

Chapter 3: Sharing The Burden

The cluttering of wood and plastic could be heard from behind a white door.

Footsteps could be heard growing louder, closer. A woman with glistening brunette hair and a bob cut, wearing a fuzzy bathrobe, appeared in front of the door. Suddenly, a little gasp and a particularly loud clack could be heard behind the door, followed by the rustling of bed covers, and finally, silence. In front of the bedroom door, Seina suppressed a chuckle before holding the silver doorknob and gently turning it. Slowly, she pushed through the door.

The room was pitch black. The serene moonlight from the night sky poured into the bedroom. Coloured wooden blocks and plastic action figures were strewn across the floor. Standing along the wall was a bed, with sky blue covers plastered with a pattern of Ultraman's face all over it. Seina crept towards the long lump rising from the covers.

"Hiroto~?" She playfully mumbled the name in the quiet bedroom.

Tee hee hee... Little muffled giggles reached her ears. At the bedside, Seina knelt down, her face next to whoever was under those covers.

"Hiroto... Were you playing with your toys just now?" She whispered.

"Nooo..." A little boy's voice teased. She stroked the boy's head.

"Oh, Hiroto... Little Hiroto..." Seina stretched and bent fingers until they resembled claws. "You liar!" She exclaimed with an open grin before digging her fingers into the little boy's armpits, wriggling them about across his body.

"Ehehehahaha!" The little boy squirmed about from his mother's tickles. His legs kicked frantically and his hands tried to shield his body, but he couldn't protect himself from his mother's attacks. His body moved until he pulled the covers off his head, letting his giggles echo across the room.

"You, boy, are supposed to be asleep!" Seina grumbled cheekily while showering her son with more tickles. At the same time, she dove her face in to kiss her son's face. *Chu! Chu! Chu!* Her kisses covered his forehead, nose and cheeks.

"Mama! No more! No more!" Little 3-year-old Hiroto cackled, holding his little hands up against his mother's. After a few more tickles, Seina stood up and caressed his head. She pulled the covers over his shoulders.

"Enough! When I leave, you better be sleeping! Otherwise, I'll eat you up like a tiger! Raaawr!" She bared her claws, lunging at her son and quickly reeling back, causing him to

jump and giggle. She kissed him one last time on the forehead before picking all the toys off the floor and putting them back in the massive toy box in the corner of the room.

Seina stopped at the doorway. She faced her son and smiled at the sight of the little boy laying comfortably in his bed. She gently closed the door, making as little noise as possible and letting the room go dark again. *That boy...* The mother walked away from the door while contently shaking her head and sighing.

Seina returned to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“Haah...” She sighed. “That’s one child taken care of...” She mumbled while taking off her bathrobe and hanging it on a chair, revealing her frilled bluish purple satin lingerie. She took the little rectangular cellphone resting on her nightstand. Once she plopped herself onto her king-sized bed and drew the covers over her legs, she flipped the phone open.

Hello Ryuji, is Taiga sleeping well?

Has she been taking her medication?

What did you feed her today?

Can you show me how Taiga’s doing?

Ryuji, please respond.

Seina clicked her tongue and bared her teeth while she frantically pressed the buttons in her phone, the light of the screen reflecting in her glasses. She watched the message feed between her and her son-in-law. Her thumb repeatedly tapped against the side of the phone while she waited for her messages to be read.

While her eyes stayed glued to her phone, the bedroom door opened. A tall, middle-aged man with a wide natural grin entered. His eyes lit up and locked onto Seina’s satin bra and her bare flabby belly.

“Hey there, beautiful,” he said cheekily while shutting the door behind him.

“Hey, Naru,” Seina mumbled without even turning to the man.

In his white V-neck T-shirt and boxer shorts, the man went to the empty side of the bed and slipped underneath the covers. He shuffled forward until his chest was pressed up against the woman’s back. “Hmm...” He comfortably rested his chin on the woman’s neck while his arms slithered around her body. His hands sunk into the fat of her sagging tummy.

Takagi Naru was Seina’s current husband, a man who had just recently entered his 40s, a few years younger than Seina, but a gap that certainly wasn’t as large as the one between Rikuro and his own wife. Despite their ages, they had their own little boy, Takagi

Hiroto, and while the fact he was a head taller than his wife acted as a point of contention for his stepdaughter, he was a key piece of Taiga's family nonetheless.

"Hey, Seina, I don't think Ryuji's going to respond. He might be asleep."

"Nonsense. He's a parent now. There's no such thing as sleep for him. I'm sure he just isn't seeing my messages. I'll just keep messaging until he notices," Seina said while typing another message, the phone making a little ding sound after she hit send.

Naru sighed. He took off her glasses and placed them on the nightstand. However, not even that was enough to stop her from glaring at her phone, as she simply squinted her eyes while she typed out another message.

"Oh, come on, Seina, give it a rest. I'm sure Ryuji is taking good care of Taiga. They're probably sleeping comfortably next to each other right now," he pestered softly.

"I can't know until I've checked," Seina uttered. "At the very least, I need a photo of her to know she's okay. You can never be too sure about these things."

Naru huffed, seemingly unable to get through to his wife. He pulled his chin away and rested his head against his pillow while he stroked his wife's soft and chubby arm. He pressed his forehead against the back of her head. Her hair smelled like fresh lavender.

"Okay, I understand," he said. "It's only natural for a good mother like you to worry about a nice girl like Taiga." He smiled as his hand moved back down to her soft tummy. "Maybe when I'm as experienced as you are, I'll start doting over Hiroto more. Remember back when he was still in your belly, how scared I was to become a father?"

"Mm." Seina nodded, still glued to her phone.

"After so many years without children, I never thought I'd have one of my own, especially at this age. I wasn't even sure I'd have the energy for it..." He chuckled. "You've been taking care of Hiroto better than I have. He can already speak full sentences and I'm still trying to keep up with you."

"Don't beat yourself up about it," Seina said. "It's your first time being a parent. You'll get used to it. Either way, you've been a good father yourself." She sighed. "Makes me wish I'd married you earlier."

Naru raised an eyebrow, surprised she'd give him the lenience when she wouldn't show her son-in-law the same. The thought made him chuckle. "Yeah. That would've been nice." His hand moved down to her thigh. "I've always wondered what it would've been like," he felt her smooth but squishy skin with the tips of his fingers. "To be a part of your family while we were younger." His index finger ran circular motions against the wide

surface of her thigh. “Maybe, I would’ve gotten the chance to know Taiga a little better than I do now, too.”

Naru brought his mouth to the side of Seina’s face. She felt his warm breath blow against her ear, no different from a kiss on the cheek. The warmth caused her body to grow heavy as she relaxed from head to toe, to the point she couldn’t even move her thumb to continue texting Ryuujii. She was tickled by the air brushing against her skin, causing her to shiver and sigh. Her eyes closed. It was euphoric.

“I think when Taiga came to stay with us while she was still in high school, those days were where my fatherly instincts really kicked in,” Naru said as he slowly reached for the flip phone in Seina’s hand, quietly pushing it closed and slyly stealing it out of her hand. “Seeing you two make up after all those years of being apart filled me with such an incredible happiness,” he spoke softly as he dipped his nose into his wife’s neck. At the same time, the hand holding her flip phone stroked her arm before placing it back onto the nightstand.

“I realised how much I wanted to feel that myself. I wanted to be a part of your wonderful family, so I began to see Taiga as one of my own and tried to act more fatherly towards her.” Naru chuckled and ran his finger along Seina’s arm. “Of course, this is Taiga we’re talking about. I already knew she didn’t like me back then. After all the advances I made, she’d still act cold towards me.” Naru pulled Seina’s shoulder towards him, making her lay on her back. Her eyes met his, unobstructed by any glasses or phone screens.

“And yet, even after she gave me a left hook to the face, I couldn’t get mad, because even though she seemed scary, I could tell she was just a girl that wanted a loving family.”

Naru snickered. “I think when she saw me giggling away with my butt on the floor, she started to lighten up.” He had a fuzzy feeling in his chest as he reminisced about all the days he’d spent with his stepdaughter. “We just kept talking and spending time together, and all of a sudden, being a father to our little boy wasn’t so scary anymore. What I have is far from what you and Taiga do, and I might not know as much about her, but that never stopped me from thinking of us as one, complete family.”

Seina gazed up as if she could see past the white ceiling and look into the starry night sky. A chuckle escaped from her. “If you really want to know...” Her voice was husky.

“Taiga always loved dressing up ever since she was a toddler. Her father would buy her lots of fancy, expensive dresses for her to wear. We’d even get her these beautiful girl dolls with all kinds of dresses so she could do the same to them...”

She wore a little grin as she began reminiscing as well. Naru took her hand and brushed it with his fingers while she spoke.

“I still remember what her favourite snack was and what her favourite places were. She didn’t always fit in while she was in elementary school, but she was always trying her best. And after that...”

Her little smile began to fade when she remembered that day.

“After I lost custody of her with the divorce, I was left completely in the dark about what was happening to her. I thought, since her father had all the money he needed to care for her, that she’d be alright. Then she came to stay with us, and I learned how much lonelier she’d gotten since I’d left... How much she’d cried all on her own... How miserable she felt living in that apartment...”

Seina held her husband’s hand tighter as she shut her eyes tightly.

