

# Accidentally become a father

*Chapter 101: The Fractured World ( Part 2 )*

The sound of metal treads moving again.

Came back to life.

One by one.

The barrels turned to aim once more.

At us.

All of them.

Yuna turned her head.

Her eyes changed.

No more hesitating.

No more wavering.

Tears fell.

One.

Two.

Dropping onto my face.

"Papa..."

Her voice was quiet.

"Please, hold on..."

She stood up.

Slowly.

Her hands gripping her wand.

"I will end this."

She took to the air.

Up.

Away.

Could only watch.

The sky.

Igniting with fire once again.

Was no longer dark.

It was bright.

Too bright.

Not from the flames.

But from Yuna.

Her small body floated.

Silent.

Motionless.

The wind stopped.

The dust hung in the air.

As if the world was waiting.

The tanks had stopped again.

As if hesitating.

As if...

Afraid.

Yuna looked down.

Looking at her own hands.

Her hands were trembling.

"...I..."

Her voice was quiet.

Barely a whisper.

"...I don't want..."

Her hands clenched into fists.

"...Papa to be in pain..."

Her wand trembled.

Light blossomed at its tip.

One.

Then two.

Dozens of magic circles.

Materialized around her.

Seven layers deep.

Spinning.

Strange symbols that looked like Python code.

Things I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

How could something like that exist within a magic circle?

I was below.

Still lying on the ground.

My eyes half-open.

"Yuna..."

My voice barely made a sound.

Her eyes changed.

No longer the eyes of a child.

Eyes that were Deep.

And Calm.

"Then..."

Her voice sounded Different.

Heavier.

Deeper.

"...I will end everything."

She raised her hand.

Stopped spinning.

The wand pointed downward.

Toward the battlefield.

Toward the tanks.

Everything.

"Gravity Field."

Felt heavy.

Immensely heavy.

Ground to an absolute halt.

CRACK!!!

Crushed.

Not from an explosion.

Pressure.

Forced into the earth.

As if trampled by something unseen.

One by one.

Crushed.

Fast.

Without deafening explosions.

The sound of cracking.

Metal buckling.

Flattened like sheets of paper.

"Yuna..."

I tried to raise my hand.

I couldn't reach her.

The mothership.

Began to move.

Its underside opened.

Light spilled out.

Something was being prepared.

Yuna looked up.

Silent.

A few seconds passed.

"...There is no other choice..."

She raised her wand.

Spun faster.

The light grew blindingly bright.

The air began to vibrate.

I squinted my eyes.

It was too bright.

"Then..."

Yuna took a breath.

Slowly.

"...I will use a grand spell."

The sky Fractured.

It literally cracked.

Like glass.

Another light emerged.

Deeper.

Colder.

More distant.

I opened my eyes.

"...what is that..."

Something appeared.

Not fire.

Not lightning.

A celestial body.

Massive.

Incomprehensibly massive.

Descending slowly.

Its shadow covering everything.

"This is..."

Yuna pointed upward.

"...Yuna's meteor."

Silence fell.

Even the war itself ceased.

Fell still.

It too realized.

That something far greater...

Was plummeting toward this world.

I smiled weakly.

"...you..."

A heavy breath.

"...you're going overboard, Yuna..."

The sky grew brighter.

Continued its descent.

Continued its descent.

Slowly.

But surely.

Drawing closer.

Growing larger.

The air vibrated.

The earth began to fracture.

I lay there.

Unable to move much.

My eyes fixed on the sky.

This was madness.

I never thought...

I would witness the apocalypse.

Was still up there.

Beneath that meteor.

Small.

So incredibly small compared to what she had summoned.

Her hands were still raised.

Holding it.

Guiding it.

Controlling it.

The mothership finally moved.

Light gathered beneath it.

Some kind of weapon.

Energy.

Blindingly bright.

Aimed at the meteor.

There was no sound.

The light was fired.

Piercing the sky.

Striking the meteor.

The meteor cracked.

I forced my eyes wider.

Did it stop?

Ignited.

It didn't shatter.

It grew hotter.

Brighter.

As if accelerating.

Yuna clenched her fists.

"Fall."

A single word.

Sharp.

And the meteor Fell.

No longer descending slowly.

But as if pulled down.

Directly.

Onto this world.

The sky turned white.

All colors vanished.

I closed my eyes.

Too late.

BOOOOOOOOOM!!!!

There was nothing else.

Only Sound.

A sound that wasn't a sound.

It was a Vibration.

That shattered everything.

Vanished.

Burned away.

Swallowed it all.

My body was lifted.

Weightless.

The heaviness was gone.

There was no more pain.

I opened my eyes.

White.

Only white.

No sky.

No earth.

No sound.

"...this is..."

I tried to speak.

No echo.

No answer.

Only an empty void.

I looked at my hands...

They were still there.

Still intact.

Was not.

The light dimmed.

A silhouette.

A silhouette came into view.

Small.

Floating.

"Yuna?..."

"Yes, it's me, Papa..."

Yuna's voice.

I gave a small smile.

"...you..."

I couldn't feel my steps.

Like I was drifting.

I tried to get closer.

My body began to vanish.

Began to fade.

"Papa."

That voice.

Close.

As if incredibly close.

I blinked.

Suddenly, Yuna...

Was right in front of me.

Her hand reaching out.

"...it isn't over yet... Papa..."

That silhouette...

Her form looked Different.

No longer like a little girl.

No longer like a witch.

Something else.

I stared at her.

For a long time.

...

...

Silence.

We merely looked at each other.

The world began to fracture once more.

Black lines appeared across the white void.

Like glass about to shatter.

I closed my eyes.

"...Yuna... I'll go on ahead..."

At last, darkness.

The pressure on my chest returned.

Heavy.

A crushing weight.

My breath caught.

...

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

The pressure shifted.

No longer on my chest.

But on my shoulders.

Small steps.

Slow.

Up.

Down.

Up again.

"Papa! I got him! I got him!!"

Yuna's voice rang out.

"Look! Look! He's going down!!"

Light.

Faint.

Flickering.

I opened my eyes slightly.

Blurry.

The ceiling.

White.

A heavy breath escaped my lips.

"Haa..."

The pressure returned.

Clearer now.

On my back.

Moving.

Shifting.

Left.

Right.

I tried to move my fingers.

They moved.

"Papa! Wake up! This is getting so good!"

That voice.

So close.

I lifted my head a fraction.

My vision still swimming.

In front of me.

The TV screen.

Lights flashing rapidly.

The sounds of an anime filled the room.

Characters shouting.

Explosions.

High-tempo music.

Yuna.

Standing.

Her two tiny feet.

Stepping up and down on my spine.

Suddenly, a small jump.

"Hah!"

Thud!

A sharp pressure.

My breath caught in my throat.

I closed my eyes for a second.

Inhaled.

Then opened them again.

"...Yuna."

My voice was hoarse.

Quiet.

Yuna immediately looked down.

Her eyes sparkling.

"Papa! You're awake! Look at this!"

Thud!

She jumped again.

Right in the middle of my back.

My breath hitched.

I immediately pushed myself up with my hands.

Supporting my weight.

"Get off..."

Yuna stopped.

Peering down at my face.

"What's wrong, Papa?"

I stared at her.

Still half-asleep.

My mind still foggy.

Fire.

Explosions.

Tanks.

The mothership.

...

The meteor.

I took a deep breath.

And then.

Exhaled slowly.

"...You almost killed me twice just now."

"Huh?"

Yuna tilted her head.

Genuinely clueless.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

Rubbed my face.

The lingering heat of the dream had faded.

Replaced by the blare of the TV.

The cool air of the room.

And the alternating weight of Yuna's footsteps.

Which, I realized, was the exact reason that dream had manifested in the first place.

I tapped a finger lightly against my own back.

"Keep going."

"Okay, Papa!"

She stood up straight.

And climbed back onto me.

Resuming her march.

But gentler this time.

Tiny steps.

Up to my shoulders.

Down to my lower back.

No more jumping.

I let myself sink back into the futon.

Staring blankly ahead.

The anime kept playing.

Loud.

Chaotic.

"Papa."

"Hm."

"This character is super strong, you know."

"..."

I turned my head slightly toward the TV.

Colorful flashes reflected in my eyes.

"...Yeah."

Yuna paused on my shoulders.

Pressing down a little longer.

"Is it stiff here?"

"Yeah."

"I knew it."

"...Hm."

Her steps moved down again.

Slow.

Rhythmic.

"Papa..."

"If I step here... does it hurt?"

Her foot pressed gently just below my neck.

"What about here?"

Her foot pressed against my neck itself.

"...A little."

"Oh..."

She shifted again.

More carefully this time.

The TV played on.

Characters laughing.

The sound of clashes.

Fast-paced music.

Yuna giggled softly along with it.

"Hehe..."

Her steps lost their rhythm for a moment.

Before returning to a slow, steady pace.

"Focus..." she murmured under her breath.

I took a deep breath.

Slowly.

Warm.

No explosions.

No tanks.

Only this small room.

And the sound of her footsteps.

I closed my eyes once more.

Not out of exhaustion this time.

But because it was peaceful.

A soft voice.

Tiny steps.

The gentle weight on my back.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

# Chapter 102: Before the Exams

The sound of paper turning.

Softly.

Over and over.

I lay on the futon.

On my side.

One hand propping up my head.

My eyes were half-open.

Staring at the low table in the middle of the room.

Yuna sat there.

Her back straight.

A book wide open.

The pencil in her hand moved slowly.

Stopped.

Tapped the table.

Then moved again.

Silence.

Only the sound of pages.

And occasionally... her soft breathing.

I lifted a cigarette.

Bit the end.

Lit it.

A small flame flickered.

Smoke drifted up slowly.

"Yuna."

"Hm?"

Without turning around.

"What are you studying."

"Math."

"Oh."

I blew the smoke upward.

