balance herself, while her other hand caressed the top of her large pregnant belly.

“Hey, are you alright, Taiga?” Ryuuji asked while he lifted his sunglasses.

“Huh? Uh... Yeah, it’s just... Hoooh... A little back pain,” Taiga said hastily.

“Are you... Still going to play the games?”

“O-of course! I’ll be fine. Make sure to get a lot of photos, alright?”

Taiga let out one final sigh before moving both her hands to her back. Her body was tilted so far back it caused her pregnant belly to jut outward. Ryuuji narrowed his eyes at his wife, but he brushed it off after seeing her face relax. The wave of back pain had subsided. Eventually, the Takasu family left the crowd to find a row of counters with vendors behind them, each of them wearing caps with little bear ears made of bread.

“Ah, there’s the counter. Let’s go register ourselves,” Taiga said.

They approached a counter. The three sisters placed their fingers on the edge, stood on the tips of their toes and peeked their heads over to look at the woman behind it.

“How many?”

“Five, please.”

The woman cheerfully handed Taiga a pen to sign the form sitting on the counter between them. Taiga wrote the names of all her family members. However, when she set the pen down, the two women turned at the sound of another woman calling out to them.

“Waaait a minuuute!”

It was Seina running towards them with Yasuo, her son and Taiga’s half brother, holding her hand as he struggled to keep up with her. Naru jogged alongside them. Seina panted heavily after reaching the counter.

“Three more! There’s three more of us!” She said.

“What!?” Taiga shrieked.

Seina took the pen and added her family’s names to the list. Taiga could only watch with her jaw dropped, not wanting to cause a fuss in front of the vendor. Naru took Ryuuji’s shoulder and gave him a wide grin.

“Hey, sorry about my wife,” he chuckled.

Ryuuji could only narrow his eyes in confusion. “Uh... It’s fine,” he muttered.

“The games will be beginning shortly. You can have a seat while you wait,” the vendor said politely as she gestured to the side, a large patch of grass littered with Panpanda-themed picnic mats. The family of eight followed her directions, now with a

sticker on their chests that read “9”. Seina paid no attention to the irritated glares Taiga was shooting at her as they walked, only focusing on her son whose hand she held tightly.

“Are you excited to play, Yasuo?” She asked.

“But Mom, I don’t like Panpanda...” Yasuo whined.

After finding an empty mat for the whole family to settle at, they took a rest before the games would begin. Taiga planted her butt on the mat with her legs stretched out, feeling both the softness of the fabric and the hardness of the ground underneath it. She let out a deep sigh as she felt the strain of carrying around her belly slowly leave her back. The rest of the family knelt down beside her, forming a circle together. Ryuuji arched over his little daughters as they pointed at all the Panpanda-themed items they could see.

“Ah... Now that registration’s handled...” Taiga turned to her mother and glared at her like a tiger intimidating its prey. She opened her mouth wide open to yell with her entire chest. “What the hell are you doing here!?”

“I’m just here to enjoy a day of fun with my children and grandchildren,” Seina responded defensively, putting her hand on her chest elegantly.

“You came here completely unannounced!” Taiga roared.

“Sorry, Taiga. Her persuasion was just too compelling,” Naru chuckled as he scratched his head. “We thought an event like this would be good for Yasuo. He just really loves sports. Don’t you, Yasuo?” He placed his hand on his son’s head, rubbing his hair.

“I guess so...” Yasuo said. Taiga grunted.

“Fine... You three can play with us. But remember this!” Taiga raised her index finger at her parents and little brother. “We’re not just here to play for fun. We’ve got a goal in mind.” She swung her arm to point her finger to the gigantic Panpanda plushie in pristine condition sitting on a tall, bread-coloured pedestal. It was even encased in a thick glass dome.

“We’re going to win the first prize! The Jumbo Panpanda Plushie!” Taiga exclaimed. “Jumbo” was an understatement. The plushie was as tall as Ryuuji and as wide as a car. Taiga leaned in to ensure everyone could hear her. “The girls have had their eyes on it ever since they found out about it. This is our only chance to win it.” She pumped her fist and looked at her daughters. “Are you ready, girls?”

The sisters raised their hands into the air and cheered. “Yeah! We’re ready!”

“Are you sure you can handle it?” Seina asked.

“Of course I can. I may be pregnant, but I’ve got plenty of steam in me,” Taiga said while she stretched and rotated her shoulder. Suddenly, the music coming through the

speakers faded out. An upbeat tune played on the speakers before the scratchy sound of a woman's voice could be heard. Everyone went silent to listen.

"Thank you to all parents and children for gathering on this lovely day to play in Panpanda's Special Day Of Fun! We hope you enjoyed the pleasantries we've prepared for you, and if you haven't gotten a chance to meet Panpanda yet, he'll still be around after the games have ended! The games will start soon, but before we can begin, it's very important to warm up our bodies before we can start running around! So get on your feet and spread yourselves out! We're going to do the Panpanda Super Stretching Exercise!"

All the parents and children happily stood up and did as the announcer said. Next to some of the speakers were screens erected beside them. Everyone turned to face the screens nearest to them, which had just switched on. The bright screens displayed a slim woman in sportswear standing on top of a yoga mat. She had a bright smile with her legs spread out and her hands on her hips. Behind her were two characters from the show standing on their own yoga mats, ready to follow along.

A song for the exercise began to play. The woman's movements followed its lyrics, and everyone followed her movements in tandem. "Knead the dough! Knead the dough!" was one of the lyrics, the feminine singer's voice blaring throughout the park. "Kneading the dough" referred to spreading one's legs out and trying to touch the ground.

The sisters imitated the woman in the screens obediently. They were eerily quiet, with smiles naturally forming on their faces. Panpanda was like a form of hypnosis for them. The Takagi's played along as well. Even Taiga in her current state was able to follow along smoothly. Ryuuji sat down and recorded his family stretching along to the music using his little camcorder.

However, while everyone was joyfully following the video on the screens, Seina had already begun scheming. *There's no way I'm letting Taiga play those games!* She was thinking with her eyes narrowed. *Doing all that physical activity while so close to her due date? She's completely out of her mind!* Her body bent and folded while she was talking to herself in her head. *I have to stop her every chance I get!*

After the song ended and the screens turned off, the announcer's voice returned.

"Now that we're all warmed up, let's go over the rules! Before each game, remember to collect the sashes at the counter so we can award the points! Each game will have a limit on how many parents per family can play, but there's no limit for children! The family with the highest number of points will win the grand prize! That's all there is to it! Now, let's play the first game, kin-ball!"

Seina and Taiga stood beside each other with blue sashes over their shoulders. They were in an open field littered with cones to divide it into smaller areas and form a court. The children stood at their feet. With their chests held high, they prepared themselves for the first game. They approached a crowd with blue sashes like theirs. As they walked, the husbands stood outside the court.

“Have fun out there!” Naru shouted with his hands beside his mouth. Ryuuji waved with one arm while the other held his camcorder, supported by the metal crutch underneath his armpit. Taiga and her daughters waved back. A crowd had gathered around a gigantic inflatable ball designed to look like Panpanda’s head. The ball was as tall as the people surrounding it. There were two other crowds with red and green sashes.

With the first game about to begin, Seina went over her plan in her head. *Hm. The parent limit was two this time, but I couldn’t get Taiga to sit aside. I’ll just have to ensure she doesn’t get to touch the ball. Since this is a team game I don’t have to worry about whether we’re contributing or not.*

The game involved three teams, each formed from multiple families. The giant ball would be tossed into the air. The teams would have to work together to get the ball to land into an opposing team’s area, earning them a point. Points would be awarded to all the families in the winning team.

The teams were gathered in the centre. A high-pitched whistle blew. The ball was launched high into the air. The game had begun. The ball began to float towards the blue team’s court. The team scrambled to position themselves underneath where the ball was going to land. A circle of people quickly formed underneath the ball’s shadow. Yasuo and the sisters were already a part of the circle with their hands raised high in the air.

“Get ready, everyone!” Taiga shouted as she ran towards an open spot in the circle. Her heavy belly slowed her down. However, just before she could reach the open space, she shrieked. “Uwah!” Seina suddenly came from behind her, taking up the space. With her back facing Taiga, she had no choice but to try to reach the ball from where she stood.

The ball descended, touching the hands of everyone in the circle. Seina glanced at Taiga from behind her. She hopped, trying to touch the ball, but it was to no avail. The blue team shoved the ball in the direction of the red team’s court. Taiga grunted as she watched the ball float away from her hands. *Alright, I just have to keep doing this until the game is over.* Seina thought.

After a few more rounds, the score was tied between the blue and green teams, while the red team lagged behind. The timer was ticking. There was only enough time for one more round; one more chance to score.

“Aaah! We’re going to lose!” Katsuko whined while she scratched her hair vigorously, ruffling it until it became like that of a hedgehog’s pines. Naturally, after playing in the sun, everyone was sweaty even though it was only the first game.

Taiga reassuringly rested her hand on Katsuko’s head. “Don’t worry. We can win the next round,” she said while pumping her fist. Even after constantly getting her chances to touch the ball stolen, she continued to show great confidence for her daughters. It seemed she hadn’t noticed what Seina had been doing the entire time, which worked in Seina’s favour. She could resume her plan without arousing any suspicions.

Suddenly, the whistle blew again, causing Seina to flinch. From the green team’s court, the ball was sent into the air and floated in the blue team’s direction. Everyone made a beeline to where the ball was going to land.

Taiga furrowed her brows with determination, seeing that the ball was close to where she was standing. She ran towards the circle of people that was forming. There was a spot open for her. She was finally going to get a chance to touch the ball. Seina noticed this, but with the distance between her and Taiga, there was a chance she wasn’t going to block her in time. Regardless, Seina dashed towards where Taiga was running.