“Oh, Naru... I wish I was there... I wish I was there to hug her when she was feeling lonely. I wanted to stroke her long hair when she was crying again. I wanted to tuck her into bed and tell her good night like I did all those years ago.”

Slowly, she inhaled, then exhaled.

“And I still want to. I want to give her the love she’d been missing all those years.”

“Just like you are with Hiroto?” Naru smirked.

Seina nodded shakily. “Yeah.”

Naru pulled her far shoulder towards himself until she was laying on her side, their faces only a few centimetres apart from each other. They stared deeply into each other’s eyes while Naru ran his palm against her cheek.

“I find that wonderful, Seina,” he spoke softly. “After all these years, you’re still looking out for your little girl. That is just beautiful.” He rested his forehead against hers. They felt each other’s soft skin. “But she also has a loving husband and a family of her own. She still loves you as her mother, so what more could she need?”

“This isn’t about what she needs, Naru,” she said, pulling away. “Everything went by so quickly after she graduated. I can’t just let her get married, have kids and say ‘that’s it’. There’s no way there isn’t any room for me in there. I can’t accept that.”

“You weren’t acting this way when Taiga first announced her pregnancy.”

“It hadn’t hit me until I changed jobs.”

“Changed jobs?” Naru asked. He leaned closer. “You haven’t told Taiga you became a full-time mother, have you?”

“Why should I have to? Whether I’m working or not, I’m still her mother! That’s the whole reason I’m doing this! If I can’t be there for my little girl, then... then...” Seina’s eyes nervously darted around before focusing on Naru’s again. “What does that mean for me and

Hiroto? If I can't even take care of my little girl, what's going to happen when our little boy grows up?"

"Seina..."

Naru held her shoulder tenderly. He could feel how tense she had gotten. He brought his face closer and closer to hers, until he was pressing his lips against hers. As he gave her this warm kiss, Seina's body relaxed a little, but she wouldn't calm down completely. He pulled her lips away and softly spoke to her.

"Taiga isn't a little girl anymore. Whatever hole that was left in her while you were away has already been filled up. Instead of trying to be the mother of the Taiga back then, maybe you should focus on being what the Taiga of the now needs."

"I..." Seina stuttered. "I have no idea how I'm supposed to decide what she needs."

"I'm sure you can figure it out if you just listened to her."

"But how can she just decide that for herself?"

"Because she's gotten older and wiser now. I'm sure she needs you somewhere, but now that she's an adult, she has to be the one to decide where that is."

"..."

Seina's eyes fell to her husband's chest. She didn't have anything left to say. Perhaps, even if things didn't turn out the way she wanted, even if she didn't have control over what happened to her daughter, as long as she was allowed to be with her, as long as she was needed, she would be satisfied.

"And there's one more thing I need to tell you, Seina," Naru looked into his wife's eyes intently while Seina turned her head up. Their eyes were locked onto each other again. His hand was gripping her arm firmly.

"Don't you ever think about you and Hiroto that way. We are going to raise that boy with as much love and care as we can give him, no matter what comes between us. As long as we continue loving each other, I'm sure Hiroto will grow up to become a happy man."

At that moment, Seina began to feel reassured. Her worries for Taiga remained, but maybe just for a moment, she could look away from them, because Naru would be watching for her. Her body finally gave out. Her husband's words, paired with his soothing voice, had calmed her nerves. Her head fell to his chest.

"Thank you, Naru."

He wrapped his arms around her back, feeling her warm skin.

"I know I've told you how afraid I was of being a father, but it's okay if you're feeling afraid too, Seina. When something tough comes our way, we'll get through it together," Naru

said while caressing his wife's hair. "And if you're still worried about Taiga, I was thinking of paying her and Ryuaji a visit myself someday. I could give you an update on how they're doing at home."

"I'd like that..." Seina said softly.

The couple silently held each other under the bed covers for a moment, basking in the tranquil, cold air of their bedroom. They felt the pleasing warmth of each other's skin absorbing into their bodies. If they laid there for any longer, they would've fallen asleep then and there and woken up still holding onto each other.

"Are you feeling better?" Naru asked.

"Certainly," Seina answered.

"Then how about we..."

"Oh my goodness, Naru," she groaned, immediately pulling herself away from Naru's chest and bashfully turning away from him. Naru ogled the back of her body, his eyes moving all the way from her neck to her plump behind. "I'm way too old for this."

"What're you talking about? You don't even look a day over 25," he flirted.

"Naru... Stop..." Within the darkness of their bedroom, Seina's face was turning red. "Iyaaah! Aaaah!" She squealed when her husband suddenly lunged forward and squeezed one of her breasts while kissing her neck deeply, like a beast pouncing on his prey. In quick succession, he unclipped the back of her bra and pulled one of the straps off her shoulders so he could touch the skin of her chest directly.

"Goodness! Naru, you are way too forward!" Seina laughed while she scolded him.

"And that's what you love about me, don't you?" Naru placed his chin on her shoulder while he teased her, giving her a big, toothy grin. She giggled and turned her head away, hiding the wide smile that wrinkled her face. He slipped his head underneath the covers and dove towards her lower body.

"It doesn't matter how old you are! Once we start, the energy will come flowing out!"

Seina narrowed her eyes at the ceiling with the back of her hand over her mouth as she huffed and puffed, the excitement causing her breathing to grow heavier. Her face was left absolutely flustered with a smile that couldn't be wiped away.

She sighed one last time.

"Alright, you got me. Let's get on with it..."

Seina drew the covers over her head and joined her husband. Little giggles could be heard from underneath as the couple tossed and tussled, making the soft covers rustle.

Articles of clothing escaped from the covers and fell off the side of the bed. The moonlight seeping in from the window tinted the white covers a serene bluish purple.

“Hee hee...”

“Heh... Heh...”

This was the powerful love of Seina and Naru.

Sniff... Sniff...

Was it another dream? Ryuaji was too dazed to think. He was only half awake, and his room was still painted in the dark of the night. The only source of light was the serene moonlight seeping between the two-floor apartment and condominium, through his bedroom window. It was just enough for him to see past the contours of his little wife's back and spot the wall at the end of the room in front of him, his three daughters laying just beneath it.

Sniff... Sniff...

Ryuaji noticed Taiga's shoulders convulse. As he became more aware of his surroundings, his sense of hearing was switched on. He'd only just realised his wife was sniffling. It was the only sound in the room, too. With each sniffle, her shoulders would jerk upward before falling back down. The dripping of tears against the fabric of a futon never usually made a sound, but somehow, when it came to Taiga, he could hear it.

Uhu... Oh... Sniff...

Was she in pain? It didn't seem so. If she were, her body would be shivering and twitching even harder. She'd be gripping his chest, bracing herself to endure it. He'd hold her while they'd wait for the pain to pass. But she only sobbed and whimpered all by herself. No, she was very much in pain—pain of losing something she was so passionate for. She needed to be held, and there was Ryuaji, just laying behind her idly.

Sniff... Ah... Ha...

He felt his body move completely on its own. The muscle memory of embracing his wife had taken over. Before he knew it, his arms were around her shoulders and his hands were wrapped over her stomach. She was warm. Oh, how he'd wished he'd done this sooner, when the sun was still up, when they'd first received the news. He needed to be soothing her from the start.

Sniff... Aah... Nnh...

Taiga's whimpers grew louder as she hugged Ryuaji's arms.

He knew how devastated she was to lose her job. He knew when she asked to be put to bed that she wasn't actually exhausted. And if he didn't know, then he should've. He was her husband, for goodness sake. She should've been crying in his arms the moment they were alone, not sobbing all on her own in the middle of the night. Why didn't he say anything earlier? Why did he let Taiga bottle all of it up until she couldn't keep it in anymore?

Aaaah... Uhuhu...

Taiga's cries could be heard clearly now.

Of course, deep down, he knew why. They'd argued earlier that day. Another word from him probably would've frustrated her even more, because after all, he was one of the sources of pain throughout this whole ordeal. She already felt powerless not being able to move or stay awake, but he heard it from Taiga herself—he was the one taking the joy of being a mother from her.

He thought he was taking her pain away. He thought he was keeping her from harm, but the only thing his fear of losing her had brought her was resentment. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to be free. But he just couldn't let go of her. He couldn't feel that despair again, not after the promises they'd made to each other. He couldn't return to the simple, blissfully careless lives he'd led with her after she'd almost met her end.

He was just so, so afraid.

I'm sorry, Taiga...

He hugged her tightly.

I'm sorry I'm so useless...

His face scrunched up.

All your pain... Your suffering...

A stray tear ran down his face.

I can't do anything about it...

His arms trembled as he continued to embrace Taiga. He couldn't see the end of her sobbing. Furthermore, her crying loudened slightly. He held her and waited for both of them to fall asleep again. Perhaps, once all their energy was gone, they would be released from their aching hearts.

Taiga was gripping his arms even tighter. The minutes passed. The sound of her stifled crying looped in Ryuji's ears and echoed inside his mind. At that point, he couldn't tell if he was asleep or awake. The only constant was his wife's crying, its volume never dwindling after what felt like an eternity. It was the only sound his ears could pick up. Not even a rustle in their bed covers would reach him—just the sounds of his wife.

She kept crying.
And crying.
And crying...

“Taiga-chan! Ryuu-chan! Aren’t you two going to wake up?”