Staring at the ceiling.

A few seconds passed.

"Papa."

"Hm."

"How do you do this one..."

She turned her book around.

Pushed it toward me.

I didn't get up.

"Hm..."

I squinted.

Looking from a distance.

Numbers.

Fractions.

Scribbles.

"Just work it out."

"I don't get it."

"Then don't bother."

"Papa..."

Her voice dropped.

I sighed.

Sat up a little.

Pulled the book closer.

My eyes narrowed.

Focusing.

"This..."

I took the pencil.

Wrote slowly.

"You multiply this first... then divide."

My hand moved quickly.

Without saying much.

"If you do it backwards, the answer comes out wrong."

I pushed the book back.

"Try again."

Yuna leaned in a little.

Staring at the paper.

"Oh..."

Her pencil moved again.

Faster.

I lay back down.

Silence again.

Sometime later.

The sound of a chair shifting.

Yuna stood up.

Walked to the small kitchen.

I glanced over.

She took a glass.

Filled it with water.

Drank.

Then sat back down.

The book had changed.

Now, pages full of text.

"What is it now."

"Language."

"Oh."

I closed my eyes for a moment.

"Papa."

"Hm..."

"What was your rank in school back then?"

I opened one eye.

"Don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Never cared."

"Why..."

I stayed quiet for a moment.

"As long as I moved on to the next grade, it was enough."

Yuna fell silent.

Her pencil stopped.

"As for me... I want good grades."

I shrugged.

"And?"

Yuna turned to look at me.

"Well... it means I'm smart."

I chuckled softly.

Briefly.

"Assumption."

Yuna frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Good grades don't mean you're smart."

"Then what?"

"It just means you know how to solve the questions."

Yuna stared at her book again.

Silent.

Her pencil tapped softly.

Tap... tap... tap...

"But... if you can solve the questions, it means you know it."

"It could also mean you cheated."

"I don't cheat."

Yuna answered immediately.

Quickly.

"Okay, okay..."

The next day.

I sat by the window.

Legs stretched out.

Coffee in hand.

Still hot.

Yuna was at the table.

This time... it was messier.

Multiple books were open.

Notes everywhere.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Make me some questions."

I turned my head.

"Papa, make some questions for me..."

"I'll solve them."

I raised an eyebrow.

"What for."

"Practice."

I took a sip of my coffee.

Bitter.

"What a hassle."

"Papa..."

I sighed.

Set down the mug.

Grabbed a blank sheet of paper.

I slid a pen over.

"What subject."

"Math."

"We already did that."

"Give me different ones."

I started writing.

Numbers.

Simple questions.

Then gradually more complex.

"Solve it."

I placed the paper on the table.

Yuna pulled it over immediately.

Focused.

I picked up my coffee again.

Watching.

Yuna's forehead creased.

Her lips moved silently.

Calculating.

Writing.

Erasing.

Writing again.

A few minutes passed.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"This is hard."

"Then let it be."

"..."

"If it's hard, it means you can't do it yet."

Yuna looked at me.

"That's why I'm practicing."

I stayed quiet.

Sipped my coffee.

"Why bother."

"To learn."

"You don't need to study that hard."

Yuna stopped.

Looked at me.

Seriously.

"I have to work hard."

"So I can get good grades."

My eyes shifted to her.

"Another assumption."

Yuna let out a small sigh.

"Papa..."

"If I get good grades... then I'll be happy."

I stared at her.

...

"As long as you're full, too."

Yuna pouted.

"That's different."

"No, it's not."

"It is!"

I chuckled softly.

A brief sound.

Another day.

Night.

The lights were on.

Even quieter.

Yuna was still at the table.

Her eyes were getting heavy.

Her hand propped up her chin.

But her pencil kept moving.

I got up.

Walked to the kitchen.

Opened a drawer.

Took out a coffee sachet.

I poured in hot water.

The bitter aroma drifted up.

I returned.

Set the mug down beside her.

"Drink."

Yuna looked over.

"It's bitter."

"It is."

"I don't want it."

"Suit yourself then."

I sat beside her.

Took the mug.

Took a sip.

The bitterness was just right.

Balanced.

A moment later.

Yuna glanced over.

Once.

Twice.

Her hand slowly...

slid the mug closer.

She tried a little sip.

Her face instantly changed.

"Bitter..."

I laughed softly.

"Want to add some sugar?"

Yuna gave a small nod.

"Add it yourself."

She stood up immediately.

Stomping her feet a little harder than necessary.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

She fetched the sugar.

Added it to the coffee.

Stirred it.

And took a sip.

"Now this, is sweet..."

My hand reached out.

She immediately pulled the coffee mug away.

From my reach.

"Yuna..."

"Here."

Yuna brought the mug closer.

My hand almost reached it.

And suddenly.

She pulled it away again.

"You little..."

My hand ruffled her hair.

Softly.

Making it a bit messy.

She smiled faintly.

"Hehe."

Time ticked on.

It was getting pretty late.

Quiet.

Only the sound of the pencil.

And the occasional soft sigh.

I leaned against the wall.

Watching her.

For a long time.

"Yuna."

"Hm..."

"Are you tired?"

A lie.

It was obvious.

Her eyes were drooping with sleep.

Half-closed.

Her hand movements.

Weren't as enthusiastic as before.

I shifted my gaze.

Exhaled.

"Alright then."

Silence descended once again.

The lights were still on.

Brighter than usual.

Quieter than usual.

The wall clock ticked softly.

Its hands nearing midnight.

Yuna was still at the table.

Her back wasn't as straight as before.

Slightly slouched.

Her shoulders slumped.

Books wide open.

Notes scattered everywhere.

Her pencil was still moving.

Slowly.

Slower than yesterday.

I leaned against the wall.

Sitting on the futon.

One leg bent.

Watching her.

For a long time.

"This place... feels like a war camp," I muttered softly.

"Hm?"

Yuna didn't turn around.

"Never mind."

Silence again.

I lifted a cigarette.

Lit it.

A small flame flickered, then vanished.

Smoke drifted upward.

"Yuna."

"Hm..."

"Let's go to sleep."

"Later."

"Why."

"I want to study some more."

I looked at the clock.

"The exams are tomorrow."

"I know..."

"Then you should just rest for today."

Yuna stopped writing.

Slowly...

she turned her head.

"I can't."

"Why."

"I'm still not sure of it all."

I exhaled the smoke.

"Energy is limited."

Yuna frowned.

"If you use it all up now..."

"You'll be exhausted tomorrow."

Yuna stared at her book again.

Silent.

Her pencil moved once more.

"I have to work hard..."

Her voice was quieter than usual.

I stood up.

Walked slowly.

Approached her.

My hand immediately reached out and closed her book.

"Papa..."

"That's enough."

"I'm not done yet."

"It's enough."

Yuna looked at me.

A little annoyed.

"I want to study."

I stared back.

Flatly.

"Tomorrow, you need a mind that works."

"Not one that's been forced."

Yuna bit her lower lip.

"Just a little longer..."

I didn't answer.

I turned around.

Walked toward the main switch.

Click.

Dark.

The lights went out.

The TV shut off.

The fan stopped.

Silence.

Total.

"Papa?!"

Yuna's voice rang clear in the dark.

"Rest now."

"Papa... I'm not finished."

"You're finished now."

"I haven't memorized it yet..."

I walked back.

Sat on the futon.

"Sleep."

"I'm not sleepy."

"Close your eyes."

Yuna let out a long sigh.

I could hear her moving.

Organizing her books in the dark.

The rustle of paper.

Her bag zipping shut.

Small footsteps approaching.

The futon creaked softly.

She sat down.

Silent.

I lay down.

Staring at the unseen ceiling.

Darkness covered everything.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The wall clock ticked softly.

"Papa..."

"Hm..."

"What if I fail."

"Fail what."

"The exams..."

I exhaled slowly.

"Then just take them again."

Yuna fell silent.

"Seriously."

"Yes."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Silence.

Longer this time.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"If my grades are bad..."

"What..."

"Will you be mad?"

I turned my head slightly.

Even though she couldn't see it.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I took a breath.

Slowly.

"Because it's not a problem."

Yuna didn't answer right away.

...

"Then what is a problem..."

I smiled faintly.

In the dark.

"If you stopped eating."

"Huh?"

"If you stop eating... that's a problem."

Yuna fell silent.

Then...

"But that's different..."

"No, it's not."

"But grades are important too..."

"According to who."

"Everyone..."

I sighed.

"If everyone told you to jump out a window, would you?"

"No..."

"There you go."

Silence returned.

But Yuna's breathing started to sound slower.

Calmer.

"Papa..."

"Hm..."

"If I get good grades..."

I closed my eyes.

"...I want to ask for something."

I opened my eyes slightly.

Staring up at the dark ceiling.

Where absolutely nothing was visible.

"If you want something... just ask."

Yuna stayed quiet.

"I haven't asked yet..."

"You don't need to set conditions."

A brief silence.

"Don't use 'if I get good grades'... to ask for things."

Yuna frowned slightly.

"Why..."

Her tone dropped a little.

"Because then it becomes a transaction."

"I don't like that."

Yuna didn't answer immediately.

I continued.

"If you want something... just tell me."

"I'll listen."

"And then I'll consider it."

Yuna remained silent.

I spoke again.

"What I mean by consider it..."

"If I'm capable of it... and if I think it's reasonable..."

"I'll give it to you."

"And if not?"

Yuna asked suddenly.

A flat reply.

Yuna stared straight ahead.

Even in the dark.

"You wouldn't grant it..."

"Why..."

"Because not everything has to be granted."

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

The ticking of the clock sounded louder.

Deeper.

"Then... if I get good grades..."

I closed my eyes again.

"Then that's good."

"That's all."

Yuna let out a small sigh.

Not disappointed.

Just thinking.

"Papa..."

"Hm..."