“I got it!” Taiga exclaimed as she was just a step away from the circle. However, she felt a sudden force shove her to the side. “Gaaah!” She shrieked and flailed her arms while she was swept off her feet by Seina pushing her away from the circle. Seina faced her back to Taiga as she stole Taiga’s space. However, when she turned her head back, she saw Taiga laying on her side, clutching her pregnant belly while she winced in pain.

“Aaah! Taiga!” Seina cried. She left the circle to tend to her daughter, kneeling beside her while she held her hands out, unsure of how to help her.

“Hnngh!” Taiga groaned while sweat ran down the side of her head. However, when Seina tried to lay a hand on her, Taiga swiped it away. “S-stop. It’s... just some false contractions!” She stammered as an aching pain radiated in her lower back. She rubbed her back to soothe it.

“I-I didn’t mean to push you! It was an accident, I swear!” Seina pleaded. Taiga never reacted to a word her mother said, only panting heavily while she waited for the pain to subside. “The... The ball!” She stuttered, taking a deep breath between each word. Unfortunately, the struggle to get the words out made her voice inaudible.

“Wh-what is it, Taiga? Is something wrong?” Seina asked frantically. Taiga lifted her arm weakly and pointed behind her. Her arm trembled as she tried to keep it up while she endured the pain in her abdomen. Still unsure of what Taiga was trying to tell her, Seina swiftly turned towards the direction her daughter was pointing. “Aaah! The ball!” She would soon realise that she should’ve turned much earlier.

“Aaawww!” The blue team groaned as the ball slipped out of their grasps. The unoccupied spot made their support uneven, causing the ball to roll onto their court.

The whistle blew once more. “That’s another point going to the green team, making them the winners of the first game!” The announcer shouted over the speakers.

“Uugh!” Taiga grunted deeply and let her back fall to the ground. Her body was spread out as she panted heavily. The pain in her back had left, but the pain of defeat immediately replaced it.

“Ehhh...” Seina could only look at the blue team sulking from their loss with guilt. She knelt there awkwardly like a child after knocking over a vase.

“I really wanted to win that one! Hmph!” Katsuko pouted with her brows furrowed and crossed her arms, though, the way she crossed her arms looked more like she was giving herself a hug. Yasuo and the sisters sat on a park bench, each of them with their own little water bottles. The sisters’ were Panpanda-themed, of course. The adults stood around them, quenching their thirst as well. Ryuuji still had his camcorder in hand, recording even the breaks they had between games.

Haruko pulled her lips away from the mouth of her water bottle and turned to her sister. “Dad said not to whine if we lose,” she said.

“That’s right, Haruko,” Ryuuji said with a smile. He petted her head and rubbed her hair. She giggled as her head felt ticklish. “There’s still so many games left to play. It’s okay if you lose this one,” he said.

Taiga let out a deep sigh after she stopped sipping from her water bottle. Her hand supported her back while she breathed heavily. Her face was slightly red too. “We wouldn’t have lost if *someone* didn’t leave the circle,” she grumbled.

“Hey, what’re you blaming me for!? Your pregnant self fell to the ground! Is that not a cause for concern?” Seina snapped back.

“I told you, I was fine! You should’ve just focused on the ball!”

“How could I focus on anything but you? You looked like you were about to give birth! Actually, you look like that right now!” Seina pointed at Taiga’s reddened face and heavy breathing. Taiga’s pregnant belly was pulsating as she inhaled and exhaled.

“Why, you!” The two women glared into each other’s eyes like two raging deers battling for a mate. They gritted their teeth before snarkily turning their heads away from each other, pouting and turning their heads up. As they took their stances, their husbands appeared next to them.

“Now, now, ladies, today’s a day of fun, not fights,” Naru said while he massaged his wife’s shoulders.

“We should also be looking out for one another. It’s no fun if someone gets hurt,” Ryuuji told Taiga while he rubbed her belly with one hand. With the assurance of their husbands’ words and the comforting touch of their hands, the women felt their bodies relax and their shoulders lightening.

“The next game doesn’t have a parent limit, so you better not mess this up,” Taiga said while she side-eyed her mother.

“Well, maybe you should see if you can keep up, first,” Seina responded. Taiga clicked her tongue.

“Actually, I think your mom might have a point here. The next game might involve a lot of running. Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Ryuuji asked.

“I’ll be fine. I told you, I’ve got a lot of steam in me. The girls and I will make light work of this game,” Taiga uttered.

“Alright, let’s get to it, then!” Naru declared while pumping his fist. The children raised their fists in the air and cheered before jumping off the bench. The family walked off, rejuvenated after a drink of water.

“It’s time to begin the second game! The rules are simple, don’t get your balloon popped! If at least one of your family members still has their balloon, your family gets points! The top three families with the most balloons popped will get extra points! Parents can only pop other parents’ balloons, but children can pop anyone’s! Get ready to pop some balloons, everyone! And be careful not to injure anyone!”

Seina, Naru, Taiga and the children huddled together in an open field underneath the bright blue sky as they listened to the announcer’s voice over the speakers. Round, inflated balloons were tied around each of their shins. Behind them was a marker with the same

number as the one on their chest to indicate which family should stand where. All the markers were spaced out in the field, with all the other competing families stationed at them.

Then, the whistle blew.

“Alright, we only need to survive to win. Let’s just sit back and–Hey!”

Seina shouted as the rest of the family ran in opposite directions, except for Mitsuko, who was standing at her legs and still figuring out what was going on. Her fingers were nervously rubbing together and her head hung low as she fearfully looked at all the families running around, preparing to attack one another with bloodlust.

Taiga briefly turned around while she was running to face Seina. “We’re shooting for first place! Complacency won’t win us that prize!” She shouted.

Naru did the same. “Come on, live a little, Seina-chan!”

Seina grunted and ran in Taiga’s direction. *How does she run so fast when she’s that big, anyway?* She thought, enamoured by the ever growing distance between them.

Thus, Mitsuko was left standing at the marker. “M-Mom? H-Haruko? K-Katsuko?” Her lips quivered as she looked amongst the crowd of people surrounding her. She sniffled.

While Seina chased her daughter, her running had slowed to a jog and her panting had grown heavy. She was never the type to exercise unless she had to take her son outside to play, so the stay-at-home mom life wasn’t doing her any favours. She glanced amongst the chaos of parents and children trying to pop one another’s balloons.

Katsuko exhibited her wolf-like agility while she hopped and slid between the legs of her opponents while she gave swift kicks at their balloons, popping them and immediately moving on to the next. Haruko had a more defensive approach, standing still in front of her targets while she calculated her every move. She’d dodge oncoming attacks and wait for the right moment to strike. Yasuo acted the same, taking on opponents close to his age.

When Seina looked ahead, she witnessed Taiga’s limitless flexibility as she twirled and jumped to avoid attacks while she countered them with kicks as sharp as a swipe from a mantis claw. The title of Palmtop Tiger was hers to keep. Her movements were as smooth as butter despite the massive weight she carried on her belly. She was like a ballerina carrying a heavy prop during a dance recital, her ponytail flowing in the wind. Her opponents stood in shock at the outrageous sight of a heavily pregnant woman outmanoeuvring them.

Seina felt just as baffled as she continued to chase after her. *What are you doing, Taiga!? Are you worried about your baby at all!?* She thought. Taiga not once wavered. Her movements continued to flow like water. However, when Seina narrowed her eyes and looked closer, she noticed something. Through Taiga’s exuded confidence, she spotted Taiga’s heavy



breathing. Her face had gotten even redder than before and she was absolutely drenched in sweat. It seemed the back pain had returned and she was running to ignore it. *I have to stop her. She's going to cause an accident!* Seina plotted while she sped up her running.

*Stomp! Pop!*

Taiga stopped dead in her tracks while Seina was some distance behind her, her shoes scraping the dirt under her. She swore she felt the ground shake. She stood and watched cautiously at the most daunting opponent she'd faced yet.

It was a burly man in a red tracksuit. The man was a giant, more than a head taller than her own husband. His muscles were that of a bodybuilder, trying to escape the fabric of his tracksuit. His short-cut hair made him look like an army general. His beard was shaved such that it formed a gray highlight in the lower half of his face. A crinkled sheet of rubber was crushed beneath his shoe.

"Aaah!" A young man tripped and fell to the ground at the burly man's feet as his crushed balloon was separated from his shin.

"Ah, Daddy, your balloon popped," the young man's daughter informed him, standing beside him. He groaned as he recovered from his fall, but while he was sitting in the grass, the two noticed the dark shadow cast over them. The young man slowly moved his gaze up the burly man's body until their eyes finally met. A cold chill ran down the young man's spine. His teeth began to shiver. His bones shook like a crumbling tower. Finally, he took a deep breath, his chest rising as he inhaled.

"GYAAAAAAHH!!!" The young man shrieked. He grabbed his daughter and dashed away at the speed of a car. "We're going home, Aya-chaaaan!"

"But Dad, we haven't finished the games yet!"

As the young man's figure shrunk with the distance, the burly man finally turned. Taiga jolted when her eyes met his. His glare was that of an ogre's, and his tough jaw was perfectly square. His stare went right through Taiga, but she never faltered. She clenched her fists and sharpened her stance.

"Takasu-san... How odd it is to see you here..." The burly man's voice was deep and scratchy. It was easy to mistake this man for anything other than a human.

"What a pleasure it is running into you, Ooshiro-san," Taiga said with a smirk.

"You look tired, Takasu-san," Ooshiro muttered.

"I'm just getting started," Taiga responded. "I always thought you were one of the nicest people in the neighbourhood. What brought this on?"

“My little Sae-chan wants that prize,” the man uttered while pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. His wife and daughter were a few metres behind him.

“Keep your shoes on when you’re in the grass, okay?” Ooshiro’s wife told her daughter while she wedged her foot into her little shoe.

“Okay!” Ooshiro’s daughter responded.