Huh?

Ryuuji’s room was lit up by the sliver of sunlight leaking through his bedroom window. The wooden beams encasing the room emitted a radiant deep brown colour. As he slowly opened his eyes, his blurry vision refocused. There was his mother in her outdoor clothes, leaning over him and his wife with her bright smile.

Ryuuji and his wife sat up from their futon, their eyes still like slits as the morning light irritated the freshly awoken couple. They synchronously rubbed their eyes with their fists, pushing out any dirt that formed in their slumber. After that, with eyebags hanging on their faces, they were left staring tiredly at the blonde woman cheerily kneeling before them. Yasuko patiently waited for them to be fully awake before she could speak.

He turned to his wife to get a glimpse of her, the sunlight from the window behind them tracing out the line of her face. Strangely, her cheeks were dry. The sleepy Taiga sitting in front of him seemed like the usual Taiga he’d be greeted by every morning—before she gave birth, at least. Remembering what happened last night, he’d at least expected her eyes to be a little red. Was she really crying, or did he just imagine it? Perhaps she just wasn’t crying for as long as he thought. Just to confirm for himself, he brushed his fingers against her soft, little cheek.

“What?” His wife grunted.

“You had a hair in your mouth,” he lied. He couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary.

“Hey, Ryuu-chan, I can have the leftovers in the fridge, right? It’s a bit too late for you to make breakfast now,” Yasuko said.

“What time is it...” Ryuujii turned to the clock in his room. It was well past 9 in the morning. Yasuko would usually be out the door by this time. “Huh? Were we really sleeping for that long?”

“It’s okay, Ryuu-chan. I’m on leave today,” Yasuko said while waving her hand. “I just want to talk to you two because I need to give you some updates!~” She clapped her hands together and cheekily tilted her head to the side.

“What did you need to tell us?” Taiga asked weakly.

“Okay, so here’s the first thing...” Yasuko pulled out her wallet and held up a thin and light wad of 10,000 yen notes with two fingers. Taiga and Ryuji focused their eyes on it.
“The landlady isn’t charging us rent anymore!”

“Why’s that?” Ryuji asked.

“Well, she’s planning on selling the whole property once we move out, so she found it unnecessary. She also knew you and Taiga were going through a hard time, so she didn’t want to burden us any further. She’s always been supporting our little family after we became friends. Isn’t she just so kind?” Yasuko said blissfully as she put the cash away.

“That’s great, Ya-chan...” Taiga added.

“What else did you have to tell us?”

“Ah, this one’s about the babies...” Yasuko nonchalantly squeezed one of her own plump breasts. “Ya-chan’s totally run dry, so she won’t be feeding the babies anymore!”

“O-oh...” Ryuji narrowed his eyes at his mother’s crassness. “That happened a lot earlier than I thought...”

“Well, it’s been sooo many years since I’ve done this, so there’s no way I could feed them for long... Not unless I give you a baby brother or sister, teehee~” Yasuko spoke ignorantly. Ryuji quietly turned his head away to cringe.

“Wait, does this mean that I have to feed them myself now?” Taiga asked, almost enthusiastic at the news her mother-in-law was giving her.

“Oh, don’t you worry, Taiga-chan. I bought extra baby formula last night! By the time we run out, Katsuko will be eating solid foods!”

“Oh... Right,” Taiga’s eyes fell to the tatami mat floor.

“Now, I just have one last not-so-good piece of news...” Yasuko stood up and hopped to the door. After sliding it open, she pulled in a tall wheeled luggage with a drop of sweat running down the side of her face. “So, for two or three weeks, Taiga-chan and Ryuji-chan will be alone together on weekdays.”

“What!?” Ryuji shouted. “Why?”

“Eheh... You see...” Yasuko nervously put her fingers together. “My mom got into a little accident...”

Taiga and Ryuji’s eyes widened. Seeing this, Yasuko anxiously raised her voice.

“Sh-she’s safe and well! She just won’t be able to do any housework for a while. She needs someone to look after her, but my dad’s been really busy with work, so I need to step in. Will... will that be okay with you two?”

"It's fine, Yasuko," Ryuaji told her. He sighed at the thought of looking after Taiga and their daughters all on his own, but he couldn't argue. After all, Seina had brought this up before Taiga gave birth. On top of that, Yasuko was still mending her relationship with her parents. Letting her take on this role would help them grow closer. She'd have her own family again. He couldn't get in the way of her happiness. It seemed good for her.

"I-If there's an emergency, I'll come straight home! You two seemed to be doing well, so I just thought I'd..."

"We'll be alright, Yasuko. I can take care of Taiga on my own," Ryuaji said calmly.

"I can take care of myself, too," Taiga pouted. Her husband clicked his tongue at her.

"Okay!" Yasuko clapped her hands together again. "Now that everything's settled, I'll be on my way! Don't get into any trouble while I'm gone, okay?" She waved her hand at her children on her way out the bedroom door. Taiga and Ryuaji simply stared at the doorway as she walked towards the front door with her luggage in hand, but not before she packed some of the leftovers from the fridge into a lunchbox. They quietly sat there until they heard Yasuko shut and lock the door behind her.

Brrrrrt!

Like clockwork, Ryuaji's cellphone sitting on the floor next to him began to vibrate. He immediately picked it up. Kawashima Ami was calling. He stood up and paced around the room while he answered the phone so he wouldn't be right next to Taiga while he spoke with Ami. At the same time, Taiga's eyes had locked onto her babies, who had just woken up at the sound of Yasuko's voice from earlier.

"Hello?" Ryuaji said into his phone, pausing to let Ami speak. "Alright, I'll take note. Is it on a weekend? I'm sure I can meet with them without issue if..."

Slowly and silently, like a monitor lizard, Taiga crawled towards her babies. She pulled her body forward along the floor, grunting and stopping every few seconds. Her eyes focused on the movements her babies made with their little arms and legs. Haruko and Mitsuko's plump arms looked strong enough to swat a fly. Katsuko only moved half as much as they did, though.

"Great! Yasuko's only around on the weekend now, so... Oh... You want me to bring her along? But... In her condition... I don't even think she'll be awake for it."

Taiga reached her babies' legs. When she tried to hold onto one of Mitsuko's legs, she was almost kicked in the eye. She chuckled quietly, not wanting to alert Ryuaji as his back faced her while he was on the phone. However, she noticed Mitsuko's face suddenly became disgruntled. She was whining. Taiga leaned in and took a sniff. Her nose caught a stench that

caused her face to scrunch up. With that, she turned towards the closet. After the countless times of watching Ryuaji change their diapers, she knew where he kept all the fresh ones.

“What she needs right now is rest, she shouldn’t have to worry about anything like this. We’ve been doing just fine without her, what do you need her for now?”

Taiga managed to pull a clean diaper out of the big box sitting inside their closet. She crawled right back to Mitsuko until she was leaning over her. She used one hand to pick at the buttons on Mitsuko’s onesie, but her finger precision had deteriorated with all the days she’d spent resting. She struggled to even get one button undone, and she couldn’t use her other hand since she needed it to support herself. Part of her wished she’d gotten her babies something that was easier to take off, but those were the only ones they could get that would fit their size.

“Hah! Got it!” Taiga said under her breath after finally getting the last button undone, revealing Mitsuko’s soft body. “Ehh!?” Taiga suddenly felt her body get lifted into the air. With just one arm, Ryuaji was carrying her at his side. She had gotten pulled away from her babies again.

“Hey, Ami? I’ll call you back. I need to take care of something.”

Ryuaji hung up. He glared down at the petite woman he was carrying at his side. She crossed her arms and pouted, turning away from him. He walked back to the futon and sat her back down on the mattress. She silently sat there with her legs crossed, keeping her irritated face while Ryuaji carried Mitsuko into his arms with the fresh diaper in his other hand.

“We can practise walking once I’m done handling breakfast,” Ryuaji told her.

“What am I eating now?” Taiga grunted.

“Miso soup. I’m making it fresh, with lots of fiber,” he said with his foot out the door.

“What about protein?” She grunted again.

“I’ll add some tofu.”

“I’m tired of tofu.”

“Suit yourself.”

Ryuaji’s voice echoed throughout the apartment as he approached the bathroom with one of his daughters in hand. Once she was alone, Taiga sighed. However, rather than laying back down to rest, she looked around the room, plotting something. There was no way she was going to spend her whole day in her futon.

In the cramped little bathroom, Ryuaji wrapped the fresh diaper around Mitsuko’s tiny waist. The old, dirty diaper was tossed into a plastic bag and wrapped up, keeping the smelly thing out of sight. Now that his daughter was fresh and clean, he could lift her into the air

without any trouble. Mitsuko giggled with a big smile between her rosy cheeks as Ryuaji lifted her over his head. Seeing his daughter's joy made a little smile form on his face too.

But her brunette hair and big brown eyes could only remind him of his wife.

"It's a shame Taiga doesn't get to do this on her own."

Of course, it wasn't as simple as that. He knew this shame was his doing. He felt like a moron for even thinking of it. He wanted to share this joy with Taiga, but fear had his hands tied. He lowered his baby daughter to his chest and gazed down at her with a light frown. She was still cackling and grinning at him from being lifted.