"What if I asked for it now..."

I kept my eyes closed.

"Just say it."

Yuna was silent.

For a few seconds.

"...maybe later."

Hm.

I smiled slightly.

Barely visible.

"Alright then."

Yuna lay down.

Her eyes closed.

Silence descended once again.

Calmer than before.

There were no more sounds.

Only breathing.

Soft.

Steady.

I opened my eyes slightly.

"Yuna."

No answer.

I turned my head.

She was already asleep.

I closed my eyes.

Dark.

And finally...

true silence descended.

Without burdens.

Without promises.

Binding us.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 103: After the Exams

[ An Incorrect Guess ]

—

A week had passed.

Yuna's semester exams had finally come to an end.

—

The sidewalk stretched out ahead.

The asphalt still held the lingering heat of the day.

The late afternoon air was slowly settling in.

It wasn't cold, but it was enough to make breathing feel a little lighter.

Our footsteps fell side by side.

Not too fast.

Not too slow either.

"Papa... where are we going?"

Yuna glanced over at me.

Her eyes were brimming with curiosity.

I didn't answer right away.

I merely gave her a brief sideways glance.

"Take a guess."

"Eh..."

Yuna furrowed her brow.

Deep in thought.

She raised her hand slightly.

Her index finger resting against her chin.

"Mm... are we going shopping?"

"Hm, that's right."

"But that's not all."

"Guess again."

"Mm... what else could it be..."

Our footsteps maintained their steady rhythm.

Along the street, a few shops were beginning to turn on their lights.

People passed by.

The sound of traffic was relatively quiet.

"To buy new clothes?"

I immediately turned to look at her.

"?!?"

"Why clothes all of a sudden?"

"That's not it."

I let out a short sigh.

"Try again."

"But Papa..."

Yuna gave the hem of her shirt a little tug.

"My clothes are getting too small."

I took a quick look.

The sleeves had indeed ridden up a bit.

They didn't fit like they used to.

"Hm... not yet."

"You can still wear them."

"Papa..."

Her tone dropped.

She clearly didn't agree.

I looked back straight ahead.

"Try again."

—

We passed by our usual grocery store.

Its lights were bright.

The shelves were visible from the outside.

Yuna glanced toward it.

"Papa... isn't that where we shop?"

"We'll do that later on the way home."

"Oh..."

We kept walking.

The pedestrian crossing light turned red.

We stopped for a moment.

Waiting.

A few people stood around us.

Some were busy with their phones.

Others simply stood in silence.

The light turned green.

We crossed the street.

"Are we going to the park?"

I turned my head slightly.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because..."

Yuna gave a small smile.

"You really love going to the park, don't you, Papa?"

"Says who?"

"I've seen it myself."

I let out a soft sigh.

"Alright... alright."

My pace slowed just a fraction.

The memory surfaced for a brief moment.

Sand.

Swings.

The wind rustling gently through the trees.

And the sound of birds.

Their chirping was light.

Never bothersome.

If anything... it was calming.

—

"Do you give up, Yuna?"

"Not yet."

"Alright."

A few steps passed.

Yuna went back to thinking.

Seriously.

"Mm..."

Her pace slowed down a bit.

Her eyes looked upward.

As if the answer might fall from the sky.

...

"We're going to..."

She stopped mid-sentence.

Then shook her head.

"I don't know... I give up."

I gave a faint smile.

"Alright."

"You'll find out soon enough."

We kept walking.

The types of shops began to change.

No longer for daily necessities.

More crowded.

Noisier.

Filled with brighter lights.

On the side of the street—

A karaoke parlor.

Its lights were flashy.

Large glass doors.

Colorful posters displayed out front.

The faint sound of music could be heard from within.

My footsteps didn't stop.

I kept walking.

...

But beside me—

Yuna's footsteps slowed.

Just a little.

Her eyes were drawn toward the building.

For a little longer than usual.

—

[ An Unexpected Place ]

—

Yuna resumed walking.

Her pace was a little quicker.

As if she was trying to catch up to my rhythm again.

She no longer looked back.

But her eyes...

Every now and then, they still darted toward the side of the street.

...

We kept walking.

A few minutes passed.

My footsteps eventually slowed.

Then came to a halt.

Yuna stopped as well.

She looked straight ahead.

Then up.

Her brow immediately furrowed.

Right in front of us—

A building with pristine white walls.

Large glass windows.

Brightly lit.

Clear lettering across the top.

Clinic.

Pharmacy.

—

"Why... are we here, Papa?"

Yuna quickly turned to look at me.

"Are you sick?"

"No."

I stepped right inside.

The glass doors slid open automatically.

A rush of cold air immediately brushed against my skin.

Yuna followed close behind.

Her footsteps were a little hesitant.

Inside—

Everything was immaculate.

White.

Almost too white.

Bright, shadowless lighting.

Shelves lined with neatly arranged medicine.

Bottles, boxes, labels.

Everything looked impeccably clean.

And... quiet.

The only sound was the soft hum of the air conditioner.

—

"Welcome."

A woman's voice greeted us.

We approached the counter.

A staff member stood behind the desk.

Her hair was tied neatly back.

Her eyes lit up with recognition the moment she saw me.

"Oh... Itsuki-san."

She gave a small smile.

"How have you been?"

"Good."

I didn't linger.

I stepped right up to the counter.

Yuna stood by my side.

But—

Her eyes darted around.

Taking everything in.

A little tense.

A little curious.

—

"What brings you in today?"

"The usual."

The woman gave a slow nod.

"Ah... it's about that time, isn't it."

She reached under the counter to grab something.

Then—

Her eyes shifted to Yuna.

She paused for a moment.

Observing her.

...

Yuna immediately lowered her head.

Giving a slight bow.

"..."

Saying nothing.

"Oh..."

The woman smiled.

"How polite."

She leaned forward just a bit.

"By the way..."

"Who is this girl?"

"Your daughter?"

I turned my head.

Looking at Yuna.

She remained silent.

Waiting.

...

I took a slow breath.

I was her guardian.

But...

"...Yes."

"My daughter."

I raised my hand.

Resting it on her head.

Giving it a gentle pat.

"Yuna."

Yuna looked straight ahead again.

Still without a word.

"Hahaha..."

A soft laugh escaped the woman.

Tinged with a bit of awkwardness.

As if she wanted to ask more questions—

but held herself back.

She smiled again instead.

"Hello, Yuna."

Yuna gave a small nod.

"Hello..."

Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Well then, this way."

The woman turned around.

She opened a door beside the counter.

"Come on in."

We followed her inside.

A narrow hallway.

The lights were just as blindingly bright.

The faint scent of antiseptic hung in the air.

She pushed another door open.

—

We stepped into an examination room.

It was a small space.

White walls.

A desk.

A few chairs.

Neatly organized medical equipment.

The room was mostly bare.

Save for a small calendar hanging on the wall.

"Have a seat."

I took a seat.

Yuna remained standing beside me.

Her eyes studied the instruments on the table.

A blood pressure monitor.

A blood glucose meter.

A few small vials.

...

The woman reached for the blood pressure cuff.

My sleeve was rolled up.

The cuff was wrapped around my arm.

Pulled tight.

"Still smoking?"

"Yeah."

"How many a day?"

"I don't count them."

"Hm..."

She squeezed the pump.

The pressure rose.

Squeezing down on my arm.

Then slowly released.

She watched the dial.

"Getting enough sleep this week?"

"No."

"Overworking again?"

"Yeah."

She jotted something down on her notepad.

"Your blood pressure is still in the safe zone."

"But stop depriving yourself of sleep so often."

"Sure."

A brief response.

...

She removed the cuff.

And picked up another small device.

"Blood test next."

Yuna immediately looked over.

"Blood...?"

I gave her a brief sideways glance.

"Just a little."

The woman picked up a lancet.

A small needle.

"Finger."

I held out my hand.

Click.

A slight prick.

A single bead of blood surfaced.

She dabbed it onto a small test strip.

And inserted it into the machine.

Beep.

A few seconds passed.

"Blood sugar is normal."

"Cholesterol..."

She checked the reading.

"Slightly elevated."

I remained silent.

"Still within the safe range, though."

Yuna was still watching.

Looking a little tense.

Her hands gripping the hem of her shirt.

...

"Now it's your turn, Yuna."

Yuna immediately stiffened.

"Eh..."

She sat down slowly.

Her legs dangling.

"Don't worry."

The woman smiled.

"It won't hurt."

Yuna gave a small nod.

But she remained cautious.

The cuff was wrapped around her arm.

Her eyes darted toward me.

I simply met her gaze.

In silence.

...

The pressure was released.

"Normal."

"Now for your height."

Yuna stood up.

Pressing her back flat against the scale.

"Keep your head straight."

Yuna tried to comply.

Looking a bit stiff.

"Don't stand on your tiptoes."

"Oh..."

She lowered her heels back down.

...

The number was recorded.

"Normal height."

Yuna gave a small smile.

Looking proud.

"Short."

Yuna's head whipped around.

"I'll be taller than you eventually, Papa. Hmph."

...

"Weight."

She stepped onto the scale.

The numbers appeared.

The woman checked the reading.

"You've been eating regularly?"

"Yes..."

Yuna answered quietly.

I interjected.

"Four times a day."

Yuna quickly shot me a glare.

"Papa!"

The woman let out a soft laugh.

"It's fine."

"Still perfectly normal."

...

"Now for a vision test."

She picked up an eye chart.

And held it out in front of her.

"Cover one eye."

Yuna covered her left eye.

"Read this."

"E..."

"The line below?"

"F... P..."

Sounding a little hesitant.

"Good."

"Switch eyes."

"Now?"

"Z... L...?"

"Yes."

She jotted it down.

"Vision is still normal."

"No need for glasses."

Yuna looked relieved.

...

"Now we'll just take a little blood."

Yuna immediately tensed up again.