Ooshiro’s wife was heavily pregnant just like Taiga. However, she didn’t seem as exhausted as Taiga was. She also had a head of incredibly curly hair. Her cute little daughter looked to be a year older than Taiga’s daughters. Her hair was curly just like her mothers, while its colour was ash brown like her father’s. The entire family wore matching coloured tracksuits for the event. They both had balloons strapped to their shins as well.

“I’ll do anything for my little Sae-chan. I’ll move mountains just for her. I won’t let anyone stand in my way, not even a friendly neighbour. And I certainly won’t be going easy on you just because you’re pregnant,” Ooshiro uttered. “But I’ll give you an offer. You see my wife back there? She knows when to take it easy. You could learn something from her. How about you just let me step on your balloon and we’ll call it a day?”

Taiga dug her shoes into the grass. “I’ll be keeping my balloon. My girls want that prize just as much as your daughter does,” she exclaimed.

Ooshiro huffed. “You know, my wife begged me to have more children, but I was always afraid that would mean my little Sae-chan would get less attention. But now that my little boy is on the way, I want to give her one final gift before she’s no longer my one and only. What are you fighting for, Takasu-san?”

Taiga switched her stance, preparing to attack. “To show that I’m their kick-ass mom of course!” Her grin widened. “But you know, if it was you who won the prize, you’d be taking that plushie away from three little girls. But if I won, I’d be taking it from just one girl. So let’s not debate over who’s got higher stakes here.” Taiga raised her hand in front of her and beckoned her opponent.

Ooshiro clicked his tongue. He swiftly moved his giant body towards his opponent, aiming his foot at her balloon. However, Taiga effortlessly dodged his attacks while she attempted to return with her own. They continuously exchanged attacks, moving in ways unfathomable to the other competitors. Not one person dared intervene in the ferocious battle between the Palmtop Tiger and the ogre. Seina bit her nail as she fearfully watched their confrontation from afar.

“Tch! I can’t imagine having more than one child, let alone three. How difficult it must be to divide the love,” Ooshiro taunted.

“You’re wrong, Ooshiro-san!” Taiga dipped her body to spread her legs out, narrowly avoiding one of Ooshiro’s attacks on her balloon while she pressed her pregnant belly against the grass. “Love never gets divided,” she said before raising her foot high into the air, using her arms to support herself on the grass. “It multiplies!” She sent her foot down like a bolt of lightning from the heavens.

*Pop!*

Ooshiro gasped and staggered forward. His foot suddenly felt lighter. He looked down to see that his once round balloon had completely vanished, reduced to just a sliver of rubber attached to his shin.

“Heh!” Taiga was lying with her belly on the ground and her legs now in splits. She donned a confident, toothy grin at her victory.

Ooshiro only sighed, his shoulders sinking as his breath left him. Then, as fast as a sudden storm, he switched. He held his chest high and placed his hands on his hips. His ogre-like eyes mellowed out and became upturned. “Well, I had a good run,” he said with a smile as he turned to Taiga, who was panting heavily while she got on her knees. He reached out his hand for the pregnant woman and helped her pull herself up. “You look like you’ve got a healthy baby there, Takasu-san. I hope the delivery goes well.”

“Haah... Thanks,” Taiga said. Her body tilted as she struggled to maintain her balance. All the jumping and running had completely drained her. “You think your daughter’s going to be fine walking away empty handed?”

“Sae-chan’s a good girl. She knows not to cry over something like this. You know, now that I think about it, Sae-chan would make a great older sister. Ah, I can’t wait to meet my son,” Ooshiro looked up to the sky with bliss.

“Wish I could say the same about my girls,” Taiga scratched her head.

“Well, we haven’t lost yet. There’s still the next few games we have to play. See you later, Takasu-san,” Ooshiro said while walking towards his wife and daughter.

“Tell your wife I said hi! And congratulations on the new baby!” Taiga shouted while waving to her friendly neighbour Ooshiro. Naturally, he waved back. She let out a relieved sigh after watching him reunite with his beloved family. However, she suddenly felt her legs begin to tremble, like her entire body was being held up by twigs. Her legs collapsed under the weight of her body, causing her to fall to her knees.

“Nnngh!” Taiga clutched her belly once more while she grimaced in pain. Not only had her back pain returned, but an intense stinging on her inner thigh appeared as well.

“Haaah... Haaah... Okay, I think I strained myself too hard that time... Ngh... I need to get out of here before someone pops my balloon...”

“Taiga! Are you alright!?” Seina shouted as she ran towards her daughter.

“Oh, good...” A wave of relief washed over Taiga. With an ally around, she could receive some protection while she rested. Unfortunately, that relief was mistaken.

“Don’t worry, Taiga! I’ve got you—Woah!”

*Pop!*

“Gaah!?”

Taiga’s jaw dropped. From what she was seeing, Seina had slipped and fallen belly first onto the ground... right on top of her balloon.

“Ah, whoops... Eeh...” Seina scratched her head with a cheeky sense of guilt.

“MOM!?” Taiga only shrieked.

“Hey! It was an accident! I swear!” Seina said. *No, that was completely on purpose! My acting was definitely on point when I pretended to slip on the grass! She doesn’t seem suspicious at all! Now she can’t play the game anymore!* She thought. “Well, it’s a shame. I guess you have to sit out now,” she stroked Taiga’s back to soothe her, but at that point, she was visibly more annoyed than in pain, even though she could still feel the pain in her back. She only narrowed her eyes at her mother.

“Whatever... Just don’t get your balloon popped. We need at least one of us to survive if we want to claim our points,” Taiga grumbled.

“Don’t worry, my balloon’s safe and sound—”

*Pop!*

Seina’s confident reassurance was interrupted by the snapping of her balloon’s rubber. The two women quickly turned to the little boy who had stamped his little foot next to Seina’s shin, leaving behind the little pieces of her balloon in the grass. Taiga and Seina looked at the boy with bewilderment. Not a word was said between either of them. The boy quietly walked away, looking for his next opponent.

Seina pulled Taiga over her shoulder to help her stand, while Taiga supported her pregnant belly with her hand below it. “Well, I guess we just have to hope everyone else still has their balloons. They’re better at games than I am, at least.”

“Hey, isn’t that Dad over there?” Taiga pointed in the distance. The two women watched Naru laughing as he was chased by a group of little kids, gently evading their attempts at popping his balloon. It didn’t seem like he was trying hard to avoid them, but

rather giving them enough leeway to take a few swings at his balloon. However, he let his guard down. Taiga and Seina heard a faint pop sound from where they stood.

“Ah! You got me!” Naru said with his hands in the air. He promptly ran off from the group of kids while happily waving at them. The children joyfully waved back. It seemed like they had fun chasing him around.

“That man is such a sucker for kids,” Seina muttered.

Taiga’s head sank as she groaned. “Ugh... Could this game get any worse?”

Just as she said that, the sound of a little girl’s whining fell upon her ears.

“IT’S NOT FAIR! IT’S NOT FAAAAAIR!” Taiga’s gaze shifted to the two little girls approaching beside her. Haruko was dragging Katsuko by the foot along the grass while Katsuko was flailing about and yelling, pounding the grass and spreading grains of dirt and slivers of grass everywhere.

“HE CHEATED! CHEATER! CHEATER!”

“Mom, our balloons popped. Do we go to Dad now?” Haruko asked nonchalantly. She dropped her sister’s foot onto the ground. She continued to flail her arms and legs.

“Oh, yeah... But why is Katsuko like that?” Taiga asked tiredly.

“A boy popped her balloon. Then she tried to pop his balloon. But I stopped her.”

“Right... Go find Dad then. And remember to drink lots of water.”

Haruko nodded and picked up her sister’s foot again before walking off without a word. Katsuko left a trail of disturbed grass where she was dragged. Taiga sighed.

“Well, there’s always the next game... Hehe...” Seina said awkwardly.

On another side of the field, Yasuo was going against a pair of boys his age, making great efforts to smoothly evade their attacks. His breathing was heavy and his head was sweaty. His exhaustion began to hinder his movements.

*Pop!*

“Aww!” Yasuo grunted. Unfortunately, he’d get his balloon popped. The boys targeting him would then start to target each other. Once he was out of the game, it was like he didn’t exist to the other players. He suddenly felt a heavy hand rest on his little shoulder.

“You did great, Yasuo!” Naru told him with a wide, confident smile. “Let’s go rest and wait for the game to end,” he said while moving his son along with him. They walked amongst the crowd of remaining players.

“Is there anyone that still has their balloon?” Yasuo asked.

“We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Muh... Mamaaa! ... Y... Ya-chaaan!”

Mitsuko was still standing where she was since the start of the game, gripping her clothes tightly. Her face was tomato red, and her cheeks were completely showered in tears. Her entire face was as wrinkled as a human brain as she wailed alone.

A boy around Yasuo’s age stood in front of her, staring blankly at her while she just cried and cried. She was already crying before he found her, and she didn’t seem to react to his presence. After watching her for a few minutes, he gently lifted his foot and hovered it over her balloon. However, he stopped when his mother took his shoulder.

“Don’t do it, Rui. Be a gentleman,” she told him. Both of them already feel incredibly guilty just standing in front of the crying little girl. They couldn’t bear to pick on someone so small, so they just walked away without a word. Mitsuko continued to cry until the whistle would blow once more, ending the second game of the day.

“And in third place for the most popped balloons... It’s the Takasu family!”

The announcer revealed the winners of the second game over the speakers. Everyone had returned to their picnic mats. Taiga carried Mitsuko in her arms, gently rocking her and stroking her little back while she continued to cry into her mother’s dress.

“There. There. There were so many people! And. And. And. I couldn’t find you, or—” Mitsuko sobbed, huffing uncontrollably between each word she said.

“I’m sorry, Mitsuko. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left you,” Taiga apologised to her in a gentle voice.

“And. And. I was so scaaaared! My. My balloon—”

“I know, I know, Mitsuko.”

“Hey, Mitsuko, you did help us win the game! You did a good job!” Seina said, rubbing Mitsuko’s hair. However, Mitsuko only gripped her mother’s shoulder tighter. Unable to see the end of Mitsuko’s crying fit, Taiga turned to her husband.