Back in the bedroom, while Ryuaji was settling Mitsuko's diaper situation, Taiga had crawled back to her babies once more. There she was, sitting over her baby Haruko. The infant had her arms stretched out and her hands opening and closing as she reached for her mother's face. Taiga simpered with a soft grin as she placed her hands under her baby's tiny shoulders.

"Hehe... You want uppies, don't you?" Taiga said as she slowly lifted her daughter's body towards her chest. "Oooooof!" She huffed as the weight of her baby caused her arms to tremble. She placed her hand under her baby's rump and the other around her baby's back, carrying her like a prized trophy. "Goodness, you're heavy... And huge. Did I really carry you in my belly for eight months?" Sure enough, her baby was big enough to be mistaken for a toddler, despite not even being half a year old.

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" Taiga cried out as Haruko suddenly started tugging on her mother's hair, causing her head to tilt towards her. "You're strong, too! Just like me!" Taiga commented and chuckled. Somehow, she couldn't get angry. Just being able to touch her babies and having her babies touch her was enough to please her.

However, the mother-daughter bonding session would only last so long, as Taiga could already feel her arms begin to give out.

"So, Taiga..." Ryuaji walked into the room with Mitsuko on his shoulder. He immediately spotted his wife huffing and puffing while she tried to carry her daughter with her twig-like arms. "Taiga!" He shouted before swiping Haruko into his own arm and carrying her on his other shoulder.

"Baah!" Taiga caught her breath as her arms dropped to the soft futon on the floor. Haruko was laughing along with her sister after swiftly being lifted up as well. Taiga glared up at her husband. "Hey! I can handle her myself!"

"You were about to drop her!" Ryuaji shouted back.

"I was going to put her back in the futon!"

“You shouldn’t have been carrying her in the first place!”

For a moment, their eyes were locked onto each other. They gave each other ferocious snarls and growls as their glares connected. The longer Ryuji gazed at his wife’s little face, the clearer Taiga’s determination became. This woman was going to do motherly things no matter what he told her. It was all she had, after all. When Ryuji realised that, his eyes were shut tightly, breaking contact. He clenched his jaw.

“Alright, fine! You can be with the babies, but you need to stay within your limits!” Ryuji shouted before laying Haruko and Mitsuko back on the futon. He raised his finger at his wife, who continued to furrow her brows at him. “You can lay next to them, you can play with them, but don’t do anything that would tire you out! Don’t carry them, and don’t put them directly on your chest. If there’s anything the babies need, just call me. You got that!”

Taiga clicked her tongue. “Fine,” she said, before crawling beside Haruko and laying next to the babies’ futon. She started using her finger to play with Haruko, caressing her tummy. The baby gripped her mother’s finger and looked at her mother’s face with big, curious eyes. Taiga smiled.

Ryuji sighed exasperatedly. He left the room to go handle breakfast. Once again, Taiga got to be alone with her daughters. She pouted.

“Yeah, right. I know my limits...”

“H-huh? We’re out of gas!?” Ryuji exclaimed, struggling to turn the stove on. No matter how many times the stove’s lighter clicked, a fire just wouldn’t start beneath the pot of water he had just prepared. He’d already gone through the trouble of taking out a cup of powdered baby formula, too. “Damn it. I need to call a contractor...” He immediately pulled out his phone to call someone to install a new gas tank. He couldn’t boil water without a fire, after all.

As he waited for someone to pick up, he held his phone between his neck and shoulder while he took a broom and dustpan he’d left in the middle of the living room to continue sweeping. Dark circles sat under his eyes, making look more fearsome than he already did. He gritted his teeth as his phone continued to ring.

“Come on, pick up... Pick up...”

A week had passed since Yasuko started staying with her parents. The fridge was full with fresh vegetables and the freezer had plenty of frozen meats, but Yasuko’s room remained

empty after she left for work that Monday morning. It was just Taiga, Ryuiji and their children in that apartment, and it stayed that way for days at a time.

“Excuse me, I need a gas tank replacement. I live at...”

Once Ryuiji was done settling the contractor, he approached his bedroom door with his phone and broom and dustpan still in hand. He slid it open and put his head through.

“Hey, Taiga, is it alright if the babies wait a little? We ran out of gas,” he said, holding his phone up and shaking it around. “I already called the contractor, he should be...” Only after getting a closer look at Taiga did he realise—she was already holding one of their babies to her chest. He sighed deeply, brushing his palm against his face and ruffling his bangs with his fingers. He was too exhausted to nag at Taiga, but his mind was telling him otherwise.

“Taiga...” Ryuiji was just about to approach her before she suddenly raised her finger at him, stopping him in his tracks.

“Wait a minute!” Taiga exclaimed, her eyes focused on her baby Haruko’s head, which was attached to her chest. Even though she was tiredly breathing through her mouth, she could keep her struggling to a minimum. The longer her baby stuck to her, the clearer her grin appeared on her face. “It... It doesn’t hurt so much! Haha!” She chuckled.

However, her smile would quickly disappear as she suddenly grimaced. “H-hey! Be gentle! Gentle!” She told her baby, even though she couldn’t understand words yet. When she heard Ryuiji groan and begin to approach her again, she glared right at him. “Th-the baby formula can wait! Just let me take care of the girls!”

Ryuiji said exasperatedly. “But it clearly hurts—”

“I said let me handle it!” She interrupted, before moving her hand down to her baby’s head to stroke it. Ryuiji only stood there and watched.

Before he knew it, he was focused on the sight of his wife feeding their child, his eyes gravitating towards it as if there were some magnetic force attracting him. He’d lost the will to move from where he stood. His hair was all over the place and his shirt was full of creases. Maybe he was just exhausted, maybe he just didn’t want to upset his wife again, either way, he couldn’t bear to tear Taiga and her baby apart again.

His mind was empty, allowing for the scene of his wife to occupy his head. Taiga’s gentle gaze beaming down on their baby’s head while she held her close and brushed what little hair she had, their baby’s eyes calmly shut as she fed from her mother’s soft bosom, and most importantly, the little grin that both his wife and his child had as they shared each other’s body warmth—all these vivid images almost put him at ease.

Ryuji huffed. Part of him wanted to hold onto this feeling, this serenity. But when his eyes glanced at the broom and dustpan in his hand, he vigorously shook the thoughts out of his head. He turned away from his wife and children, and continued sweeping the living room, leaving them alone for once. He needed to keep everything running. He needed to stay vigilant. He needed to be the one that Taiga could rely on.

Taiga's eyes watched Ryuji's back as he went to clean up the living room all on his own. She huffed at her husband's foolishness and gently shook her head. After that, she shut her eyes, rested her chin on her baby's head and stroked her little back.

The days at the Takasu household stayed quiet for a while.

"Mmh... Huh?"

Ryuji smacked his dry lips and slowly opened his eyes, the blurry curtains of dark red in his vision drawing to reveal what stood before him.

Gradually, the image of his beloved wife standing over him while he was comfortably laying in his futon became clearer and clearer. Taiga was holding herself against the wall, trembling on her two feet while her big, brown eyes looked at him with surprise, as if she had just been caught red-handed. A single drop of sweat ran down the side of her face. Knowing her husband, he'd probably freak out at the sight of her even trying to stand on her own, then she'd be sent right to bed.

"T-Taiga?" Ryuji mumbled, his eyes still like tiny slits. "What time is it?"

After expecting a shameful outburst from her beloved husband, Taiga sighed deeply.

"It's 11:36. Didn't you say you wanted to marinate the chicken earlier?"

"O-oh, right... I did..."

Ryuji responded groggily as he lifted his heavy shoulders, scratching the back of his head which was covered in dark, spiky, messy hair no different from a sea urchin's. Then, when he finally came to, his sanpaku eyes shot open. His hands were on his head as he shrieked with his mouth wide open.

"B-baby formula! I completely forgot to prepare it!"

"I already fed the babies, you idiot!"

The man suddenly went absolutely silent in his pose, looking straight out of an Edvard Munch painting.

"I handled them myself. It's fine," Taiga reassured him, to her annoyance.

"Oh..."

Sss... Sss... Sss...

Ryuuchi turned to what sounded like hissing coming just from inside their room. There were their three infant daughters, laying on their futon on their little bellies. They were pushing and tossing their colourful toys around. The toys made a variety of sounds, one of which being the hissing, coming from what looked like a plastic salt shaker being playfully thrown around by Haruko's little hands.

"They really love that baby's kitchen set. It's the first time they got to play with it. I was seven months along when we bought that, remember?" Taiga smirked. It wasn't just Haruko joyfully listening to the music of the little trinkets. Mitsuko held one that made a pleasant jingling sound.

"Did you... take those toys out yourself?"

"Of course I did. They looked bored laying there all morning."

Katsuko was laying there too, simply eyeing her sisters as they handled their playthings. She tried to grip one of the toys, but her hands didn't seem strong enough to even hold any of them.

"What about Katsuko's medication?"

"I already gave it to her. I took my own, too."

"Is that so..."

The days Ryuuchi spent cleaning, running errands and looking after his wife had passed like water through a sieve. All of a sudden, another week was gone. Even though Yasuko had left home again, it seemed the infant care was going smoothly, no thanks to Ryuuchi. He never even thought Taiga was even capable of doing all those things.

Amongst the cacophony of sounds from the babies' toys, Taiga sniffed.