"Eh..."

"Just kidding."

The woman returned to her paperwork.

A few seconds passed.

"Everything is normal."

...

Yuna let out a long breath.

"Are we done?"

"Yes."

She immediately broke into a small smile.

...

I stood up.

"Finished?"

"All done."

The woman handed over the results.

"You're both in good health."

"Except—"

She looked over at me.

"Cut back on the cigarettes."

I took the paper.

"Yeah."

—

We left the room.

And headed back to the front desk.

I picked up some basic medicine and vitamins.

Just in case.

I paid the bill.

"Thank you, Itsuki-san."

"Thank you too."

I gave a brief nod.

We turned around.

And exited the clinic.

The glass doors slid open.

Welcoming us back out into the open air.

—

We started walking again.

Yuna finally broke the silence.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Who was that?"

My pace remained steady.

"Clinic staff."

"That's not what I meant..."

Yuna stepped a little closer.

"She knew you, Papa."

"Because I come here often."

"Often?"

"A few times... a year."

"What for?"

"Checkups."

"Why do you need checkups?"

I gave her a fleeting glance.

"I don't necessarily have to. But..."

"If I get checked, I'll know."

"Whether I'm still normal or not."

"Papa..."

She sounded unhappy with that answer.

I let out a soft sigh.

"Just to be safe."

—

Our footsteps carried us forward.

The streetlights flickered to life one by one.

The sky was changing color.

Late afternoon fading into evening.

Up ahead—

The karaoke parlor from earlier.

We were approaching it again.

Its lights were even brighter now.

The music was clearer.

People were coming and going.

...

Yuna's footsteps slowed.

Then—

Stopped altogether.

"Papa..."

She turned to look at me.

Her eyes no longer held any hesitation.

—

*Chapter 104: The Song That Never Ends*

"Papa."

"What is it?"

Yuna didn't answer right away.

The karaoke parlor.

Its lights were bright.

The faint sound of music spilling out.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"I want to go to karaoke."

I turned my head.

And looked at her.

"Why all of a sudden?"

"If you want to sing, you can do that at home."

"I know..."

Yuna gently gripped the hem of her shirt.

"But... I want to."

I stayed silent for a moment.

Watching her.

"Oh..."

I turned around.

"Alright then."

"Let's go."

I immediately changed direction.

Heading toward the karaoke parlor.

Yuna froze for a second.

Her expression shifted instantly.

A little surprised.

A little happy.

"Eh... really?"

I didn't answer.

I just kept walking.

We went inside.

The air inside was different.

Cooler.

More fragrant.

Dim lights in soft colors.

"I'd like a room for one hour."

I looked over at Yuna.

"A coffee for me... and for you, Yuna?"

Yuna looked a bit nervous.

"Mm... iced milk."

I nodded.

And finished paying at the counter.

"Alright, right this way."

Click.

The door to the room opened.

We stepped inside.

The room wasn't large.

But it was enough.

A large screen at the front.

Two speakers on either side.

A long table in the middle.

And two sofas facing each other.

"Wow..."

Yuna stepped in slowly.

Her eyes wandering the room.

"It's spacious..."

"Yeah."

I took a seat.

"Not bad."

Yuna sat down across from me.

Still looking around.

Like a child in a brand-new place.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Have you ever been to karaoke before?"

"...Why not?"

I leaned back.

Staring straight ahead.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I have no interest in it."

"And no one's ever invited me."

I turned my head slightly.

"What about you?"

Yuna gave a small smile.

"Never."

"We're the same... hehe."

Click.

The door opened.

Carrying our drinks.

Coffee.

And iced milk.

They set them down on the table.

Then left.

Yuna immediately picked up her glass.

And took a slow sip.

I picked up my coffee.

Breathed in the aroma for a moment.

Then took a sip.

"...Not bad."

"Yeah..."

Yuna smiled.

"It's good."

Silence.

A few seconds passed.

I pulled out my phone.

Glanced at the screen.

The date.

The time.

The statistics.

For the novel that had been contracted.

The numbers were moving.

Going up.

The payment had come through.

"...Not bad."

I set the phone down.

Took another sip of coffee.

And looked ahead.

Was just sitting in silence.

Not singing.

Not picking a song.

Just looking around the room.

Taking a sip of her drink every now and then.

"Yuna."

"Yes, Papa?"

"What did you come here to do?"

Yuna fell silent.

For a moment.

"...To sing."

"And?"

"...I'm embarrassed."

I let out a soft laugh.

"Hahaha..."

"Embarrassed?"

Yuna lowered her head slightly.

"Alright..."

I reached for the tablet with the song list.

And started looking.

One by one.

Scrolling.

Nothing caught my eye.

"What song are you looking for, Papa?"

Yuna leaned in a little closer.

I stopped.

Paused for a moment.

There was nothing interesting.

I put the tablet down.

Picked up my phone.

And connected it to the system.

The screen lit up.

A title appeared.

( You can listen to the song here.

Link : <https://...> )

Yuna looked at the screen.

"Mm... what song is that, Papa?"

Hohooooooo...

Hohooooooo...

A male choir echoed from the sound system.

Low.

Deep.

Like it was coming from a vast, empty space.

The lyrics began to appear on the screen.

I picked up the mic.

Took a breath.

And started to sing.

Same old faces, every day born..."

A low voice.

A slow tempo.

Not high-pitched.

Not trying to sound beautiful.

Just... straight.

The music played on.

A steady rhythm, the kingdom's sweet sang..."

The song felt like a preparation for war.

Calm...

yet heavy with tension.

Iron gates rattled, beneath a dark sky..."

Like a war without end.

A kingdom.

That just keeps enduring.

Every morning, a new enemy stir..."

Against monster attacks that never ceased.

The atmosphere in the room shifted.

No one spoke.

Just the next wave of darkness..."

Quiet.

Somber.

The song ended.

Silence.

"Papa..."

Yuna's voice was soft.

"That was really good..."

"But... a little sad."

I set the mic down on the table.

"Thanks, but I'm nowhere near a pro."

I leaned back in my seat.

"Let alone someone like you... you have a singer's blood."

Yuna looked at me.

"So? Do you think..."

A slight hesitation.

"I can sing like Mother?"

I gave a small shrug.

"Something like that."

Yuna fell silent for a moment.

Then, her expression shifted.

A spark of excitement.

"Alright... I want to try too."

She picked up the mic.

Still a little hesitant.

"I... want to sing Mother's song..."

She selected a track.

The screen changed.

The music began.

Soft and gentle.

Title: "Searching and Waiting."

There is only one I reach for... that I seek..."

Yuna's voice rang out.

Higher.

Lighter.

I will keep walking... to reach you."

She sang with her heart.

But...

There is still a place... waiting for me to come home..."

It still felt like... she was just reciting from memory.

I will... keep stepping forward..."

The song ended.

Yuna slowly lowered the mic.

And looked at me.

"What did you think, Papa?"

I didn't answer right away.

I just looked at her.

...

"Pretty good."

Yuna's face brightened a little.

"You have a naturally good voice."

She gave a small smile.

"But..."

Her smile faltered.

"You still haven't figured out how to capture the mood of the song."

Yuna stayed quiet.

"You're just... singing it cheerfully."

I reached for a glass.

"Going entirely off memory."

I took a sip of the drink.

"And you aren't stepping into the song at all."

Yuna stared at the floor for a moment.

Reflecting.

"Oh... how did you know that, Papa?"

"I worked behind the scenes for a long time."

I set the glass back down.

"You should know that."

"Mm... I understand..."

My throat felt a little dry.

I reached for Yuna's glass again.

And took a small sip.

Yuna immediately noticed.

"Just a little bit, Papa... don't finish it. That's mine."

"We'll buy another one later."

I handed it back to her.

Yuna stayed quiet for a second.

Then... she reached for my coffee.

And took a sip.

I just threw her a passing glance.

And didn't say a word.

"By the way, Papa..."

Yuna was still holding her glass.

Looking at me.

"My friends... invited me to go to karaoke."

She paused for a moment.

"Can I go?"

I didn't answer right away.

Just looked at her.

...

"Will there be an adult accompanying you?"

"Yes."

Yuna nodded quickly.

"My friend's older sister is coming too."

I took a slow breath.

"Hm..."

"In that case... alright."

"Yay..."

Her voice was small.

Almost a whisper.

But her tone lifted.

"Thank you, Papa."

She immediately grabbed the tablet.

Her eyes lighting up again.

"Papa, listen closely."

She turned her head quickly.

"Teach me how to sing well."

I raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Why the sudden request..."

"Isn't it obvious?"

She looked back at the screen.

"So I don't embarrass myself when I sing later."

I leaned back.

"Alright then..."

Yuna started again.

One song.

Then another.

Sometimes stopping in the middle.

Repeating certain parts.

"Papa, how about this one?"

"You ran out of breath there."

"Oh..."

She tried again.

"And that time?"

"Don't rush it."

Yuna nodded.

Looking serious.

Time passed.

Without us realizing.

One hour.

Gone by.

Added another hour.

Then another.

I didn't say much.

Just sat there.

Listening.

Correcting her every now and then.

Yuna kept trying.

Her voice began to change.

Becoming more stable.

Little by little.

Finally.

We headed out.

The door to the karaoke parlor opened.

The outside air felt different.

Cooler.

More breathable.

We walked.

Side by side.

"Papa..."

"Hm?"

"That was fun."

She stared straight ahead.

"Let's go to karaoke again sometime."

"If you just want to sing... you can do that at home."

"But it's different."

Yuna answered immediately.

"The sound is so much clearer here."

She turned her head slightly.

"You'll come with me again, right?"

I let out a short sigh.

"Just go with your friends."

Yuna pouted a little.

"Going with friends is one thing..."

She looked straight ahead again.

"But going with you is different, Papa."

I stayed silent for a moment.

"Alright... alright..."