“Hey, is there a nursing room anywhere? Mitsuko might need it.”

“Oh, there’s one just nearby,” Ryuuji pointed in its direction. Sure enough, the room was in view, right next to the public toilets.

“Oh, I see it,” Taiga said as she lifted herself from the picnic mat. “Nngh!” However, when she tried to plant her foot on the ground, she winced in pain, bringing her back to her knees. She panted heavily while she held her belly. She was sweating, too. It seemed the pain was really getting to her.

“Taiga, are you alright?” Seina asked while stroking her daughter’s back. Taiga slowly turned to her mother, the pain encumbering her.

“Mitsuko and I might need a break from the games, too. I’ll sit out for the next one. Do you think you can handle them?” Taiga asked.

Seina smiled, then gave her daughter a thumbs-up. She spoke with bravado.

“You bet I can!”

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“I don’t want to lose!”

“Waaaaah!”

“It’s not fair! It’s not!”

Taiga stood bewilderedly while her daughters tugged at her dress and cried with their cheeks flowing with tears. The loud, high-pitched voices of her daughter made it difficult for Taiga to even get a word in. While she stood there awkwardly, she recoiled as she felt another twinge. She sighed and rubbed her belly to soothe her pain. Seina watched the little girls sobbing to their mother while she stood a few metres away. She scratched her cheek with a sense of guilt.

While it was still bright, the sun had noticeably died down since morning. The flow of the wind had slowed and the deep blue sky had gotten duller. It was late in the afternoon. Seina had participated in most of the games with the children, some of them alongside her husband, and some alongside Taiga, who would recover some time later. Her schemes to keep Taiga out of the games would resume. However, that would also lead to a few losses. When Taiga wasn’t participating, Seina was able to focus on the games. But even when she wasn’t scheming, their family would lose. After that, she looked back on the previous games with Taiga and wondered.

*Was I losing those games on purpose or am I really that bad?*

Katsuko pointed at Seina while she wiped her tears with her mother’s dress.

“It’s because of her! We keep losing because of her!”

“Eh? Me?” Seina pointed at herself, confused by the sudden accusation. The girls continued to stare at her with their watery eyes filled with sorrowful disapproval.

“You’re not very good at the games, Mom,” Yasuo added. He stood next to his mother, now covered from head to toe in Panpanda merchandise. He wore a Panpanda-themed hoodie, a Panpanda-themed hoodie, Panpanda-themed sunglasses, and he sipped from a Panpanda-themed cup. Seina had no words.

An upbeat tune played over the speakers before the announcer’s voice came through.

“Thank you so much for playing in Panpanda’s Special Day of Fun. We hope you enjoyed all the games we had prepared. However, there’s still one more game to play! This time, the playing area will be all around the park! There are flags placed everywhere. Go around the park and try to get as many as you can. Each flag gives a lot of points, so even if your family doesn’t have a lot, this might be your family’s chance to win! We’ll gather back together to redeem the points and announce the winner of the games. The game starts now, good luck!”

The announcement ended with a whistle blowing through the speakers.

“Well, there’s still one more game! We might win this one!” Seina said, pointing up at the speakers and trying to make her case.

“We’d need a miracle if we’re going to score enough to win,” Taiga mumbled. “You know, now that I think about it, it did seem like you were making us lose on purpose for some of the games.”

Seina’s eyes widened. “Wh-what!? No way! Why would I do that?” She defensively waved her arms around. Her pleading was fruitless. Taiga already knew. She looked down and rested her hand on her pregnant belly. She glared at her mother while her head was down.

“You’ve been trying to keep me from playing, haven’t you?”

“Eeeh...” Seina’s tongue was tied. She stood there with her hands in the air and blinked like an idiot. She turned to her husband standing by her. “Eh... Naru?” She asked, her voice as timid as a mouse. Naru only shook his head.

“I can’t defend you here. Sorry,” he said gently.

“Was... was that plushie important?” Seina asked. Taiga only sighed.

“It’s not about the plushie, Mom,” she said. “The girls probably would’ve cried if we lost anyway, but I would’ve been fine with that.” Taiga rubbed Haruko’s head. “But we lost because you wanted to meddle with me and my family. How could I be satisfied with that?”

Seina took in her words quietly. She swallowed her spit before trying to respond.

“O-okay, I get it now. I won’t interfere anymore. If we really try, maybe we can still win that plushie your daughters wanted—”

Taiga raised her hand, interrupting Seina.

“I’m exhausted, Mom. The girls are sad and tired. I can barely walk without losing my breath... I think the girls and I have had enough games for today.” She sighed. “I just want to have a day of fun with my daughters.” She began to turn away, her daughters turning with her. “I’ll be taking them to the bouncy castle. If you want to play the games, go play with Dad



or something.” Before she started walking away, she looked at Yasuo. “Do you want to come along, Yasuo? You’ve never been in a bouncy castle before, have you?”

“Yeah, I’ll come!” He responded enthusiastically.

Taiga began walking off with her daughters. Yasuo scuttled along with them. As Seina watched her daughter walk off, Naru took her shoulder. They looked at each other quietly, before going to a bench behind them. As they sat, Seina’s eyes remained on Taiga, who was still in view. Naru, however, was focused on his wife.

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There wasn’t anything else of note that day. The telephone rang while Seina passed by with a basket of laundry in her hands. She easily recognised the numbers displayed on the telephone as Taiga’s. Naturally, she didn’t want to keep it ringing.

“Hello? Taiga? Is there something you need?” She asked, with one hand carrying the basket and the other holding the phone to her ear.

A cold silence came through the phone. Seina could only hear a quiet monotonous humming of the phone’s handset. After a minute, something finally came through. But it wasn’t a word, only a trembling snuffle.

“Hm? What was that?” Seina prompted the other person again. This time, she heard another louder snuffle.

“M-... Mom?” Taiga’s troubled, shaky voice crawled through the phone, followed by a deep and loud sigh. Seina dropped the basket to hold the phone with both hands.

“Taiga? What’s wrong?” Seina asked, her voice filled with a sense of urgency. She could hear Taiga’s body convulsing and letting out rough, suppressed breaths. It was the type of convulsions that came with an intense round of crying.

“I don’t know... I don’t know, Mom...” Taiga’s voice had grown to an ugly whine, high-pitched like a pig’s grunt. It was as if the tears were going to burst through her face.

“Taiga, are you okay? What happened?”

“I don’t... I don’t know what I’m doing, Mom!” Taiga sobbed. Before Seina could think of what to say, Taiga continued to sob and grunt. When the words came to her, she waited for the flow of tears to slow.

“Is anyone else at home, Taiga?” She asked gently.

“Just...” Taiga sniffed. “Just me... And the babies...” Seina heard her daughter wipe her leaking face on her sleeve. “Haruko... Mitsuko... Katsuko... No matter how hard I try...

I can't help them... They won't even look at me..." Taiga was interrupted when a baby started wailing in the background. "Katsuko..." Her voice became shakier when she spoke her daughter's name. She continued to sob over her baby's cries.

In her daughter's crying fit, Seina wanted to comfort her. "It'll take time, Taiga—"

"No! I can't! I—..." The tears continued to flow out of her eyes. "I just can't..." Seina heard a thud on the other end of the line. Taiga had gotten on her knees and leaned her head on a wall. "Ya-chan... Ryuuji... They already have everything figured out... The babies always prefer them over me... And I gave birth to them. I'm supposed to be their mother but... I'm nothing."

Taiga's distraught grunting resumed over the phone. Seina could only stand and listen. Through the shaky tears and agonising cries of her daughter, she pondered to herself. *How many times has she cried like this while I was away?* She was always her mother, even when her daughter wasn't under her care. It was her duty, after all. But that duty wasn't being fulfilled. Not when her daughter was with her father, and certainly not while she was on the phone either. Every grunt her daughter released chipped away at her heart until she just couldn't take it anymore. After that, there was just one thing she needed to do.

"Wait for me, Taiga," she uttered. Taiga's crying came to a halt.

"Don't do anything else. Just... Wait for me."

Seina felt a timer start the moment she put down the phone. She couldn't waste another second leaving her duty unattended. The first step she took towards the door after hanging up, the train line she took, the pace she moved; every choice she made and every moment she used to get to her daughter were more valuable than gold. Not once did she ever stop thinking about her. *What is she doing now? Is she going anywhere? Will she be okay?* She couldn't bear to leave those questions unanswered.

She remembered passing the luxury apartment her ex husband placed her daughter in. Once she was in front of the Takasu family's two-floor apartment, she found the landlady talking to a rather disgruntled young woman.

"My baby can barely get any sleep, and my husband has work tomorrow. What is it going to take for you to do something about all that racket?" The woman complained loud enough for Seina to easily eavesdrop.

"R-right, I'll talk to my tenants. They're moving out soon, so they should be out of your hair by then," the landlady said.

The woman clicked her tongue. “You have no idea how much of a nuisance it is living directly next to this awful sound. I didn’t pay to be woken up by someone else’s baby! You either handle it now, or I’ll handle it myself.”

“I-I understand, I’ll do everything I can.”

Sure enough, Seina heard the sound of little Katsuko’s crying as she approached the apartment. When the landlady stopped focusing on the woman, she immediately recognised Seina’s face as she passed by.

“Takagi-san!?” She exclaimed. But Seina didn’t even look in her direction. Her pace didn’t change a bit. *What could she do?* She thought. *This is something only a mother can handle.* She climbed the staircase while the two women looked at her from below. She gave the door a few light knocks, then she waited. The sound of footsteps approaching the door could be heard on the other side. But the door did not open when they stopped.

“Taiga, it’s me.”