"Oh, goodness..." She suddenly put her fingers over her nose. "I think I'll let you handle this one. Katsuko needs a change."

"Hm?" Ryuuchi tried sniffing himself. "I guess I can smell a bit from here. But how do you know it's coming from Katsuko?"

"Must be one of my new superpowers after giving birth," Taiga chuckled briefly.
"Seriously, go change her."

"R-right."

Ryuuchi lifted his body from the soft futon. After taking a fresh diaper from their closet and lifting Katsuko into his arms, he slid the bedroom door open, but not before turning to his wife, who was still supporting herself against the wall.

"Don't strain yourself, Taiga. I don't want you to faint again."

"I'm not straining myself!" Taiga shouted softly. "I haven't even fainted in days!"

“You never know...” Ryuji muttered before leaving the room. Taiga huffed and grunted at her husband’s overbearingness.

“Nngh!” Taiga brought her feet forward, one at a time, along the wall. She reached the opening in the sliding door and peeked through, narrowing her eyes. She picked up the sound of running water coming from the bathroom, seemingly from her husband cleaning their daughter’s body.

At last, she was alone again. Her eyes immediately darted towards her two other daughters playing around on the floor.

Ryuji stepped out of the bathroom with a clean Katsuko in his arms—well, not completely clean; the baby was already slobbering all over her hand as she placed her fist in her mouth. Ryuji stood there and furrowed his brows, his head tilted towards the direction of his bedroom. He heard something.

Hahahaha!

Hehehe!

Heheheheha!

There was an incessant giggling echoing throughout the apartment. He could definitely recognise one of the voices belonging to his wife, but the other two were much higher in pitch. He approached the bedroom door he had left open and stood in front of the doorway to get a look at what his wife and daughters were up to.

“Hahaha! Chu! Chu! Chu!”

“Ehehehe!”

There was Taiga, lying on her belly between her two infant daughters. She was showering her baby Haruko with kisses all over her smooth and puffy little face. Haruko giggled from the ticklish feeling, shaking her head as her mother’s lips touched her skin. Mitsuko was grinning from ear to ear at her mother as she waited for her turn.

“And you! Chu! Chu! Chu!”

“Hehehaa!”

Mitsuko cackled like her sister did after getting covered in kisses as well. Somehow, it felt like an eternity since he’d seen his wife have such an energetic smile. It was the first time he’d seen such wide grins on their daughters, too. His chest began to feel fuzzy the longer he took the sight in. The feeling left him frozen as he processed it.

“Hahahaa!” Taiga guffawed along with her babies’ giggles as she nuzzled her cheeks against their fuzzy little heads. She was huffing and puffing after laughing so much. While

she caught her breath, she noticed Ryuji standing just outside the bedroom, staring at her with intrigue.

“They love my kisses, Ryuji!” Taiga joyfully exclaimed. “Try it! Try kissing Katsuko! They’re so cute!”

Ryuji held up little Katsuko in his hands by her little armpits. He looked into her doll-like eyes, while she gazed back at him with curiosity. Seeing the happiness emanating from his wife and children made him realise something. He’d forgotten all the days that came before that fateful night when Taiga gave birth and nearly lost her life.

A question started to burn inside his heart.

Why did I start this family?

Ryuji puckered his lips and brought his daughter’s forehead to his face.

Chu.

He pulled his baby away from his face to observe her entire profile. Her eyes were big and wide, and they were staring right through him. After just a moment, a big grin formed on Katsuko’s cheeky face before she let out a tiny giggle. Once he witnessed it, he couldn’t stop himself. A wide grin bloomed across his face, just like his daughter’s, and he let out a little chuckle.

Maybe it was this fuzziness, this warmth he was longing for throughout Taiga’s pregnancy. Suddenly, all those memories were pushed to the front of his mind—the days they spent picking out clothes for their daughters who had yet to arrive, the brand of diaper that was of the most value-for-money quality which Katsuko was wearing, the type of crib they’d put their daughters in once they moved out of that dingy apartment. They shared so much excitement imagining what they’d do with their daughters, but now that they were really here, it was only months after they were born that he’d started to feel it for real.

Through all the pain and despair, that excitement to raise a family with his wife had faded. His need to be by his wife’s side came first, and after that need was threatened, he’d thrown away everything else to protect it. But Taiga hadn’t left. It just hadn’t set in for Ryuji. She could still be taken away at any moment by her mother, but at least she was living, breathing and bonding with her daughters like she should be.

“Mhm... Hahahaha...”

Ryuji felt his body get lighter. His guard was let down, and now, something was coming through. He couldn’t contain himself. He let out a gentle laugh at his daughter’s cute face. Katsuko’s grin widened, seeing her father’s smile. Did the apartment always have this much sun coming in? Everything seemed so much brighter.

Taiga's chest heaved as she chuckled, her face softening as she witnessed her husband's smile. It felt like an eternity for her, too, since she'd seen him have such a sincere grin. She wanted to hold onto this happiness for as long as she could, and she wasn't going to let anything hold her back.

Taiga shuffled herself onto her knees before carrying Mitsuko into her arms.

"Ryuji!" She shouted, catching his attention. "Let's take the girls outside! It's a really sunny day today!"

Ryuji thought about it for a moment. If it's just outside the house, then it should be safe, he thought. He looked at Katsuko one more time, filling himself with a pleasant warmth at her smile, before facing his wife.

"Y-yeah! Let's do that!"

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt the shining sunrays beaming down on his face. It felt like he'd been living in a cave for the past few months, the sun's glare causing him to briefly squint. But after the irritation settled, he was left with soft tranquility from the white winter sun, the skies clear of any overbearing clouds. He almost felt undeserving of such peace, and yet there he was, carrying his three daughters on his front while his wife supported herself on his shoulders from behind.

"Let's go down the stairs, Ryuji," Taiga said.

The Takasu family slowly went down the old steps of the two-floor apartment. Taiga placed her feet down with intention for each step, taking a moment to stabilise herself while her fingers gripped Ryuji's wide shoulders. Even with the weight of three infants on his front and his wife on his back, Ryuji felt incredibly light. It'd been months since Taiga had walked down these stairs. When he turned his head back to see her beautiful eyes focusing on where she was putting her feet, he could only grin at how far she'd come.

Once they reached the landing of the stairs, Taiga and Ryuji settled down in front of the railings, their rumps on the dusty floor with the asphalt road in front of them. At that time of day, the neighbourhood children were in class, and the salarymen were in their offices, leaving an empty quiet along the boundary walls of all the homes.

Haruko and Mitsuko sat in their father's long arms, giving them front row seats to the peaceful midday scene before them. Katsuko clung to her mother's chest, her back getting thoroughly stroked and patted. She viewed the front of the house from over her little shoulder. The whole family admired the row of Zelkova trees with their deep green leaves, and the endless skies above them with their soft blue hue.

The three sisters spotted a butterfly, its wings dotted with black and white, fluttering by their little faces. Their big, brown eyes followed its fluid aerial motions, before it eventually flew out of sight. Seeing the three girls already so full of curiosity, Taiga and Ryuji turned to each other with smiles of pride. Their daughters were big and healthy. In that moment of peace, their imaginations were allowed to flourish again, and all they thought about were the amazing things their daughters were going to achieve once they grew up. Their first steps, their first words, they wanted to see all of it.

But Haruko, Mitsuko and Katsuko weren't the only ones that needed to grow.

"Ryuji..."

Taiga pulled Katsuko off her chest and sat her down between her sisters, on Ryuji's hard chest. She gripped the railing to pull herself to her feet, her knees trembling as she brought out all the strength she had to stand.

"Hooh... Hooh..."

She huffed to maintain her energy and calm her racing heart as she gradually released the railing from the clasp of her fingers. Once her fingers had let go, her hands dropped to her sides. She gazed at her feet sitting flat on the ground. After all the days she'd spent in her futon, with the floor only centimetres from her face, it felt like she was on top of the world as she stood on her own.

"Haha..." She chuckled, before swiftly turning to her husband with a toothy grin.

"Watch me, Ryuji!"

Ryuji's eyes widened as his wife took her first step away from the railing. His back was raised after his wife took the second step. After that, she had nothing left to hold onto. His heart was pounding through his chest as the thought of her falling to the ground worried him to his core. However, another feeling, a warm feeling, was fighting against it. While his anxiety told him to get up and catch her before she fell, his pride and love for Taiga told him to stay there and cheer her on.

Ryuji leaned forward and held his three infant daughters tightly as they all watched Taiga triumph over everything that had been pinning her down. It was the first time in months she'd walked on her own.

"Hah... Hahah..." Taiga's eyes focused on her feet, acting decisive about where to put them. The seconds between each placement became shorter and shorter. She raised her eyes until her feet were out of her view. Where her feet needed to be was an afterthought. She only needed to think about where she was going—forward. With each step, her eyes moved higher and higher until she was looking straight ahead at the other side of the road.

“Hahah!” Her little grin had turned into a wide open smile. She tilted her head up to the sky and closed her eyes as she basked in the sweet summer sun. Even though her legs were crooked and slanted, there wasn’t a single step met with hesitation. She laughed with her chest. All her pain and sadness couldn’t hold her back anymore.