I threw her a glance.

"But not too often."

"Why not?"

"I prefer staying at home."

"Oh..."

Yuna fell silent.

Thinking.

Her pace slowed slightly.

"So..."

She started speaking again.

"Is that why you only go shopping once a week?"

"And..."

Yuna continued.

"Is that also why we're going to so many places at once today?"

I gave a small nod.

"Pretty much."

Yuna looked like she was piecing something together in her head.

Like small puzzle pieces finally fitting into place.

We kept walking.

Up ahead.

An electronics store.

The building looked old.

Its paint slightly faded.

Its lights dim.

I stopped for a moment.

Looking toward it.

I changed direction.

Yuna didn't ask any questions.

She just followed along.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

*Chapter 105: Report Card Day*

We stepped inside.

A small bell above the door chimed softly.

Ding.

Inside...

The place was clean.

Tidy.

But the lighting wasn't as bright as a modern store.

The fluorescent lights were white...

slightly dim.

Giving the place an aged feel.

The shelves were fully stocked.

Packed with electronics.

Some looked brand new.

But most of them...

Were older models.

"Welcome."

A male clerk approached us.

His pace relaxed.

"Looking for anything in particular? I can help."

I took a quick glance at the rows of shelves.

Then looked back at him.

"I'm looking for a PlayStation 2."

...

"And an AV player that supports older TVs."

The clerk's face immediately broke into a smile.

"Ahh..."

He nodded.

"Alright, sir. Let me go find them for you."

Sir?

Do I really look that old?

Whatever.

The clerk walked off.

To start searching.

I turned to Yuna.

She was wandering between the shelves.

Her eyes darting from one item to the next.

Looking a little confused.

"Papa..."

"Hm?"

"What kind of place is this?"

"This place..."

"Is a cross-generational electronics store."

"Cross-generational?"

"Yeah."

I pointed at the shelves.

"Here..."

"You can find stuff from way back when... all the way up to now."

Yuna took another look.

More closely this time.

"And the prices are cheap."

Yuna immediately turned to me.

"Why is it cheap?"

"Shouldn't it be expensive?"

She furrowed her brow.

"Since it's all old stuff... like antiques..."

I shook my head.

"Because this isn't a place for collectors."

Yuna fell silent.

Processing the thought.

A short while later.

The clerk returned.

In his hands.

A PlayStation 2.

Slightly dusty.

Along with a few other devices.

"Is this what you were looking for, sir?"

I looked at it.

And nodded.

"Yes."

"Alright, let me test it for you first."

He immediately started sorting the cables.

Hooking it up to a small TV on the counter.

The screen lit up.

The PS2 logo appeared.

Yuna instantly leaned in closer.

Her eyes lit up.

"Whoa..."

"What is this, Papa?"

She pointed at the console.

"It's for playing games."

"What kind of games?"

I thought for a moment.

"Lots of them."

The clerk tested the controller.

Navigating through the menus.

Everything ran smoothly.

The PS2 was working.

Perfectly fine.

He tested the AV player next.

The disc read properly.

The flash drive too.

A video appeared on the screen.

The audio came through clear.

Every function worked just fine.

"Everything's in working order, sir."

I gave a nod.

I walked over to the section with the controllers.

"Pick one."

Yuna looked them over.

There were a few different colors.

Black.

Grey.

Red.

Pink.

Her hand stopped on one.

"This one."

The pink one.

I grabbed a black one.

"Quite the contrast."

Yuna gave a small smile.

We moved over to the games section.

Rows of game cases lined the shelves.

Older box art.

Bursting with color.

Yuna picked one up.

Examining it.

"Papa... what's this?"

I glanced over.

"That's a game."

"How do you play it?"

I picked up another case.

"I'll teach you later."

Yuna gripped the case a little tighter.

"Can I pick some out?"

"Go ahead."

She immediately started looking through them, one by one.

Her expression entirely serious.

I picked out a few games right away.

Without hesitation.

Then went back to stand beside Yuna.

Watching her choose.

Judging entirely by the covers.

"This one looks fun."

A short while later.

We gathered a small stack of games.

And returned to the counter.

"Your total comes to this much, sir."

I paid.

The items were packed into a plastic bag.

It looked completely stuffed.

Heavy.

And bulging with sharp corners.

I picked it up.

We headed out.

The door opened.

Ding.

The cold night air greeted us.

Yuna walked closely beside me.

Glancing occasionally at the bag in my hand.

"Papa..."

"Hm?"

"Make sure you teach me how to play later."

"I will."

Yuna gave a small smile.

Our footsteps fell into sync once more.

As we made our way home.

A few days later.

Yuna and I walked along the sidewalk.

Our steps were slow.

Heading toward the school.

The morning air felt light.

Not too cold.

Not too hot.

Today...

was report card day.

"Papa."

"Hm?"

"If my grades turn out bad..."

Yuna stared straight ahead.

"It's your fault."

I turned to her immediately.

"My fault? How come?"

"Because..."

She shot me a quick glance.

"You stopped me from studying the night before the exams."

"That was so you wouldn't get too tired."

"Whatever you say."

Yuna quickened her step a little.

"Either way, it's your fault if they're bad."

I let out a small sigh.

We arrived.

The school gates were open.

We stepped inside.

A long corridor.

The sound of footsteps.

The chatter of parents.

"Which class is yours?"

"That one."

Yuna pointed ahead.

I followed her.

We reached it.

Yuna's classroom.

Inside...

there were already a few parents.

And their children.

Most of them...

were mothers.

Yuna suddenly waved.

From inside the classroom.

Two girls waved back.

Her friends.

The ones who occasionally came over to the house.

Though I still didn't know their names.

I picked an empty seat.

At the very back.

I sat down.

Yuna sat to my right.

To my left...

was an older man.

"Good morning."

He turned to me.

"Ah, morning to you too."

I glanced at the little kid next to him.

A boy.

"Is he your grandson?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"He's my grandson."

"Oh..."

I leaned back slightly.

"By the way... how old are you?"

"Fifty-five."

I turned to Yuna.

"Look."

I gestured slightly.

"This grandpa..."

"Is fifty-five... and he still managed to come here as a guardian."

Yuna immediately sat up straight.

Giving a small bow.

"You look very healthy."

The man laughed.

"Hahaha... thank you."

The room grew quiet again.

A few names were called.

One by one.

Before long.

"Nishida Yuna."

I stood up immediately.

Yuna did too.

"I'll go on ahead, Grandpa."

Yuna turned to the older man.

"Alright."

He nodded.

We walked to the front of the classroom.

The teacher was already seated.

With a file in hand.

I took the seat in front.

Yuna sat beside me.

The report card rested on the desk.

Unopened.

The teacher looked at us.

Ready to speak.

The teacher in front of me.

Yuna's homeroom teacher.

Her face was familiar.

She had come to our house that one time...

I'd forgotten her name.

I ended up staring at her for a few seconds too long.

Just trying to remember what her name was.

"It's been a while, Nishida-san."

"Yeah... I suppose."

She reached for the report card on the desk.

She opened it slowly.

She turned the page.

Her eyes scanned the numbers for a moment.

Then, she gave a small nod.

"Your daughter's grades... are excellent."

I leaned forward a little.

To take a look.

Neat rows of numbers.

85... 88... 90...

98.

"Hm..."

"Thank you."

I looked over to my side.

"See, Yuna."

"What did I tell you."

Yuna leaned in to look as well.

Her eyes instantly lit up.

Her lips parted slightly.

Proud.

"If only you'd let me study harder, Papa..."

"Maybe I would've gotten a 100."

"Haha..."

A dry laugh escaped my lips.

"They probably would've just gone down."

"Eh?! No way."

Yuna shot me a sharp glare.

The teacher watched the two of us.

Then, she spoke up.

"Why don't you let Yuna study harder?"

Her tone was gentle, but firm.

"As a parent, you should be supporting her."

Ah.

Here we go.

"The teacher's right."

"You need to support me, Papa."

I let out a short sigh.

"Haha... listen, Sensei."

The teacher stayed quiet.

Giving me room to speak.

"Is it really right for me to let this child study late into the night?"

I turned slightly toward Yuna.

"Should I just let her sit there, completely losing track of time?"

I looked back at the teacher.

"Out of the question."

"Because her health is more important."

The room grew a little quiet.

The teacher turned to Yuna.

"Is that true, Yuna?"

Yuna gave a slow nod.

"It is..."

"Papa often stops me from studying for too long."

"Especially before exams... he just tells me to go to bed early."

I wasn't really paying attention anymore.

My gaze drifted.

To the wall.

White paint.

A little faded in the corners.

There was a framed class photo.

And a piece of paper.

Handwritten.

Cleaning roster.

...

My eyes stopped.

Saturday.

Yuna.

The teacher spoke again.

"Yuna..."

"Your father is right."

Yuna's head snapped up.

"You're allowed to study."

"But don't stay up too late."

"Don't forget to eat."

"What matters most... is your health."

Her tone was soft.

She raised a hand.

Gently patting Yuna's head.

Yuna looked down a little.

Pouting.

"You're just like Papa, Sensei..."

The teacher gave a small smile.

"If you get sick..."

"You won't be able to come to school."

"And then..."

She glanced over at me.

"You'll just end up making things difficult for your father."

Yuna fell silent.

Slowly.

She turned to look at me.

Her eyes softened.

"Papa... I'm sorry."

I gave a slight shrug.

"No need."

"You're the one who'd get sick, not me."

The teacher closed the report card.

Pointed to the bottom.

"Well then, Nishida-san."

"Please sign here."

I nodded.

Picked up the pen.

Signed my name.

Quickly.

Without a second thought.

The report card was pushed toward me.

I took it.

The teacher looked at me.

"Yuna is a smart girl."

"You really must support her."

I met her gaze.

For a few seconds.

Then turned to Yuna.

"You heard her, Yuna."