Those were the magic words she needed. The crack in the door opened slowly. Katsuko’s wailing became clearer. Taiga peeked through as if she hadn’t seen the sun in days. The little girl had the marks of dried tears left behind on her cheeks. The shape of her bones poked through the skin of her arms. Her eyes were the colour of a peach’s skin, with eyebags deep enough to function as pockets. Her lips were dry like sandstone, and her skin was pale like a ghost. Seina could only feel pity for her daughter, but she only had to smile to tell her everything was going to be alright.

“The doctor said I’m not allowed to go anywhere without Ryuuji or Ya-chan.” Taiga’s voice was weak, almost weak enough to be overcome by the apartment’s overwhelming silence. Seina knelt in the living room while her daughter rested into her chest. She stroked her daughter’s frizzy hair with one hand while she held Katsuko in her other, her little rump sitting in her palm. Taiga stared blankly at her baby daughter, who was now sound asleep. “But they’re busy sometimes, so the landlady stays with me to make sure someone is around to help me if I faint.”

Taiga fidgeted with the fabric of her mother’s cardigan. “Ryuuji and Ya-chan try to bring me outside a lot. They know how tired I am of being stuck here.” She gripped the fabric tightly. “I’m so tired, Mom.”

Seina’s hand rested on Taiga’s shoulder, gently caressing her skin, exposed by her bright camisole. “What do you usually do at home, Taiga?” She asked gently. Taiga started stroking Katsuko’s belly in a circular motion.

“I feed the babies. And I change their diapers.” She rested her finger against Katsuko’s soft cheek, but she quickly withdrew when Katsuko’s face scrunched up and swiped it away. “I can’t do anything when they cry. The neighbours always yell at me.” Taiga’s hand dropped to her mother’s knees. “They need someone to take care of them.” She closed her eyes. “Please help me, Mom...”

Seina gently set Katsuko down onto a tiny cushion next to her, freeing her hand so she could embrace her daughter with both arms. “It’s okay, Taiga. I’m here,” her whisper was as gentle as the ocean waves on a clear night. “But you know, Taiga...” Her hands slowly moved up Taiga’s body until she was holding her cheeks, bringing them closer to her face. “You are my baby first.”

Seina leaned in and pressed her lips against her daughter’s forehead. All movement in Taiga’s body ceased as she felt herself get submerged by the comfort of a mother’s kiss. Her mother’s arms moved underneath her shoulders, then pulled her head and body into her chest for a hug as warm as sitting by a fire during a freezing blizzard.

Seconds passed while Taiga sat in her mother’s arms. Then those seconds turned into minutes. There wasn’t a knock on the door or a call for their names. There wasn’t a single sound or creature that could disrupt the embrace Seinā held with her daughter.

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“Taiga called me when her daughters were still a few months old. You remember that, don’t you?” Seinā’s voice was soft and dry. “That was the time I left Yasuo with you to go take care of Taiga.” Naru nodded. “Hearing those cries when we weren’t in the same room... It was just terrible. At that moment, I thought...” Seinā sighed deeply. “I just couldn’t leave my daughter alone again.”

Seina leaned her head on her husband’s shoulder, allowing him to caress her hair while they watched Taiga in the distance. “Staying with her at the apartment... It was such a difficult sight. She was so... frail. Her legs gave out easily so half the time, she was just crawling around the apartment. She couldn’t even hold one of her babies for ten minutes but now, after going through all that... She chose to have another child, even with the burden of caring for the other three. All I can do is sit here and wonder, ‘what happened?’.”

Seina raised her head to face her husband. “It’s crazy, you know. Back then, she’d rant to me about how annoying it was to stay with the landlady. She never told anyone else but me because she never wanted the landlady to hear any of it. She’d laugh when I joked about the

neighbours living in the apartment next door. She looked so happy when I was with her. She used to call me to ask when I would be arriving. But now..." She reached out her hand towards her daughter. "She keeps trying to walk away..."

Seina dropped her arm and rested on the bench's backrest. "Maybe she really doesn't need me after all..." She sighed. "What am I going to do now, Naru?"

Naru wrapped his arm over his wife's shoulders. "I'm sure it'll come to you eventually, Seina-chan."

As Taiga trudged with her daughters and little brother by her side, Ryuuji approached them in his metal crutches with his camcorder in hand. Taiga raised an eyebrow at him.

"Where have you been?" She asked snarkily.

"I was just giving the camera lens a clean in the restroom. Did something happen?" He asked casually. Taiga clicked her tongue at her husband's cluelessness.

"What is it with you and that camera? I swear, you haven't put it down once since you took it out this morning," she said scornfully.

"What? I paid good money for this camera! Don't you want these memories recorded in high quality?" He said defensively.

"Whatever... I'm bringing the kids to the bouncy castle. We're done for today."

"Isn't there one more game?"

"It's too much effort to win the prize, so we're just going to kill time."

"Is that so..." Ryuuji looked down at his daughters. Their eyes were still watery and their cheeks were still red while they were clinging to their mother's dress. They looked up at their father like a bunch of sad puppies. "Are you excited to play in a bouncy castle?" He asked playfully. But they didn't respond, causing Ryuuji to pout. "Are you three still sad because you lost?" The girls remained silent.

"It's not fair," Katsuko uttered. That was the only sound that came from them. Ryuuji sighed with a smile and rubbed each of the girls' heads.

"That's okay," he said. "You three worked so hard, didn't you? But in the end, you didn't get what you wanted. Makes you feel sad, doesn't it?" The girls nodded.

Taiga chimed in, pulling their heads into her waist and stroking their hair. "It's okay to lose sometimes. It's just a plushie, after all. We can buy a different one at the store. Would you like that, girls?"

Mitsuko covered her face with her mother's dress, muffling her little voice. "I still want the jumbo one..." She said.

Taiga huffed. “These three just aren’t getting over it, huh?”

“Okay, since we lost, how about we get some ice cream to make up for it?” Ryuuji added. He turned to Yasuo. “I’ll get some for you, too. What do you think?”

“Really? Thanks, Ryuuji!” Yasuo cheered. The girls lifted their faces from their mother’s waist to nod pitifully at their father. Ryuuji straightened his chest and held his head high, looking down at his daughters with a wide grin.

“Alright, let’s get some ice cream!”

However, that ice cream would have to come another time.

“Takasu Ryuuji?”

A woman’s voice called out to the father of three (soon to be four). When he turned around, he was greeted by a scrawny but gigantic husky, panting at the woman’s feet. The whole family focused on the woman with her dog, whose back was slouched deeply and whose hair had grown until it drooped over its eyes .

“Chiiko-chan?” Ryuuji suddenly exclaimed at the sight of the dog.

“That’s right! Wow, I’m surprised you even recognise her. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, hasn’t it?” Chiiko’s owner said. She was an old neighbour of Taiga and Ryuuji’s before they moved away.

“Oh, it has! The last time we met, these girls were still in their strollers,” Taiga said, nudging them. Her eyes gravitated towards the dog. They’ve been friendly with each other for a while, but she can’t help but remember the time they entered a heated battle with each other in the summer.

“Ah, your daughters are absolutely adorable... By the way, I passed by your new home while I was walking Chiiko-chan yesterday. It looks absolutely wonderful just from the outside! I wish I lived in a house like that,” Chiiko’s owner rambled. The couple smiled at the woman after a hearty reunion. Ryuuji looked at the children and noticed their eyes locked onto the panting dog, filled with intrigue.

“Hey, is it alright if the kids get a chance to play with Chiiko-chan?” Ryuuji asked while he gestured at the kids. Their eyes widened after hearing the request.

“Oh, yes! I’m sure Chiiko-chan would love to!”

“Really?” Yasuo asked excitedly. Taiga gently pushed the kids in the direction of Chiiko, who continued to sit idly at her owner’s feet. Once they were standing over Chiiko, their hands hesitantly moved toward her fur. First, their fingers gently brushed against her

hairs. Then, their fingertips slowly moved along her skin. When Chiiko's head subtly drifted towards their hands, they each formed a rhythm and scratched her confidently.

Chiiko's owner looked down when she felt something similar to a brush tickling her feet. Her mouth was agape and formed a bright smile when she witnessed her dog's tail wagging energetically. "Oh my, she loves the scratches! How cute..."

Chiiko's panting invigorated as the scratches excited her. She started rubbing her face against each of the children. The girls giggled as Chiiko tickled their soft faces with her warm, fluffy fur. Chiiko's reaction to the scratching excited the girls as well, leading them to scratch her even more. It became a perpetual motion of affection. Taiga and Ryuuji bent down to watch the adorable scene.

"What do you think, girls? Does it feel just like touching the Jumbo Panpanda Plushie?" Ryuuji asked.

"It's even better!" Haruko said. The girls continued to giggle incessantly when Chiiko got on her feet and rubbed her body against them. It was as if they'd completely forgotten that they had lost the games.

"Ruf!" Chiiko barked. She seemed to have taken a great liking to them.

"Children are so easy to please," Ryuuji mumbled to his wife with a smirk. Taiga smirked back with mischievous eyes.

"Hey, can I try holding the leash?" Yasuo asked politely.

"Ah, sure!" Chiiko's owner transferred control of her dog to the little boy. Yasuo held up Chiiko's leash as if he were her actual owner. "It's been such a long time since I've seen Chiiko so energetic."

"Why's that?" Ryuuji asked.

"Well, ever since the vet diagnosed her with diabetes, she's been running around and playing much less. A slow walk through the park is usually all she can handle."

"Oh, poor thing," Taiga said. However, there was a part of her that looked down on the dog and made her think, *What a tragic fall from grace*. The sight of the dog and the reminder of their battle had reawakened her fighting spirit.

However, unbeknownst to the adults, something was brewing inside the husky. Not only did the scratching feel wonderful, but the girls' giggles brought her great joy. When her pleasure had reached its peak, Chiiko sat down and looked to the sky. What she saw wasn't the blue sky, but rather, a bright white light. She had ascended beyond simple pleasure. She had achieved nirvana.

*This... This is heaven!* If dogs could speak, that was what she was thinking.