Ryuaji stood up, lifting his daughters in his arms. He stayed by the railing, his smile widening the farther Taiga got. The contours of her little figure were illuminated by the sun’s rays. She was only a few metres away from him, but those steps she took were as good as a journey across the country. He could see the joy overflowing from his wife like a fountain after weeks of drought.

It was the happiness that they both needed.

Ryuaji had spent so much time wallowing in the dark that he couldn’t notice the light at the end of the cave—this life with his family, where all of them could smile no matter how hard the times were. If he didn’t let himself have this, if he didn’t allow something like this to bloom, then what was he trying to protect this whole time? The ugly oppression he’d placed upon his wife, the ugliness he thought they just needed to accept, was nothing compared to the beautiful, reckless freedom Taiga shamelessly displayed.

“G...” Ryuaji’s throat shifted. He felt the air rise from his chest. “GO, TAIKA!”

He shouted with all his might, huffing and puffing after letting his voice out.

Taiga looked over her shoulder without stopping her feet even once. Ryuaji caught sight of the beautiful, blissful smile and her calm, half-open eyes that had formed on Taiga’s face. The sunlight was reflecting off her soft, smooth cheeks and caused her long eyelashes to glisten. That was his wife, shining brightly like a diamond.

However, as the distance between him and his wife grew, the air in his voice disappeared. The realisation had gradually overcome him. Taiga wasn’t a diamond, far from it. Diamonds didn’t break. She had more in common with a fancy glass, if anything, and he knew what would happen to glass when it hits the floor.

His heart continued to race. Even after tasting this sweetness, he couldn’t get it out of his head. This pleasant weather, his wife’s laughter, all of it helped to push that feeling back, but it couldn’t be kept away forever. There wasn’t any amount of steps that Taiga could take that would deny the fact that she was sick and needed to recover, and ensuring she rested was his utmost responsibility.

It would only be a moment before his truth came to light.

Ryuaji gasped.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

The smiling face that gracefully watched him was sinking down, the eyelids drawing over those two brown gems for eyes and concealing their shine. As Taiga's head fell, so did the rest of her body as she collapsed to the ground. Her legs had finally given out.

It was Ryuji's turn to move his feet forward, but with three babies in his arms, he could only move so far. There was no way he could catch her in time. He could only watch as her knees hit the concrete below her. His pupils constricted and his jaw unhinged as he prepared to shout at the top of his lungs.

“TAIGAAA!”

Her hands touched the ground after her knees. Her arms managed to support her chest and dampen the impact, but the side of her face wouldn't receive that protection as her soft cheek scraped against the concrete. The sting from hitting the ground spread through her face, but her exhaustion kept her from reacting. Her face was left stuck to the ground, her arms at her side and the strands of her hair spread apart. She'd pushed herself far past her limits.

“Nnngh...”

Fortunately, she was quickly returning to consciousness. She lifted her upper body from the ground using her arms while she caressed the cheek that got scratched up when she fell. The scrape was covered in a thin layer of blood and dirt. Her face scrunched up. After rising from the ground, she sat with her butt on the ground, her knees spread apart. She let out a disgruntled sigh as if she had just been woken up from a nap, sitting through the burning pain in her face.

And in a split second, her eyes shot open.

Vroooooom!

Taiga's hair was blown behind her as a car zoomed by, its metallic doors just centimetres from her face. She had collapsed just before the road in front of the apartment. Any closer and she would've lost her little nose. She had jolted back, her eyes stuck wide open and her little mouth sealed tightly shut as the little distance between her and a terrible accident left her awestruck. Her heart was about to pound out of her chest.

However, her fear soon turned into something different.

“Pfft...”

She tittered, before letting it all out.

“Bahahaha!” She fell further backward, her arms holding up her back while her big smile faced the sky. Her body jerked with each breath of air that escaped from her lungs. Even with the burning on her cheek and the dizziness in her head, the bliss of being outside under the heavenly sun never faded.

Ryuji, however, couldn't think the same.

"Hahaha! That was way too close—Uwah!"

Taiga's laughter was interrupted when Ryuji suddenly lifted her by the arm and threw her body over his shoulder with a deep frown and furrowed brows on his face. He carried his wife with one arm, which brushed the dirt off his wife's tush beside his face, and his three daughters with the other, though their relatively large size made it seem like they could fall out of his grasp at any moment. With the whole Takasu family in Ryuji's hands, he began walking toward the apartment.

"Oomf!"

Ryuji had planted Taiga back onto her futon with an adhesive bandage over her bloody cheek. The babies were back to fiddling with their toys on their mattress.

"Ryuji!" Taiga called her husband's name demandingly, crawling forward and tugging on his pants while he quietly turned away. "Hey! Don't just bring us inside without saying anything! What is up with you!?"

Ryuji closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, before getting in his wife's face.

"What's up with me!? What's up with you? Don't you have any awareness at all? Do you even know what could've happened if you were just a step further? You could've gotten seriously hurt! You could've ended up in the hospital again! And even worse, you could've... You could've..."

A stray tear climbed down Ryuji's cheek. His wide open eyes watched Taiga's face. His outburst was met with silence from her. She only looked at him worriedly even after his words trailed off. That fateful night was still burnt into his head, and he could feel it festering. His life wasn't even the one at risk and yet, he'd sustained a scar that would lead him to cause so much pain for her. And now, he was tearing himself up inside. His negligence had led to Taiga getting hurt, yet his anxieties were leading him to push any joy away from him and his family.

He was useless.

Ryuji had lost the will to shout at, or even look at, his wife's face. His hair was ruffled and standing up. He huffed and shut his eyes tightly while he rubbed away the tears welling up. He marched out of the bedroom, away from his beloved wife. Her fingers let go of his pants as she watched him turn the corner towards the kitchen.

The bedroom had fallen silent, the only noise coming from the little girls tossing their toys about. Taiga's eyes remained at the place where her husband had just stepped out of her

sight. In her condition, it was in her right to only think of herself, but the warmth and happiness she shared with her husband a moment ago just wouldn't feel the same if only one of them could enjoy it.

Ryuaji found himself washing some dishes left behind in the sink from last night's dinner, vigorously scrubbing away the grease on the plates and pans. In fact, there was still some laundry in the living room he'd forgotten to keep away. The floor cushions were strewn all over the place and the table was tilted. The mess was building up faster than he could clear it. Even though Yasuko rarely helped out with housework, it felt like everything had slowed down since she left him alone with Taiga. At that point, he didn't want to think about anything else. He just wanted to get something done.

Behind Ryuaji, Taiga was on her feet again, holding onto the wall to support herself. She moved closer and closer, step by step, until she reached the little kitchen where she'd crawl on all fours towards the counter next to Ryuaji. Finally, she climbed up and stood over the sink that Ryuaji was soaking his hands in. Her husband sighed.

"Go back to bed, Taiga."

Taiga rested her head on Ryuaji's shoulder while she held the edge of the counter, gazing at the soapy bubbles in the sink as her husband worked. He sighed again, knowing his words had fallen on deaf ears.

"I've been scaring you a lot lately, haven't I?" Taiga spoke gently, stroking his muscular arm as he scrubbed another dish with a sponge.

"I'll admit it. I wasn't paying attention to what my body was telling me, and because of that, I fell and almost got run over... It's a good thing you were there to pick me up again." She turned her head and nuzzled her nose against her husband's upper arm. Hearing her refer to him that way made him wrinkle his brows and tighten his lips. "You swept me out of there before I could get hurt even more, and then you patched me up," she said as she brushed the tips of her fingers against the white bandage on her cheek.

"I'm really glad you're looking out for me, Ryuaji."

Before he knew it, Taiga's arms were wrapped around his.

"But it isn't good for you to be so worried all the time," she uttered.

Ryuaji's eyes suddenly gravitated towards Taiga's supple face. He could feel her big brown glowing eyes staring straight through his head before they even entered his view. It'd been months since Taiga had even looked at him that way, with her upturned eyebrows, pursed lips and pouting cheeks.

"I mean, look at yourself. You look like you haven't gotten a wink of sleep," she said as she leaned forward and started feeling the dark circles beneath his eyes. Ryuaji started to grumble at the ridiculousness of the girl who had just collapsed a moment ago acting so concerned for her own caretaker.

He took Taiga's wrist, covering it in soapy water while stopping her from touching his face any more.

"How do you expect me not to worry?" He asked tiredly. "For a good month, you were as thin as a straw, you couldn't speak a word, and you were stuck to the bed for entire days. You were as good as a corpse." Ryuaji gently lowered her arm before returning to the sink to continue washing the dishes. "And all that happened because I didn't look after you properly. I really, really couldn't let you end up like that again. That was what I promised your mother *and* myself."

Ryuaji glared viciously with determination as he scrubbed a pan with all his might. "I'm not going to relax until you're as healthy as you were before you got pregnant. It doesn't matter how I look or end up."

The sound of the dishes in the sink clanking together filled the couple's ears. Taiga leaned in front of her husband, trying to maintain their eye contact. She raised her voice over the cacophony of Ryuaji's hands shifting everything in the sink around.

"You're still thinking about it, aren't you?" She shouted, prompting him to stop. The air cleared for her to speak, letting her soften and relax her voice. "That night... When I went into labour and gave birth to our girls... When you and Ya-chan had to help me deliver them..."

Ryuaji turned his head away.

"I really thought I was going to lose you," he muttered. "I don't ever want to feel that way again."