"You're smart."

Yuna gave a small nod.

"So..."

I continued.

"You don't need to study at home."

Silence.

The teacher reacted immediately.

"You can't say that."

Her tone was a bit firmer now.

"Studying at home is still important."

I stood up.

"Alright, thank you."

"Let's go, Yuna."

The teacher stood up as well.

"Thank you as well."

"For taking the time to come."

"Have a safe trip home."

Yuna quickly got to her feet.

Bowed respectfully.

"Thank you, Sensei."

We turned around.

And walked out of the classroom.

Slow footsteps down the corridor.

The faint sound of other people talking.

The report card was in my hand.

Yuna walked beside me.

Silent.

"Papa..."

I didn't look at her right away.

"Hm?"

"If I had gotten a 100..."

She paused for a moment.

"What would you have said?"

I glanced her way.

"Hm..."

I thought about it for a second.

Then answered.

"I'd still tell you to go to bed early."

Yuna fell silent.

...

Then let out a long sigh.

"You're so weird, Papa..."

Chapter 106: Beef.

—

Semester exams were over.

Report cards had been handed out.

Summer vacation... had finally begun.

—

I opened my eyes slowly.

The ceiling.

The morning air felt a little chilly.

I turned my head to the side.

The futon next to me was already empty.

Folded.

Neatly.

I lifted my head a little.

Yuna.

She was sitting.

In front of the small table.

Still in her pajamas. Her hair wasn't brushed yet.

On the table, her report card lay open.

She was staring at it.

No wide smile. No over-the-top reactions.

But from the look in her eyes.

It was clear enough.

She was proud.

"Yuna..."

She didn't look back.

"What time is it?"

"Mm..."

"...half past six."

"Oh..."

I dropped my head back onto the pillow.

Still too early.

I shifted to my side, pulled the blanket up a little, and closed my eyes again.

—

"Papa."

I didn't open my eyes.

"Don't go back to sleep."

"Let's play the PS2."

"Go play by yourself..."

...

"Papa..."

Her tone dropped.

A little disappointed.

I took a deep breath.

Just as I was about to sink completely back into sleep—

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang.

I didn't open my eyes.

"...Yuna."

Before I could even finish speaking, she was already up.

Her quick, small footsteps headed for the door.

I heard the sound of the lock clicking open.

The door opened.

—

"Is this the Nishida residence?"

I sighed, forcing myself up.

By the door—

Yuna looked back.

"Papa! It's a package."

A package?

I paused for a moment.

I didn't recall ordering anything.

I walked over, my steps still heavy. Hair a mess, eyes half-closed.

"Yawn..."

I let out a long yawn as I reached the door.

—

"Nishida-san?"

"Yes, that's me."

The man held out a large box to me.

I took it.

Heavy.

Heavier than it looked.

"Please sign here."

He handed me a small clipboard and a pen.

I took them, then signed my name without a second thought.

I caught a quick glimpse of the label.

Sender: Kuroda Seiji.

Receiver: Nishida Itsuki.

My hand stopped for a fraction of a second.

"Oh..."

I handed the pen back.

"Thank you."

The man gave a light bow and left.

I closed the door slowly.

Behind me—

"Who is it from?" Yuna asked.

I stared at the box for a moment.

"Your father."

"From you, Papa?"

"No."

"I didn't order anything. It's from Seiji-san."

"Oh."

A short response.

No enthusiasm.

A little different from usual.

I placed the box on the table.

Yuna grabbed a kitchen knife, then handed it to me without a word.

I took it.

I started cutting the packing tape.

The faint sound of tearing plastic filled the room.

Opened.

I stopped.

Yuna leaned in closer.

Inside—

Beef.

A lot of it.

Neatly arranged in layers, complete with premium-grade labels that I didn't even need to read to know the price was absurd.

We both stayed quiet.

Staring at the contents of the box.

"Beef..." Yuna muttered.

"...so much of it."

She looked up at me.

"Can you cook this, Papa?"

"I can."

"...But I'll look up how to cook it on the internet first."

...

"That just means you don't know how."

I glanced toward the kitchen.

Barebones equipment.

Incomplete.

A regular frying pan, a regular pot.

And a small stove.

Clearly, a lack of cooking utensils.

I looked back at the meat.

If I mess up... the cooking.

It'd be such a waste.

"How about we bring it to Mika's place?"

I turned to look at her.

"Who's Mika?"

"My friend."

"She has an older brother who works at a restaurant."

"Oh..."

Makes sense.

I looked at the box again.

Then the kitchen.

Then the box again.

Ingredients this expensive shouldn't be cooked by an amateur.

But...

showing up at someone's house this early in the morning...

Feels a bit impolite.

I let out a soft sigh.

But still—

it'd be a bigger loss if this went to waste.

Hm, alright.

—

"Let's go, Yuna."

She immediately turned her head.

"Go get ready."

"We're going to your friend's place... Mi— who was it again?"

"Mika, Papa. Mika."

"Right, right." I gave a small nod.

"Mika."

—

Summer had just begun.

The morning air already felt warm, but it wasn't sweltering yet.

The outskirts of town.

Not too crowded. Not too quiet.

In the distance—

stood the apartment building where I lived.

Towering high.

Just me, and Yuna by my side.

And the box in my hands.

Reaching an intersection—

Yuna stopped for a moment, then pointed to the left.

"This way, Papa."

I followed her.

"Do you come here often?"

"Not a lot, just a few times."

"Oh..."

We kept walking.

Past a few residential blocks.

The neighborhood gradually began to change.

The single-story houses were replaced by more modern, two-story homes.

Iron gates.

Pristine walls.

Paint that still looked brand new.

Yuna finally stopped.

I stopped behind her.

In front of me—

stood a row of two-story houses with uniform designs. Neat. Almost too neat.

I looked down at Yuna.

"Yuna..."

She looked back slightly.

"Are you sure this is the right house?"

"I'm sure, Papa."

Her tone was confident.

She stepped forward.

Standing slightly on her tiptoes to reach the doorbell.

Press.

—

We waited.

Shortly after—

Click.

The door opened.

A woman appeared.

She had short hair. Not exactly neat, but not messy either.

A loose T-shirt. Shorts.

Simple.

I stared at her for a moment.

...

Not bad.

Her eyes immediately landed on Yuna.

"Oh, Yuna."

Her voice was light, familiar.

She walked straight to the gate and opened it.

She looked at me.

"And you must be... Yuna's father."

I nodded.

"Yes."

"Please, come in."

Yuna and I stepped inside.

Past the iron gate.

A small, clean front yard.

Then into the house.

The moment we walked in—

the difference was immediately apparent.

Cream-colored walls.

White ceilings.

Gleaming tile floors.

Everything was in order.

Not a single thing looked out of place.

I walked further inside.

Cold.

The tile floor felt cold.

The air inside was cool, carrying that distinct, crisp scent of air conditioning.

...A far cry from my place...

We reached the living room.

"I'm sorry, my parents are at work," she said, looking back at us.

"That's not a problem."

"I just need a bit of help."

"Please, take a seat."

"Thank you."

I sat down on the sofa.

Yuna immediately sat down next to me.

This sofa was too soft.

I adjusted my posture slightly.

"What kind of help did you need?"

I didn't answer right away.

I placed the box on the table.

Gently.

Then, I opened it.

Pulled back the plastic wrapping.

The contents were immediately revealed.

Premium-grade beef.

A whole lot of it.

"..."

The woman leaned in a little.

"Whoa..."

An honest reaction.

Then, she looked up.

"...But I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"You're lying."

Yuna immediately cut in.

"I've tried your cooking before."

"It was really delicious."

The woman turned to Yuna, then gave a faint smile.

"Yuna..."

Her tone was half-resigned.

"Alright, alright..."

She let out a small sigh.

Then she looked back at me.

"So, how would you like this cooked?"

I looked back down at the meat.

To be honest—

I had no idea.

"I'll leave it to you."

"I don't really know much about cooking."

"Alright then."

She stood up right away.

Beside me—

"Where's Mika? I don't see her."

"Oh, Mika?" she answered, walking slowly.

"She's still asleep."

She paused for a moment.

"Could you go wake her up?"

"Okay!"

Yuna stood up immediately.

Without waiting a second.

She hurried toward the stairs.

The sound of her small footsteps faded up to the second floor.

I watched her go for a moment.

Then—

"You can wait here," the woman said.

She had already started walking away, carrying the meat.

Heading deeper into the house.

—

I stood up.

"May I help?"

She looked back.

A little surprised.

Then she gave a faint smile.

"Ah... thank you."

—

In front of a bedroom door—

Yuna stood still.

She raised her hand, then knocked softly.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

"Mika..."

No answer.

She waited a moment.

Silence.

"Still asleep..."

she muttered softly.

Yuna stepped a bit closer to the door.

"Mika, I'm coming in."

She pressed down on the door handle.

The door simply opened.

Unlocked.

No loud creak—just a soft scrape.

She stepped inside.

The room was still dark.

The window curtains were drawn tight, leaving only a thin sliver of light at the edges.

The air inside felt warm, slightly stuffy—different from the cool air downstairs.

In the middle of the room—

stood a bed.

The sheets were slightly rumpled.

On it, Mika was still asleep, her body half-wrapped in a blanket.

The bedside lamp was off.

Silence.

Yuna just stood there.

Watching.

. . .

Then she walked over to the window.

She pulled the curtains back—

Swish.

The morning sunlight instantly poured in.

Bright.

Too bright for a room that had just been dark.

Through the window—

the cityscape sprawled open. Rooftops, narrow streets, and a sky that was just starting to clear.

On the bed—

Mika reacted.

She scrunched up her face, then rolled over, turning her back to the light.

Trying to escape the morning.

"Mika, wake up."

No clear response.

Yuna stepped closer.

And stood beside the bed.

"Mika."

She reached out.