The spark in Chiiko had turned into a burning fire. Her eyes widened and peered through the hairs over her eyes. At that moment, it was as if she had been cured of her illness. *This energy... I need to use it! I need to!*

Everyone except the girls suddenly took a step back in surprise when Chiiko shifted her body in multiple directions. Before they knew it, the sisters were sitting on the gigantic Chiiko's long back.

"Awooooooo!!!" The dog let out a confident howl.

"Hey, wait, that's dangerous—Aaah!" Before Taiga could get her children off the dog, Chiiko sprinted between her and Ryuuji, shoving them and making them fall on their butts. The impact caused Taiga's pain to return, so she instinctively clutched her belly and winced in pain. Ryuuji's metal crutches made a loud clang as they toppled onto the ground.

"Ch-Chiiko!" The dog's owner shouted as she tried to reach out. Yasuo blankly watched the dog run away, still processing what was happening. However, he had taken too long to realise his situation.

"Uwaaaah!" Yasuo shrieked when he felt his feet swept from under him as his entire body was pulled towards Chiiko. His grip on her leash was tight, but his body was incredibly light, and despite being diabetic, the gigantic husky pulled him along easily.

"Yasuo!" Taiga shouted for her brother while she was still on the ground.

"Woah! Woah! Wooooaaah!" Yasuo frantically stepped his feet and pulled them up as he tried to stabilise his footing, but the force of Chiiko dragging him along was too much. Eventually, he stopped struggling and went with the flow, letting the soles of his shoes rub against the pavement beneath him. He held the leash tightly and let the wind blow in his hair, as if we had started wakesurfing.

Seina was resting her head on her husband's shoulder. The couple had started taking in the scenery while they sat on the bench. However, they jolted when a gigantic dog passed them by, paired with the sound of high-pitched giggles of little girls.

"Wait, was that..." Seina had only just noticed the three girls on the dog's back as she watched the dog run off in the distance. "The girls!?" The realisation prompted Naru and Seina to stand up.

"Waaaahooooo!!!" Katsuko yelled, her voice echoing through the trees.

"Aaaaaah!" Yasuo shrieked as he passed his parents while getting dragged along.

"Yasuo!" Naru shouted for his son. Seeing his child in that predicament, his gaze quickly focused on the dog. He started running as if he were in the Olympics, chasing the dog



that was dragging away his son. Seina stood at the bench with her jaw dropped, still confused about what was happening. Then, Taiga and Chiiko's owner ran past Seina.

"Mom! That dog just took the girls! We need to catch it!" Taiga shouted. Seina quickly understood. The women continued their chase, now with Seina by their side.

"Baaaah! Haaah! Haaaah! Haaah!"

Their chase ended as quickly as it began. Taiga was grovelling on the ground while clutching her belly. Seina and Chiiko's owner panted heavily, their clothes drenched in sweat. There was no way a pregnant woman and two older women were going to catch a dog running faster than a car.

"How... Haah... Are we supposed to catch up?" Seina asked.

Suddenly, Taiga's phone rang. She answered it while her face was still facing the ground. Ryuuji's voice was heard on the other end.

"Hey, Taiga? Things aren't looking so good from here."

Ryuuji was still sitting on the side of the pavement where Chiiko had taken the girls. Using the zoom function on his camcorder, he carefully tracked the location of the dog and his daughters.

While everyone was worrying about saving the girls from Chiiko, the girls themselves were giggling away while they rode on the dog's back. There wasn't an ounce of fear in those bright and happy smiles. Katsuko, who was right behind Chiiko's head, even stood on Chiiko's back and raised her head to the sky. "Awooooooooo!" Both Katsuko and Chiiko howled in unison. Yasuo was silent and focused, trying very hard not to let go of Chiiko's leash. Naru was panting heavily, still chasing after the dog. He reached out his hand, but it seemed he couldn't even get a hold of his son.

"Gyaah!"

"What is that!?"

"Aaah!"

In her euphoria, Chiiko was blissfully unaware of her surroundings, causing her to bump into and scare the other park goers, causing some of them to trip and fall. The park became riddled with the shrieks of innocent passersby. It seemed this ride was only fun for the Takasu sisters.

Suddenly, something caught Mitsuko's eye. She was sitting behind both of her sisters. Her head moved along with what she was focused on. Eventually, she reached out her hand.

Before she knew it, a little purple flag was in her hand. The same thing would happen to Katsuko, who was taking in the view from over Chiiko's head.

"Gah! Hey!"

Katsuko had stolen a blue flag from the hands of a twelve-year-old boy. She pointed the flag forward and held her chest high, as if she were rushing into war on her horse.

Ryuuji watched the chaos unfold from where he sat. "Someone might get hurt if they continued like this. It doesn't look like your dad is having any luck, either. I don't think I can do anything else from here, sorry."

"No, it's fine. You stay there and keep watching the girls. We'll need you," Taiga assured her husband. She lowered her phone and turned to her mother. "I think I've got a plan, but I need your help to execute it. Do you think you can do it?"

"Huh? You want... me?" Seina pointed at herself in surprise. Taiga only nodded. With that, Seina immediately understood, nodding back confidently.

Half an hour had passed. Ryuuji, who was on reconnaissance, had his phone held to his ear and his eye on his camcorder, still on the line with his wife. "They're approaching. Get ready to move."

Chiiko had not shown a single sign of stopping, still panting and happily running through the park while terrorising the passersby. The girls had their hands full of flags of many different colours. They continued to smile as their hair blew in the wind. Yasuo's body was less tense than before as he calmly surfed along.

"Geeehh... Heeehh... Haaaahh..."

Naru was far behind Chiiko, still trying to save his son. With his tongue sticking out, his panting sounded less like heavy breathing and more like a pig's grunting. His eyes had drifted to the sky rather than focusing on what was in front of him. He looked like the kind of zombie that walked incredibly slow. Finally, he gave in, falling to the ground on his chest, outrun by man's best friend.

"Ah... Oh no..."

Yasuo suddenly winced. His hands were getting tired of holding the leash. He felt his fingers slowly slip away from its leather. He was too exhausted to continue holding on. His grip on the leash loosen bit by bit, as he attempted to delay the possible disaster as much as he could. He braced himself for what could be an intense round of hurt.

Then, when Yasuo was just a few seconds away from letting go, Seina jumped out from behind a tree and grabbed the leash, safely placing her son on the ground behind her.

Her grip was strong enough to stop Chiiko from moving, but the dog kept running anyway. However, Seina grimaced when she felt her feet slowly slide towards Chiiko as the dog began to overpower her. With her control over the dog leaving her hands, she used the leash to pull herself towards Chiiko. When the dog was in reach, she took the girls one-by-one, putting each of them on her shoulders.

Then, she appeared.

Chiiko and Seina looked forward in shock to the heavily pregnant woman standing intimidatingly before them. She had the glare of a tiger focused on its prey. After letting the wind blow in her hair and her dress, she took her wrestling stance, her limbs becoming unshakably still. She looked at the dog as if she were saying, *Ready for a rematch?*

Chiiko growled, drool dripping from her mouth. *Let's do it, then!* She thought, putting even more energy into her legs. Seina quickly let go of the leash to prevent herself from getting dragged by the dog. Like a beast getting released into an arena, Chiiko charged at Taiga with a lust for battle. Not once did Taiga tremble at the sight of her opponent.

They clashed.

Taiga's feet and Chiiko's hind feet were planted into the ground. Taiga faced the floor as she wrapped her arms around Chiiko's body, while Chiiko did the same with Taiga. The two fighters butted heads. These fighters weren't the same compared to their previous match. Taiga was weighed down by her pregnancy, while Chiiko had grown skinnier and weaker. However, even after their bodies had changed, they remained equally matched.

Then, it hit her.

"Gaaaah!"

Taiga felt an intense tightening in her belly. She grimaced in pain, little tears dripping from her eyes. This battle was taking a toll on her body. She breathed heavily, trying to endure the pain, but it became unbearable. She let out another agonising groan. Her feet began to slip. It seemed this match was going to end in a loss, just like before.

"Go, Mom!"

"Fight on! Fight on!"

"You can do it, Mom!"

"Yeah! Let's go!"

Taiga's eyes lit up. Her gaze shifted to the children, including Yasuo, jumping and cheering for her. She witnessed their hopeful eyes focused just on her, rooting for her. Seina was watching her in disbelief. She was only concerned about whether her daughter was going to make it out fine. At that moment, Taiga came to the realisation that she and Chiiko weren't

equally matched after all. No, it was motherhood that made her far stronger. With the sweat on her skin glistening in the sunlight, she gave the audience a confident, toothy smile. The children cheered even louder. Seina's eyes lit up, too. *She's really going to win this...*

Taiga gripped Chiiko tightly and tilted her back. With the baby in her belly and Chiiko's immense size, it felt as if she were lifting a truck. The move was instantaneous.

*Crash!*

Taiga suplexed the dog.

"Yeeeeaaaaahhh!!!"

The crowd went wild. Taiga fell to her knees, panting heavily while she held her belly. Chiiko's body flopped on its side and went limp. Taiga looked at her opponent, who seemed to have fainted. She raised her fist. She won.

"Yahooooo!!!"

Taiga's daughters quickly surrounded her to celebrate her victory, cheering loudly for their mother. Mitsuko happily nuzzled against her mother's side. Haruko was waving the flags over her mother's head. Katsuko hugged her mother's arm. "Mom is the strongest!" She cheered. Even though her eyes were tired and her body was sore, she couldn't help but laugh and smile at all the praise she was being showered with.

Seina watched Taiga from a distance. Her daughter's smile was brighter than the sun. She looked so strong and confident next to her children. She looked like she could stand on her own two feet. This version of her daughter almost seemed brand new. But it wasn't. Seeing her granddaughters huddled around their mother made her eyes shine. *She really doesn't need me after all...*

Seina approached her daughter with a smile. "That was incredible, Taiga." The only person she had to worry about was herself. *What am I going to do now?*

Taiga, looking up at her mother, scratched her head. "Oh... Thanks, hehe..." Her voice was weak, but upbeat. "Ow!" The tip of a flag poked her in the cheek.