Without seeing his eyes, she could feel the sorrow in his voice.

"I understand," she said firmly. "But I'm here now, aren't I? I'm talking and standing again. I feel healthier. I know it seemed like I was going to leave, but I didn't. I still held up my end of the promise."

"I know," Ryuaji uttered. His gaze returned to the sink as he gently continued his work. "But I've already decided that I wasn't ever going to let you go again."

He sealed his lips shut after that, attempting to end the discussion there. Taiga started getting irritated by the sound of water splashing about in the sink, so she looked straight at her husband once more.

“Did you ever care to wonder what I decided after I came back?”

Ryuaji tilted his face lower, averting his wife’s gaze.

“I decided that, no matter how broken my body was, I was going to be the best mother I could be for our daughters. I’m going to raise them to be the happiest people they can be. That was what we promised each other, wasn’t it?” Taiga huffed in frustration before gesturing to the front door. “What we did just a moment ago, when you heard our girls laughing so joyfully—don’t you want more of that, too?”

Ryuaji bit his lip.

“I do.”

He sighed.

“The way the girls stared at every little thing with such amazement, the way they smiled so widely and excitedly...” A soft grin formed on his face before he knew it. “It was all so adorable, the first time we’d even spent time together as a family, and for the first time, I really felt like a father to those wonderful little girls.”

He looked forward and nodded to himself. However, he quickly straightened his face and looked directly at Taiga.

“But that isn’t the only thing I want,” he said sternly.

“I could make them smile for days, I could feed them the best food I can make, I could care for them the best I can.” Taiga stared with her big shining eyes straight at her husband’s sanpaku ones. “None of that would matter if you’re not by my side. I can’t ever return to a life where you’re not there.”

Ryuaji’s hands finally left the sink. He took his wife’s little slender hands and clasped them together, holding them tightly.

“That’s why...” He said while gazing down wistfully at the hands in his grasps.

“I need to do everything I can to protect you.” He let out a breath as he lowered his forehead, pressing Taiga’s hands against it. “I can’t let you get hurt again, not while you’re under my care. It doesn’t matter how happy we are this way. Losing you is worse than anything else.”

He raised his head and looked at Taiga pitifully.

“I’m sorry, Taiga. I know I freaked out earlier, but I promise it was for our own good. Please, if you’d just understand...”

Taiga took a moment to observe the pained look on her husband’s face. She could only frown at how much his demeanour had changed after she’d given birth. She knew how much of a toll this was taking on him, seeing all the happiness he’d built up over the years

just disappear in a single night. With that, she lowered her hands and pulled them out of her husband's grasp.

She turned to the sink. Ryuji looked at her with befuddlement before she grabbed a bowl and sponge. Nonchalantly, she began cleaning off the food stains off the bowl's ceramic surface. He held his hands up, ready to take items out of her hands.

"Hey, you don't have to—"

"Just let me help."

He detected a hint of exasperation in her voice. Even though the urge to interrupt her remained, he could only silently watch as she cleaned and dried the bowl with a cloth. After that, she took out a cup to clean as well. After awkwardly watching his wife clean for a few seconds, he decided to resume his work as well.

"You don't have to force yourself to do any of this, Ryuji," she said. "I know you just want me to be safe and healthy, but you aren't happy doing this, are you?" She briefly looked up at her husband. "I'm definitely not."

Taiga took the final dish resting inside the sink. They viewed the now empty sink while they both had dishes in their hands, taking turns using the sponge. "I know it doesn't have to be this way. It might not be as safe, but we could still be enjoying ourselves while I'm recovering."

"I..." Ryuji mumbled. "I just want what's good for you."

"I know you do," Taiga said before meeting her husband's face with a smile. "And right now, what's good for me is this family."

Ryuji couldn't take his eyes off Taiga's alluring smile. The couple had started taking turns drying their hands with a towel. Even after he'd handed it to her and she was looking down at her own, he couldn't stop seeing the little grin on her face.

"I just lost my job, Ryuji. You, Ya-chan and my babies are the only ones I have with me now. I want to focus all my energy on all of you, and let me tell you, so far..." Taiga looked up at her husband with upturned eyes and a grin that stretched from cheek to cheek. "Being a mom feels the best."

The light of the room felt brighter than usual in Ryuji's eyes, reflecting off his wife's dazzling face. The white lines that drew out the shape of her face made it seem like the sun had entered their apartment to illuminate her. Somehow, he'd felt the same warmth he did a moment earlier.

"But this feeling isn't complete, you know."

Taiga's head moved closer to his chest as she reached her hands behind him. He could feel the ends of his apron's strings tickling his back as she untied them. He could hear her let out a little snicker, like she could feel the pounding of his heart in his chest.

She looked up at Ryuaji happily.

"I want you to focus all your energy into *us*, Ryuaji," she said, resting her hand on his chest and gently sliding it up to his neck. "Not just me, but your daughters, too. I'm sure you'll come around and find that being a father feels much better than anything else."

She lifted the strap of the apron over his head, removing it from his neck. She cheerily tilted her head at him. "It would make me the happiest to act like parents together. Let's fulfil all the promises we made to each other that way, you hear?"

Ryuaji gazed at his beloved wife's cute complexion. He watched her eyelashes flutter when she blinked. With him supporting Taiga's journey through motherhood as the reliable father, they'd be together just like they were before she fell sick—they'd be by each other's side forever. If that was what Taiga really needed, if that was what would make her happy, then he wanted to give it to her. He despised himself for keeping her tied down all the time. He couldn't keep fighting himself like this. He wanted to tell Taiga with confidence, *Yes!*

Let's do that!

However, just when he was about to open his mouth, he felt the air suddenly weighing heavily on his shoulders. The dishes were cleaned and the chore was completed, so his body decided that was going to be the end of it. Taiga's eyes widened when she noticed his body tilting away from the sink and his eyelids falling shut. She held her arms out, ready to catch him, but he stumbled and gripped the edge of the counter before he could hit the floor.

"Ugh..." He lowered his head and held it in his hand. He pinched his eyes as he struggled to keep himself awake. Taiga placed her hand on his shoulder, still afraid he was going to fall again.

"Ryuaji, you've pushed yourself too far. You need to rest," she said worriedly.

"W-wait... I still need to..." He stammered while pointing to the mess in the living room. Taiga held his chin and lifted it to her face.

"If you want me to rest, then let's rest together, okay?"

"O... Okay..."

Ryuaji began to walk towards the bedroom, his back slouched forward. Taiga held onto him, her arm behind his back. They both took slow steps towards their resting place, holding onto any frames or walls they passed by to keep themselves on their feet. Taiga shut the bedroom door behind them as they approached their futon.

Once they were on the floor, Taiga drew the covers over her and Ryuji's bodies. Their daughters had fallen asleep just before they arrived. Although they were strewn all over the futon, their eyes were comfortably shut. Taiga watched as Ryuji lowered his heavy eyelids and relaxed his shoulders.

"Ugh... I'm sorry... I should be better than this..." Ryuji groaned weakly. Taiga placed a finger over his lips.

"Shh... It's alright. You can rest now."

Her gentle voice put him right to sleep. He began to softly snore immediately after pulling her finger away. She cheekily grinned at her sleepy husband's face. She appreciated the sight of Ryuji at peace, saving his energy instead of using it to nag or worry. She laid there on her side, basking in the tranquil silence of their bedroom.

It'd only just set in how much had changed in the Takasu household. She wasn't used to Yasuko being away for so long. She wasn't used to Ryuji being this stressed out, and she wanted to see him happy like he was earlier. She certainly wanted to be moving around on her own again, too. She wanted to be free to spend time with the new additions to the family.

She'd spent so much time looking forward to her recovery, that she'd only just remembered one thing she missed after she gave birth.

"It's been a while since we've done this, hasn't it, Ryuji?"

Taiga crawled atop Ryuji's chest. Her body was light enough for Ryuji to breathe easily even with her weight on him. She moved her legs until his waist was between them. Finally, she shuffled forward along his torso, bringing her face close to his.

"I hope everything goes back to normal too, Ryuji."

Taiga closed her eyes and gracefully kissed the sleeping Ryuji's lips. She pressed her lips harder against his, tilting her head and deepening their connection. His mouth was warm and soft. Part of her wished he'd kissed her in the periods she'd been forced to sleep. It would've made her feel like a princess, but she couldn't remember a point where he did. All the stress had gotten to his head and kept him from affection.

Taiga had hoped that, with this deep, long kiss, that the lovely, cheerful Ryuji would return after he awoke, and the warmth she shared with him would bring him the happiness that she had needed while she was sick. In this time of hardship, it was the love they had for each other that needed to be maintained, so they could continue driving each other forward, so they could be by each other's side forever.

Taiga pulled her lips away and snuggled her head beneath his neck. She slept atop of him, just like that, on the warm bed of Ryuji's body.

And once again, all was calm at the Takasu household.

Taiga's eyes shot open. There she was, waking up on Ryuji's chest in their quiet bedroom. Her eyes darted around. It was quiet. Too quiet. She felt something in the pit of her stomach. Something was very, very wrong.

She quickly sat up, the covers falling off her back. Her head turned to the babies in an instant. Her senses were pointing her there. She quickly crawled along the tatami mat floor like a spider, desperately getting there as fast as she could. As she shuffled towards her babies as fast as she could, there was an emptiness in the air that she couldn't ignore. She could hear the breathing of four people—two adults, two infants.