Gently shaking Mika's shoulder.

Once.

Twice.

No result.

Yuna stopped.

Thinking for a moment.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if weighing her options.

Then she leaned down.

Getting close to Mika's ear.

Her voice dropped even softer.

Almost like a whisper pressed directly against it.

"Mika..."

...

"Mika..."

"Wake up..."

Still no reaction.

Yuna took a small breath.

Then—

Fuuu...

She blew gently into Mika's ear.

The reaction was instantaneous.

Mika's hand shot up reflexively.

Scratching her ear with a half-awake, annoyed expression.

"Mika."

Yuna called out again, this time in a normal voice.

Not long after—

Mika's eyes slowly fluttered open.

Her focus hadn't entirely returned yet.

Then—

she saw Yuna.

Her expression quickly changed.

"Yuna?!"

She shot up, sitting straight up in bed.

Her hair was a messy tangle, sticking out in every direction.

"Since when have you been here?!"

"Just now."

Mika rubbed her face.

Slowly.

"Who did you come here with?"

"With Papa."

"Hoooh..."

Mika let out a long sigh.

"My sister must've been surprised."

Yuna looked at her.

"Hm? Why?"

Mika narrowed her eyes a little.

The corner of her lips lifted slightly.

"Who knows..."

"...my instincts just tell me so."

—

*Chapter 107: Beef. 2*

Our footsteps came to a halt in the kitchen.

This room...

It was larger than I had expected.

It wasn't just your ordinary home kitchen.

A long island counter sat in the middle. The surface was clean, almost gleaming.

Along the wall—rows of cooking utensils hung neatly.

Knives of various sizes.

Pans.

Pots.

Metal ladles lined up like a display.

Everything was in order.

As if every object had its own designated place.

I stood a few paces back.

The box of meat from earlier was already open on the counter.

A few cuts had been taken out.

The color was a vivid, fresh red.

The woman walked over to one side of the kitchen.

She picked up an apron.

Lifting the straps, she slipped it on from the front.

The fabric draped perfectly against her figure.

It looked simple.

In my eyes.

It looked stunning.

It suited her perfectly.

...

The thought just sprang into my mind out of nowhere.

I immediately furrowed my brow.

I shook my head slowly.

Not enough.

I raised a hand to my own cheek.

\*Smack!\*

A light slap, but the sound echoed clearly in the room.

The woman whipped her head around.

"What's wrong?!"

I felt the heat rising in my face.

"It's nothing."

I averted my gaze.

Focus.

I need to focus.

The body is merely a vessel.

The soul is what matters.

...

that exact phrase only made my thoughts spiral further out of control.

An image flashed in my mind.

Vividly clear.

As if I had truly lived it.

The same kitchen.

But it felt... warmer.

More alive.

She was standing in front of me.

Trying to put on an apron.

her hands were struggling to reach behind her back.

Falling short.

She let out a soft sigh.

"Darling... could you help me?"

Her voice was gentle.

"Your hands can't reach, as usual."

I stepped closer.

Right behind her.

The distance between us was close.

Too close.

My hands grasped the apron strings.

Tying them.

Slowly.

the kitchen door opened.

Yuna stood there.

"Papa... Mama..."

Her voice was quiet.

"...what's for breakfast today?"

She turned her head.

Slowly.

Her eyes met mine.

she smiled.

Gentle.

Warm.

A faint curve graced her lips.

"Hehe... Darling..."

"...what should we cook today?"

Her soft chuckle.

It felt so comforting.

...

"Hey... sir?"

A touch.

Light.

A single finger pressed against my chest.

I jolted slightly.

The world that had just felt so warm—shattered in an instant.

Back.

To the kitchen.

To the harsh white light.

To the soft hum of the AC.

Mika's older sister stood very close.

Her hand was still reaching out.

Her fingertip touching my chest, as if checking to see if I was really there.

"What's wrong?"

"Are you alright?"

I took a short breath.

"...Ha."

This isn't good.

I shook my head quickly.

A little too quickly.

"I'm fine."

Don't get swept up in the moment.

Don't get any strange ideas.

Don't hope.

"Sorry... do you mind if I smoke in here?"

She raised an eyebrow slightly, then nodded.

"Yes, of course."

"My dad is a smoker too. So there's no need to hold back."

"Thank you."

I rolled my sleeves up to my elbows.

A small movement, but enough to buy me a brief pause.

She walked to the other side of the kitchen.

And picked up a book.

It was quite thick.

And the cover was a little worn.

A cookbook.

I took a cigarette out of my pocket.

Slipped it between my lips.

Click.

A small flame flickered to life.

I took a drag.

The first plume of smoke drifted out slowly.

Rising upward.

Vanishing into the vent.

I felt a little calmer.

"So?" she asked, opening the book.

"What are we going to cook?"

"Hm..."

She turned a few pages, then stopped.

"Take a look at this."

I stepped closer.

Standing beside her.

Close enough to clearly see the contents of the page.

A picture of meat.

Perfectly grilled.

Steak.

Below it—an ingredients list.

Followed by neat step-by-step instructions.

"Yeah..." I nodded slowly.

"This one is fine."

She didn't respond immediately.

She just turned to the next page.

"How about this one?"

Another picture.

Still meat.

A different technique.

"This one works too."

Next page.

"And this one?"

"Hm... not bad."

She stopped.

She didn't turn any more pages.

Slowly, she closed the book.

Then she turned to look at me.

Staring at me flatly.

"Honestly... what do you actually want?"

"I showed you several options."

"Why do you keep answering like that?"

I fell silent for a moment.

A wisp of smoke escaped slowly from my lips.

"Well... what can I say."

"I'm really not good at making choices."

"They all look... decent."

She crossed her arms.

Observing me for a few seconds longer.

Not judging.

More like trying to understand.

"In that case..."

"what are we going to cook?"

I turned my gaze toward the counter.

The pile of meat was still there.

A lot of it.

Too much for just one type of dish.

"What if..." I paused for a second.

"...we just make all of them?"

She followed my line of sight.

Looked at the meat.

Then back to me.

"Yeah... there's definitely enough meat for that."

She opened the book again briefly.

Skimmed through it.

Then closed it.

She walked over to the fridge.

Opened it.

Closed it again.

Then walked back.

"We don't have enough ingredients."

"I'll go buy them."

I reached into my pocket.

Checking.

Wallet.

It's there.

She tilted her head slightly.

"Do you even know what you're supposed to buy?"

I stared back at her.

"I'm coming with you."

She untied the apron from her body.

Her movements were quick.

Practical.

"Yeah, I suppose you'll have to."

I turned around first.

Stepped out of the kitchen.

She followed behind me.

"Mika...!" she called out.

"I'm heading out for a bit!"

"Okay, sis!"

I didn't stop.

My steps continued toward the door.

her footsteps kept following mine.

We stepped out of the house.

She slowly pulled the door shut until it was tightly closed.

Click.

Then she turned around, walking through the gate.

She pushed it open, then pulled it shut again with a soft metallic sound.

Clink.

We started walking.

Side by side.

Our paces matched perfectly, neither of us taking the lead.

Neither of us falling behind.

The air outside felt warmer now.

The sun had risen higher.

The sounds of the neighborhood began to drift in—a door opening, a passing vehicle, the distant murmur of voices.

"By the way..." she said quietly.

I glanced over slightly.

"Where is Yuna's mother now?"

I didn't stop walking.

"...Yuna's mother..."

"I have no idea."

"I don't know where she is right now."

...

A brief silence.

"I'm sorry..."

"I didn't mean to bring up something uncomfortable."

"It's fine."

"I don't really think about it anymore either."

We kept walking.

A few steps later.

"It must be hard."

I turned my head slightly.

She kept looking straight ahead.

"Raising Yuna all by yourself."

"I can't even imagine..."

She raised a hand slightly.

Counting on her fingers.

"Making meals every day, washing her clothes, cleaning the house, working..."

"...and so many other things."

I stopped.

By reflex.

She stopped as well.

"I don't always make her meals."

She turned back.

And met my gaze.

"Yuna cooks for herself... sometimes."

...

"I don't wash her clothes either."

"She washes them herself."

...

"As for cleaning..."

"sometimes she's the one who does it."

...

Silence.

We looked at each other.

A brief breeze passed by.

Gently swaying the tips of her hair.

"I suppose..."

"...it's not as hard as you imagine."

She didn't answer right away.

Her expression shifted.

Growing a little more serious.

"Hold on..."

She held up a hand, as if to pause the conversation.

"Let me process this."

I waited.

Then...

She took a deep breath.

And exhaled slowly.

"Since when..."

"...has Yuna been without her mother?"

I thought for a moment.

"Probably..."

"...since she was about nine."

"So before that..."

"Yuna was still being taken care of by her mom?"

"Yes."

"And after that..."

"...she started becoming independent?"

I nodded.

"More or less."

She lowered her head a little.

And started walking again.

I resumed my pace as well.

Not long after.

She spoke up again.

"You're a good parent."

I glanced at her.

She wasn't looking at me.

Her eyes were still fixed on the road ahead.

"Your daughter is still young."

"Around the same age as my little sister."

She paused for a moment.

"...but... she's already capable of living like that."

I smiled a little.

Faintly.

"Yeah... I suppose."

I shifted my gaze forward.

"But..."

She glanced over slightly.

"Every child is different."

Our footsteps remained in sync.

"You can't compare everyone to Yuna."

...

"Not every child has to be like her."

...

She fell silent.

For a few paces.

Then she nodded slowly.

"I understand."

Her voice sounded softer now.

"You're right..."

Her expression seemed gentler.

Calmer.

"Every child is different..."

...

"...and as a parent..."

I glanced at her.

She continued.

"...all you can do is give them your best."

"Yeah..."