"Ah! Sorry, Mom..." Haruko said, caressing her mother's face.

"Wait... A flag?" Taiga's eyes lit up as she started counting the coloured flags in her daughters' hands. "This... might be enough to win the prize!" Taiga said excitedly.

"Really!?" The girls said, hopping on the spot.

"Come on! Let's go and redeem them!" Taiga nudged her daughters along.

"Yaaaay!" The little girls scuttled ahead. Yasuo followed them. While Seina watched the children wander off, her attention was caught by Taiga reaching out her hand.

"Can I... Hah... Get a little help? I can't move my legs..."

“Oh, right.”

Seina pulled her daughter over her shoulder and trudged in the children’s direction.

“CHIIKO-CHAAAN!” Chiiko’s owner shrieked as she ran to her dog who was still laying on the ground. She bent down and shook her dog’s limp body. “Chiiko-chan, are you alright!? Can you move?” She asked frantically. Her heart skipped a beat when Chiiko didn’t move for a moment after being shaken. But suddenly, Chiiko’s mouth formed a wide smile. Her owner felt her wagging tail brush against her shin. *Ah... Life is good...* The dog thought. Chiiko’s owner breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

The grass patch littered with picnic mats was in view. Seina and Taiga were still a distance away. While she was over her mother’s shoulder, Taiga’s face suddenly turned red and scrunched up.

“Mom, my back! Rub my back!” Her urgent begging led Seina to hastily brush her hand over her daughter’s back.

“Taiga, are you alright?”

“Y-yeah! Hooh, that dog really did a number on me. Just... just keep rubbing.” Taiga’s breathing had grown heavier.

“You were being quite reckless back there...” Seina said worriedly. “Well, I guess the plan wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to pull off my plan safely without you, either.” Taiga grinned at her mother. Her eye twitched as she endured her pain. However, Seina was left with an aching feeling in her chest after receiving her daughter’s praise.

“No, don’t... I’m sorry, Taiga. I caused a lot of trouble for you. Not just today, but the past few days, too. I shouldn’t even be here. I’ll be out of your hair for good. I promise.” Her gaze drifted to the ground. Hearing her mother’s pained voice, Taiga simply looked forward as if she hadn’t heard what her mother said.

“Sorry for kicking you out.”

Seina turned to her daughter. “Huh? But that was my fault.”

“Yeah, but... I never wanted to shout at you like that.” Their eyes met. Seina was greeted with a friendly smile from her daughter. “I did have fun today, you know. Even though you tried to mess with me.”

“But... The games...” Seina stammered.

“Well, maybe it’s because we won in the end, but... I guess it’s just nice having you.” Taiga leaned in closer to her mother. “Today was supposed to be a day for family, after all. That does include you.”

“I see...” The two women looked forward. “Hey, Taiga? I know you’ve been seeing my face a lot, but... Is it... still okay if I called you? Once a week, maybe?”

“Sure. I’d love that.”

Two men stood before them in the distance, in a similar position as they were, with one being carried on the shoulder by the other.

“Heeey!”

Naru shouted and waved at the women. He looked almost as tired as Taiga was, panting heavily and drenched in sweat, with Ryuuji struggling to hold him up while carrying himself on his crutches. The women were filled with warmth from the reunion. Everyone was safe. The games had come to an end. The other families were gathering again. Thus, Panpanda’s Special Day of Fun had reached its conclusion.

*Rustle, rustle, rustle...*

Haruko, Mitsuko and Katsuko hugged the gigantic Panpanda plushie, their arms filled by the character’s thick legs and rump. They crinkled the plushie’s plastic wrapping as they squeezed its body with all their might.

“Wah... So soft...”

“So cute...”

“So big!”

Yasuo’s mouth was agape, enamoured by the immense size of the plushie. He joined the hug, sinking his face into its rump as well. The adults gathered around the children, smiling at the adorable sight.

“You know, it might be even softer if you removed the plastic,” Ryuuji said, recording his cute daughters.

“It’ll be wonderful decor for the sisters’ room,” Seina added.

“Let’s just hope they don’t fight over it,” Naru turned to his son. “How about I get you your own plushie, Yasuo?”

“Yeah... Panpanda is the best...” Yasuo said, his voice muffled.

While everyone was enjoying the newly won prize, they had yet to notice Taiga standing behind her husband, her back tilted forward and facing everyone. Like usual, she had a hand on her back and another under her belly. However, her heavy panting had turned

into wheezing. She was sweating bullets. Her eyes widened as her body was overcome by pain. Ryuuji was the only one that could hear her wheezes, but he was still unsure of what he was seeing. He just rubbed his wife's back to soothe whatever she was going through.

"Dad, can we still get ice cream? Even though we won?" Haruko asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Yaaay!" The children cheered.

"Oh! I know a place nearby that makes some really good soft-serve ice cream. We could go there," Naru said.

"Eh? Isn't that the one that's too sweet?" Yasuo asked.

"I like sweet!" Mitsuko said.

"Well, we better get there before it closes. The sun is coming down—"

"YAAAAAAH!!!"

Seina was interrupted by a high-pitched shriek, paired with what sounded like water spilling. Everyone immediately went silent and turned to the source of the sound: Taiga.

"M... Muh... Muh..."

Taiga's lips quivered. Her legs shivered. The inner side of her thighs were soaked, and a tiny puddle the size of the palm of a hand had formed right under her. Everyone simply watched her in awe. It seemed what she was experiencing wasn't just back pain.

"My water broooke!"

She cried before falling to the ground, her legs spread out like two chicken wings.

"Eeeeeeeeh!?" Seina and Ryuuji squealed in shock. Naru quickly pulled out his phone and started calling for an ambulance. The children stood with their plushie idly, unsure what to make of the situation. Taiga's mother and husband quickly rushed to her side, kneeling beside her and holding her shoulders. She planted her hands onto the ground behind her and started taking long, deep breaths. Her entire body had turned red.

"Have you been having contractions this entire time!?" Seina asked Taiga.

"Uh... Hooh... I think so!"

Ryuuji started to rant. "Seriously!? I thought you said it was just back pain! You were doing all that running, too! I thought I told you to be more careful—"

"I thought I was fine, alright!? ... Nngh! Aaah, I need to push!"

"How close are your contractions? Actually, when did your labour even start?" Seina asked while stroking Taiga's belly. Ryuuji did the same.

"Uhh... Two minutes? I haven't been counting... Haah... As for labour... This morning, I think?"

“THIS MORNING!?” Ryuuji shrieked before blacking out and falling on his side, next to his wife’s leg.

“Ryuuji!? What’re you fainting for!? You’re not the one giving birth!”

Seina grabbed Taiga’s shoulders to face her. “Taiga, if you were in labour for that long, then your baby could be coming any minute!”

“What? No!”

“What do you mean ‘No’!?” Seina shouted irritably.

“I... I still have a few hours, right? My water only just broke!” Taiga looked at her mother worriedly.

“But this is your second pregnancy! The baby might come a lot faster.”

“I am NOT having my baby at the park!” Fortunately for Taiga, after the games had ended, the park wasn’t as crowded as in the morning. However, there were still a few park goers in the distance that stopped their afternoon jog, wondering what was taking place. Then Taiga’s face scrunched up. “Hnnngh!”

“Are you pushing? I thought you said you didn’t want to—”

“I can’t help it, alright!?”

“Wait, then that means I was right to get you to sit out! I can’t believe you, Taiga!”

“Shut up! Aaaaaaah!”

Taiga’s shrill cries and groans attracted more attention from the passersby. They simply stood and watched the situation unfold while mumbling amongst themselves. Taiga continued to breathe heavily between her contractions while they waited for help to arrive. Then, Ryuuji woke up to the sound of an ambulance’s alarm in the distance. He sat up and turned behind to be greeted by two paramedics arriving with a stretcher.

“Ah! Quick, get her onto the stretcher!” Ryuuji told Seina. Seina wrapped her arms under Taiga’s shoulders while the paramedics set the stretcher down beside them. Together, they carried Taiga onto it to bring her into the ambulance, which was on the road a few metres away.

“Wow... So that’s the inside of an ambulance...” Yasuo mumbled.

“Panpanda is too big for the ambulance,” Haruko said. The girls nodded to one another before letting go of the plushie to join their parents’ side, leaving Yasuo to carry the gigantic plushie on his own. Taiga’s groans quietened as the Takasu family hurriedly left the scene, leaving just Naru and Yasuo on their own.

“Let’s meet them in the hospital,” Naru told his son.



The backdoors of the ambulance were shut. Ryuuji and Seina stood at both sides of the stretcher, while the sisters stood next to their father, admiring the equipment covering the inner walls and becoming spectators to the process of childbirth.

“Alright, we’re not in the park anymore. Are you ready?” Ryuuji asked.

“Hooh... Yeah, I’m ready,” Taiga said. The paramedics draped a cloth over her legs while they pulled her pants off to deliver the baby.

“Ah, I can already see the head poking out. Looks like this delivery won’t be long,” the female paramedic standing between Taiga’s legs said. “Just push when you’re ready.”

“This... Hooh... This will be easier than last time. I just know it,” Taiga said in an attempt to calm herself for what’s to come. It wouldn’t take long before another contraction would hit her, causing the pain in her abdomen to return. “Nngh!” Her face scrunched up again as she groaned. Seina and Ryuuji held her hands.

“Push with everything you’ve got!” Ryuuji said.

“Aaaaaaaah!” Taiga’s screaming was amplified. Her grip on Seina and Ryuuji’s hands tightened. Ryuuji winced slightly, closing one eye. Seina, however, did not take it as lightly.