Taiga was leaning over her baby Katsuko's body. She gasped after confirming her daughter's condition. Her little nostrils weren't moving like her sisters' were. Her chest didn't rise or fall—it was stagnant. Taiga placed her hand over her baby's belly, shaking her about to try to stir her awake.

Ack! Ack!

The infant let out a small sputter. She took in a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. But that was it. She stopped moving completely. Taiga tried to shake her again, but it was to no avail. Her own breathing grew heavy. Her chest was heaving. Her heart was racing. Her baby wasn't breathing.

"RYUUJII!!!" She screamed at her husband. But her husband didn't move or respond. She took little Katsuko into her arms and crawled towards Ryuji. "Ryuji... Ryuji..." She shook his shoulders vigorously, but he was far too deep into his slumber to be woken up. He had passed out and wasn't going to return until he was fully rested.

Taiga's eyes immediately turned to her cellphone resting by the side of the futon. She swiped it and immediately dialled an ambulance. She gritted her teeth harder and harder with each second that passed. She rocked her baby, holding her to her chest with her arm, hoping for her to start breathing again while she called for help.

"Okay, Takasu-san, just stay on the line for now. Help is on the way."

"Th-thank you."

The operator on the other end of the line began giving her instructions. She laid Katsuko on the futon and began pressing onto her chest. Sweat ran down the sides of her face as she performed compressions on her baby. Katsuko coughed again, clearing her airways

once more. But she still wasn't breathing on her own, and she could barely get any air. Taiga opened her baby's mouth and leaned down to start blowing air into her baby's lungs. The outcome was the same.

"Uuuugghhh!!!" Taiga grunted loudly and pulled at her long hair. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She panted heavily, her chest continuing to heave. Her vision was becoming unclear, her unconscious baby staying in the centre of her view.

"Calm down, Takasu-san. The ambulance is almost here."

Too long. It was all taking too long. She couldn't wait anymore. She just needed someone, anyone, to help out. She spotted Ryuaji's cellphone. She lowered her own phone before dialling the landlady on her husband's phone. She held it up to her ear and listened to the phone's repetitive beeps.

"Hello? Takasu-san? Are you still there?" The operator asked.

Taiga's hands were trembling. The landlady wasn't picking up. She struggled to even breathe herself. After a few long seconds, she put her husband's phone away. Her eyes watched her baby's motionless body. The operator's instructions didn't seem to help, so what else could she do? She couldn't just sit there and wait.

A ringing in her ear overwhelmed her. Her racing heart was making her feel faint. She pinched her eyes as a painful headache passed over her. After that, she had to make her move. She scooped her daughter into her arms, got on her feet and trudged towards the front door. If she was going to wait for the ambulance to arrive, she at least didn't want them to waste any time going up to their apartment.

Taiga supported herself against the bedroom door frame she passed by, but with one hand carrying her baby and the other holding her phone, she could barely grip onto anything. Her body teetered left and right as she tried to move straight towards the exit. One of her feet collided with the living room table, causing her to trip. She embraced her daughter in her arms, covering her from the impact of the floor.

"Gyyiih!"

"Takasu-san? Are you alright? Where are you?"

She had hit her head against the door frame as her body slid into the kitchen. She held her head, stinging from the collision. But she couldn't stop now. Like a soldier in the trenches, she wriggled towards the front door, before getting on her feet once more to turn the knob. She pushed right through, stepping into the white sunlight. Dust stuck to the soles of her bare feet. She fell forward, stopping herself on the handrail to keep herself from falling to the ground floor.

Taiga's recovery was far from over. She wasn't ready to be making such quick movements, nor did she have the strength to properly steer herself outside. When she looked down the staircase, her vision was skewed. The image of the steps she had to set her feet on was all over the place. On top of that, Katsuko's body began to feel heavier. She was barely strong enough to lift herself, so carrying a large baby on top of that easily took a toll on her body.

But no matter how broken her body was, no matter how exhausted she felt, her maternal instincts drove her over the edge. She leaned against the handrail as she went down the stairs one step at a time. Her heavy breath blew on her baby's little hairs. Moving down the stairs made her slow. She couldn't take it. She rushed her next step.

“Gyaah!”

She immediately lost her balance, causing her to slip down the stairs. She hugged Katsuko tightly once more as the edges of the steps dug into her whole back. *Thud, thud, thud, thud*—it was as if she was getting showered in sharp punches from behind. *Thud!* Her butt hit the hard ground as she reached the landing of the stairs. The pain ran up her spine and almost paralysed her from the waist down.

“Gyiihh... Iiihhh...”

She grimaced and shivered as the pain inhibited her control over her body. There was no doubt that she would sustain bruises from her fall. More tears were welling up in her eyes. With wrinkled brows, she used the little energy she had to keep moving. She got on her feet again and staggered towards the road. She'd hoped the ambulance would be there the moment she stepped off the premises. She could quickly pass Katsuko to a medical professional, then release all the tension in her body after she knew her daughter was safe. She was only a few steps away from the road.

Finally, she stopped in her tracks. With her eyes to the sky, she opened her mouth wide and took a deep breath.

But her breath was cut short. Her eyes and mouth fell shut, followed by her head, then the rest of her body. That was the last of the energy she had before she'd collapse and faint. Her phone fell out of her hand and onto the ground. With her arms over her baby, she hit the ground as well. Her forehead got scratched. The impact kicked dirt into the air, covering both Taiga and Katsuko's soft faces in it.

“Hello? Takasu-san? We're in your neighbourhood. We'll be there shortly.”

“Gah!”

Ryuiji woke up, his head jolted. His hand was resting on Taiga's futon. He felt around and managed to grab his phone, but Taiga wasn't there. How long was she gone? He had no way of telling, but he couldn't let this suspense linger. He had to know where she was, lest she faint somewhere without his knowledge.

He quickly got up from his mattress and ran towards the bedroom door. He dipped his head out, scanning the living room. Nobody was there, but that was where he heard it; a high-pitched whirring right outside the apartment. Ever since that fateful night, he could recognise the sound with just a decibel—the sound of an ambulance's siren.

"Taiga!" He gasped before leaping towards the front door. His eyes widened when he witnessed the rays of sunlight bursting through the open doorway. The thought of his wife being outside all on her own sent chills up his spine. He ran towards the handrail standing just outside his apartment, panting heavily as he desperately heaved forward. Once he was outside and the sun was getting in his eyes again, he gripped the handrail and looked over the edge. His heart sank at what he saw.

"TAIGAAAAA!" Ryuiji screamed at the top of his lungs. He witnessed his wife getting lifted into the back of an ambulance on a stretcher. He ran down the stairs to the ground floor and made a beeline for the back of the ambulance. He reached Taiga's side and gripped the handle of the stretcher. He faced the paramedic on the opposite side.

"Wh-what happened!?" Ryuiji asked, still panting profusely.

"We received a call about a woman's baby not breathing. When we arrived, we found her passed out on the ground. We'll be taking both of them to the emergency room. I take it you're Takasu-san's husband?" The paramedic asked as Taiga was rolled into the ambulance. Ryuiji's eyes followed her unconscious face, which was attached to a ventilator. Sure enough, Katsuko herself was there getting breathing support as well.

"Y-yes..." Ryuiji stuttered.

"You can follow in the back of the ambulance if you'd like."

"Right..."

Ryuiji was about to step into the back of the ambulance, but he stopped himself.

"W-wait... Can I go get my daughters? I can't leave them alone, they're just babies," he asked the paramedic.

"Sorry, we need to transport her immediately. You can ask for her room at the hospital once she's in a safe environment," the paramedic told him.

"But... But... Ugh..."

Ryuji pulled at his hair and knelt on the ground. He couldn't leave Taiga alone. She might be safe with medical staff, but she needed someone close to her to accompany her. They were already preparing to close the back of the ambulance. He didn't know what else he could do. He could only kneel there and groan.

Out of the blue, a person's shadow was cast over Ryuji.

"I can go."

He heard another man's voice, prompting him to immediately turn his head up to get a look at the man standing before him.

"I'm her father."

He couldn't believe it. Takagi Naru had arrived in front of the Takasu household. He wasn't even looking at his son-in-law, only facing the paramedic handling his stepdaughter. Taiga's parents lived quite far away, so for a moment, he was wondering what he was doing all the way out here.

But it had just hit him, and his stomach began to turn. One of Taiga's parents had caught sight of a terrible incident, an incident that he was supposed to prevent. Seina might as well be at the scene herself. Taiga was going to be safe, but the domestic life they had with each other remained at risk.

Ryuji stood up. Taiga's stepfather sat beside her, holding her hand while she rested in the stretcher. He gazed at her solemnly.

"N-Naru!" Ryuji shouted. It was the only moment in that ordeal that their eyes met. But after the man glanced at Ryuji, his eyes focused on Taiga again. Afterwards, the doors of the ambulance were shut, cutting Ryuji off from his wife. He could only stand there in awe as the white and red vehicle began to drive away.

Ryuji stood there, catching his breath.

He watched the vehicle's figure get smaller and smaller as the distance grew.

The responsibility he had over Taiga, he failed to uphold.

The promise he had made to Taiga's mother, he had broken.