“Oh, goodness! Taiga, less strength in your hands and more into your pushing!” She shouted, frantically trying to pull her hand out of Taiga’s grip but to no avail. Her hand immediately turned red and looked like a bunch of snapped twigs. “Gaaah! How do you handle this, Ryuuji!?”

“Well, she’s done worse,” Ryuuji said. Taiga glared at her husband while gritting her teeth. She gripped Ryuuji’s hand even harder, causing it to turn red as well. “Ow, ow, ow! Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” The stinging pain brought him to his knees.

“Aaaah... Haaah... Haaah...” Taiga’s contraction subsided, leaving her panting with her whole chest. “No... Not easier! It’s not easier at all!”

“The baby seems to be having some trouble coming out. Push harder when the next contraction comes around, okay?” The paramedic said calmly.

“Oh no... It can’t be... Could it?” Ryuuji began to hyperventilate. “Gaaah! Why’d you have to be so reckless, Taiga!?” He ruffled his hair in distress.

“Ryuuji, your panicking is the LAST thing I need right now!” Taiga yelled through her heavy breaths.

Seina leaned over her daughter and looked her straight in the eyes. “But he’s right! How do you expect to give birth when you spent all your energy playing those games!? And you chastised *me* for worrying about that!?”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you! Enough!” Taiga shoved her mother back.

Ryuuji groaned and pinched his forehead. “You know how troublesome this kind of thing is, Taiga! What if something goes wrong?”

“It’ll all be fine if you just stop whining!” Taiga’s breaths became more continuous. “Nngh!” She groaned as she felt another pang in her lower back.

The paramedic raised her head from behind the draped cloth. “Hey, I think we should all just calm down here—”

“I can’t believe you’d do something so irrational! Are you even thinking right!? You aren’t delirious or anything? Do you have a fever?” Seina felt her other hand on her daughter’s forehead.

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Taiga shoved her mother again.

Ryuuji felt a tug at his shirt. He turned to find Katsuko trying to get his attention. “Hey, Dad, are we still getting ice cream later?”

“You’re asking about that now?” Ryuuji said irritably before quickly composing himself, speaking in a gentle voice. “Maybe another time, okay? We’re a bit busy—”

“GAAAAAAAAAAH!!!” Taiga suddenly shrieked loudly as another intense contraction arrived. “You know what!? If you two are soooo worried about me giving birth, then let’s do it! Let’s do this childbirth together!” She pulled their hands in and gripped them even harder.

“Huh!?” Ryuuji and Seina were in sync.

“Push with everything you’ve got, ma’am!” The paramedic said from under the cloth, oblivious to what was happening outside. Taiga took a deep breath.

*Crack!*

Ryuuji and Seina’s eyes widened. They each felt an intense stinging pain in their hands as Taiga’s grip hardened further. But it didn’t stop. It felt as if their hands were placed under a hydraulic press and it had yet to reach the bottom. Their hands were already mangled beyond recognition. Their hair began to stand. Then, Ryuuji, Taiga and Seina’s mouths opened together like a choir.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

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The cold air conditioning filled the hospital room, confined by the sealed windows and pale white walls. The view outside the window was pitch black, with the light of a few

lamp posts sprinkled through the darkness of the night. A tranquil, pin-drop silence resided in the room.

“He’s beautiful...”

Taiga said softly with a gentle smile. Even with her ruffled hair and exhausted eyes, she was glowing. She sat in a white hospital bed. Her newborn rested in her arms, wrapped in a white blanket, while the top of her maternity dress was unbuttoned. His marshmallow-like cheek and tiny hand touched his mother’s bare chest. His eyes were shut and relaxed.

“Come look at your little brother, girls.” Taiga tilted her body to show her young daughters, who stood curiously at her bedside. Their little arms reached out all the way to caress their little brother’s cheek with their tiny fingers.

“Can I hold him?” Ryuuji asked, sitting on the other side of the bed. Taiga nodded calmly, then passed the baby to him. In his right arm, his newborn son sat comfortably. With his left hand, which was covered in a hard, white cast, he stroked his son’s cheek. He grinned at his son’s adorable face.

“Ah... He looks so healthy...” Seina said, approaching Ryuuji and bending over to get a feel of the baby as well. Her hand was in a cast just like her son-in-law’s. Naru and Yasuo stood beside her to get a look.

“Look at that, Yasuo. That’s your nephew,” Naru said, nudging Yasuo towards the sleeping newborn while they watched him closely. The baby started to wriggle about and his face started to scrunch up. He whined.

“Ah, looks like he wants to be with mama again.” Ryuuji returned his son to Taiga, who held him to her chest again. “What a relief, huh? The delivery went really well.”

“Yes, much better than last time. Everyone came out of it just fine,” Seina added. She rested her broken hand on Taiga’s leg while Ryuuji rested his broken hand on his wife’s thigh, rubbing it gently.

“Welcome to the family, Yuuchi,” Taiga said. Everyone silently watched as she rocked the baby in her arms, taking in the comforting sight of a mother with her newborn son.

*Creak!*

The sound of the door swinging open shattered the silence. An older man in his 50s and a younger woman barged into the room.

“Huh!?” Seina cried in confusion, which quickly turned into outrage.

“Taiga! Is everything alright?” The man shouted, his eyes focused only on Taiga. Taiga’s daughters suddenly stood up, smiles beginning to form on their faces.

“We came as soon as your husband called! Are you... You know what? Nevermind. This is a family matter.” The woman made a smooth U-turn out of the room the moment her eyes met Seina’s, who gave a vicious glare to the new visitors. The older man standing before everyone was Aisaka Rikurou, Taiga’s biological father and Seina’s ex husband. The young woman that left as quickly as she came in was Yuu, Rikurou’s ex wife who was still living with him at the time.

While Seina looked at her ex husband with her jaw dropped, Rikurou simply opened his arms in relief, paying no attention to anyone else in the room.

“Ah, my grandson!” He exclaimed, rushing to Taiga’s bedside to get a closer look. He stood between Seina and Ryuuji. “Oh, wonderful! He looks so healthy!” He said while his ex wife looked at him in disgust. Suddenly, he felt his feet shift slightly. He looked down to find Katsuko hugging his legs.

“Grandpa!” She cheered.

“Ah, Katsuko! It’s so great to see you again...” He rubbed his granddaughter’s head.

“You!?” Seina yelled. Rikurou turned to his ex wife, who had finally caught his eye.

“Oh, uh... Hey, Seina... Hehe...” Rikurou did a little timid wave as he chuckled. A drop of sweat ran down the side of his head.

Naru got behind his wife and held her shoulders. “Now, now, Seina-chan. Let’s not freak out in front of the baby—”

“What are YOU doing here!?” Seina yelled again, causing Rikurou to flinch.

“J-just here to see my grandson, that’s all!” He raised his hands in the air and tilted back as if he were held at gunpoint. “I-if you want me to leave, that’s fine! I can just see the baby later...”

“Oh, actually, there’s something I wanted to talk to you two about,” Taiga said. “I was thinking of holding family reunions every now and then.” She looked at her baby with a smile. “That would mean my family, Ya-chan and her parents, Mom and Dad, everyone. We’ll all get together at least once a year.”

Seina and Rikurou looked at their daughter in disbelief before unhinging their jaws to shout with their chest, “WHAAAAT!?”

The sound of their shriek caused the room to fall silent again. Taiga looked at her parents blankly. Everyone looked awkwardly at what once was the Aisaka family. They heard the door swing open again, but nobody seemed to react to the young blonde woman jumping through and happily raising her hand.

“Heeey! Ya-chan’s back to health! Where’s my precious grandson?” Despite the fanfare she gave, nobody batted an eye. She looked around, confused by all the silence. Her parents followed her into the room and noticed the strange atmosphere as well. However, they were unable to comment on it.

“Eh?”

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The sky had turned a dull grey as the April showers prepared to roll in. Seina held a short, wide, light pink box in her wrinkly hands while she walked through a neighbourhood with her husband and son, who stood head-to-head with his father. They were carrying similar boxes as well.

“How’s your second year at Ohashi doing for you?” Naru asked his son.

“Fine, I guess,” Yasuo answered nonchalantly.

“Try to give your nieces some advice when you see them, alright?” Seina said.

“They’ll be enrolling there after junior high. You’ll be their senior, you know.”

“But I’d have graduated by then...”

Seina furrowed her brows at the box in her hands. “Did we go overboard with the desserts? I mean, I know the sisters eat a lot, especially Haruko, but this much?”

“We’re fine. They’re just extra treats, after all,” Naru said.

The Takagi family turned a corner. While they walked, an elderly couple walked beside them. However, the large white box in the old man’s hand caught Seina’s eye. She quickly realised that it wasn’t just any elderly couple beside them. At the same time, Seina had caught the attention of the old man as well.

“Oh, Seina...” It was Rikurou.

“Ah, hello there! Long time no see!” The woman next to him leaned back and smiled at Seina while waving excitedly. The cheery woman was Aisaka Kohana, Rikurou’s current wife, who was in her late forties.

Seina looked her ex husband in the eye before turning her head and pouting. “Yeah, it’s been a while...” She muttered.

“What do you think? Hehe...” Rikurou gently shook the white box in his hands. It was almost as large as his torso. “Yuuchi’s going to love this birthday cake. I just know it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he would,” Seina muttered again. Rikurou could hear the sarcasm in his ex-wife’s voice. Despite that, he kept a bright and confident smile.

“Taiga’s pretty amazing, isn’t she?”

The mention of their daughter caught Seina’s attention.

“I feel like... If it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t be doing all these things together as a family, you know? I certainly wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t kept her faith in me. I don’t think it would even be a big deal if I were gone for good. She has so many people to fall back on, after all. And yet, even when she’s got all the love she can get, she still chose to reach out to a worthless bum like me.”

Rikurou breathed a sigh of relief.

“She really was the one that brought us all together.”

Even though the words came from a man she had little respect for, she couldn’t disagree with what he said about their daughter.

She looked up to the sky.

“Taiga really does have everything sorted out, huh?”