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 108: Beef. 3

~~~ • ~~~

We arrived at a convenience store.

The glass doors opened automatically as we approached.

Ding.

A blast of cold air immediately greeted us from inside.

A stark contrast to the heat outside.

We stepped in.

Bright white lights.

Neatly arranged shelves.

Soft music played from the speakers.

A few other customers walked around leisurely, picking up items without a word.

She grabbed a shopping cart.

Then handed it to me.

I took it.

And pushed it.

—

We walked through the aisles.

She was in front.

I was behind.

When she stopped—

I stopped.

When she walked—

I followed.

...Like an assistant.

—  
She stopped in the produce section.

Picked up two cabbages.

One in her left hand.

One in her right hand.

She held them up slightly, inspecting them both with a serious expression.

"Which one do you think?"

I stared at her for a moment.

Here we go again.

I let out a quiet sigh.

"Wouldn't you know better?"

"I want to hear your opinion."

"Just answer."

I looked at the two cabbages.

There was no difference.

Or maybe there was, but I didn't care.

"The right one."

She raised her right hand slightly.

"This one?"

"Yeah."

She brought it closer to her face.

Inspecting it more closely.

For a few seconds.

Then—

she put it back on the shelf.

"Your choice wasn't very good."

"This one is better."

She placed the other cabbage into the cart.

I stared at her flatly.

If she already knew the answer—

why ask me?

"Haa..."

I let out a soft sigh.

We continued walking.

The cart began to fill up.

Vegetables.

Some seasonings.

And things I didn't even know the names of.

We stopped again.

In front of the carrots.

She stood in silence longer this time.

Observing.

As if it were a crucial decision.

I stepped closer.

Took a quick look.

Carrots.

Straight.

Plump.

I grabbed a few.

Without saying a word.

And tossed them straight into the cart.

She glanced over.

"Good choice."

I gave a small nod.

"Thanks."

Not long after that—

we were finished.

The cart was fairly full.

We headed to the checkout.

A female cashier was standing there.

She glanced at the two of us.

Looking a bit curious.

"You two usually come in separately..." she said as she started scanning the items.

"Why are you suddenly shopping together?"

I turned my head to the side.

Mika's sister turned her head as well.

We looked at each other.

For a brief moment.

"!?"

I was a little surprised.

I didn't remember ever seeing her here before.

"You usually shop here too?"

The cashier smiled faintly.

Watching the two of us.

"Yes. But only once a week."

"Oh..."

The items continued to be scanned.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

The cashier glanced at the contents of the cart again.

"That's quite a lot of groceries."

"Is there a special occasion?"

"Not really."

Her answer was brief.

The total appeared on the screen.

I immediately took out my wallet.

And paid.

The transaction was complete.

The groceries were packed into large plastic bags.

Several bags.

I took all of them.

Heavy.

"Thank you," the cashier said.

Ding.

The doors slid open.

The hot air welcomed us back.

I adjusted my grip.

Plastic bags in both of my hands.

And she walked beside me.

Without carrying a single thing.

...

I glanced at her.

She pretended not to notice.

We started walking home.

—

We arrived at the house.

She took the lead.

Opened the gate.

Then the door.

"I'm home."

We stepped inside.

The moment we passed through the door—  
a familiar sound immediately greeted us.

The sound of the television.

An anime broadcast.

Magic sound effects.

And—

three girls' voices calling out to each other.

We walked past the living room.

There—

the large flat-screen TV glowed brightly.

In front of it, three little kids were sitting.

Yuna.

And two of her friends.

Yuna turned her head first.

Spotting us.

"Welcome back, Papa... Miss..."

"I'm back, Yuna—" she answered casually, before her eyes widened a fraction.

"Oh... Hana is here too."

One of the girls beside Yuna immediately turned around.

She sat up straight, then gave a polite little bow.

"Hello, Miss..."

Her voice was well-mannered.

A little stiff.

On the screen—

an anime character was preparing to attack.

"Hey, Yuna! Look at this!"

Mika's voice.

Yuna immediately snapped her attention back to the TV.

"Fireball!!"

Mika shouted in unison with the character on screen unleashing their magic.

"Star Slash!!"

The other girl chimed in enthusiastically.

The three of them immediately burst into cheers.

Their voices filled the living room.

I stopped for a moment.

Watching the scene.

...

Lively.

Much livelier than I had imagined.

Then I started walking again.

Following her to the kitchen.

The sounds of the anime slowly faded behind us.

"Does Mika visit your home often?" she asked as we walked.

"Yeah."

I placed the grocery bags on the counter.

"I apologize if she is causing any trouble."

"It's no problem."

"It's actually a good thing."

She walked over to the sink.

"Yuna gets to have friends at home."

"That is true... if they weren't around..."

She glanced slightly toward the living room.

"...this house would definitely be too quiet."

I opened the grocery bags.

Taking out the contents one by one.

She washed her hands.

I followed suit right after.

The water ran.

Cold.

We finished at almost the same time.

She grabbed an apron.

Putting it on just like before.

Then—

"Here."

She held something out to me.

An apron.

I looked at it.

It was pink.

With a picture of a cat on it.

...

I took it.

And put it on.

The fit was fine.

But—

when I tried to tie it in the back—

I couldn't quite reach.

"...Hm."

My hands paused in midair.

"Turn around."

I complied.

Turning my back to her.

Her footsteps approached.

I could feel the distance between us.

Close.

Her hands grabbed the strings of the apron.

Tying them.

Slowly.

Her movements were light.

Practiced.

"...Done."

I turned back around.

She stared at me.

Then—

her mouth twitched.

Trying to hold something in.

"Pfft—"

She covered her mouth.

But it was no use.

"...it doesn't suit you at all."

I gave her a deadpan look.

"Function over aesthetics."

She nodded quickly.

"Yes, true..."

Then she looked at me again.

"...but it still really doesn't suit you."

I tugged at the apron slightly.

"I'll just take it off, then."

"No need."

She answered quickly.

Firmly.

She finally stopped laughing.

Catching her breath.

"By the way..."

She straightened her posture slightly.

"I am Misaki. Suzuki Misaki."

She held out her hand.

I looked at it for a moment.

Then shook it.

Her hand.

It was a little rough.

Not as soft as it looked.

But still—

softer than mine.

"Nishida Itsuki."

I let go of her hand.

"Just call me Itsuki."

She gave a small shake of her head.

"I cannot do that."

"You are older than I am."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think there's much of a difference."

I leaned my waist against the counter.

"Besides, I'm not a fan of being overly formal."

She thought for a moment.

Then let out a small sigh.

"Alright..."

"In that case... Itsuki-san."

She gave a faint smile.

"Just call me Misaki."

I nodded.

"Misaki."

I glanced toward the counter.

Toward the meat waiting to be prepped.

"I look forward to working with you."

She followed my gaze.

Then looked back at me.

"Likewise..."

Her tone was much lighter now.

"...Itsuki-san."

"I look forward to working with you."

She was no longer speaking formally to me.

Things were much more relaxed.

—  
We got to work.

The once-quiet kitchen—  
came to life.

The vegetables were brought out.

A pot was placed on the stove.

The frying pan was adjusted slightly, ensuring it sat just right.

Water filled the pot.

Oil was poured into the pan.

The burners were turned on.

Click.

Click.

Small flames flickered to life.

Growing steadily.

A faint warmth began to fill the air.

"Itsuki-san."

I turned my head slightly.

"Please wash the vegetables."

"Got it."

I got straight to it.

Grabbing a handful of vegetables from the counter.

And heading to the sink.

I turned on the tap.

The sound of running water filled the corner of the kitchen.

My hands began washing them, one by one.

Not long after—

Misaki walked over.

Carrying a strainer.

She stood beside me.

Helping with the washing.

We stood close.

Occasionally—

our hands would brush against each other.

Fleetingly.

Unintentionally.

"Itsuki-san..."

I didn't look up.

"What do you usually do for work?"

"I... work for a stage production company."

I turned a leafy green over under the running water.

"Designing stages, setting them up, then tearing them down again."

"Hmm..."

She gave a slow nod.

"It sounds exhausting."

"Fairly."

I turned off the tap for a moment.

And moved the vegetables into the strainer.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Yuna mentioned you work at a restaurant."

"Yes."

She dried her hands slightly.

"I work there part-time."

"Does that mean you have the day off today?"

"No."

She shook her head slightly.

"I have the night shift later."

"Oh..."

I nodded.

"In that case... mind if I drop by sometime?"

She paused for a moment.

Glancing at me.

"Sure."

Her answer was brief.

"But don't come too often."

"Why not?"

A faint smile touched her lips.

"It is expensive."

"Hahaha... and here I was wondering why."

We finished washing up.

The tap was turned off.

We moved back to the counter.

Cutting boards were set down.

Knives were drawn.

I grabbed a carrot.

She grabbed a cabbage.

We started chopping.

Chop.

Chop.

Chop.

My hands moved at a steady pace.

Not too fast.

Not too slow.

Beside me—

Chop-chop-chop-chop.

Her movements were much faster.

Neater.

More precise.

I stole a quick glance.

Her hands were nimble.

Without a hint of hesitation.

"...Used to this?" I murmured.

She didn't look up.

"You could say that."

Her knife kept moving.

"By the way..." I said.

"Where is this restaurant?"

She told me the name.

I gave a slow nod.

"Alright. I'll keep it in mind."

—

"Sis!!"

"Papa!!"

The voices rang out suddenly.

Loud.

Coming from the living room.

Both of us turned our heads at the same time.

Over there—

Mika and Yuna were standing in the doorway.

With bright, enthusiastic expressions.

"Explosion!!"

"Fireball!!"

Whump!

Whump!

Two pillows flew through the air.

Flying straight.

Smacking right into our faces.

Soft—

but still startling.

The pillows dropped to the floor.

Silence.

.

.

.

And then—

"MIKA..."

Misaki's voice changed.

It was lower.

Deeper.

And—

clearly furious.

"What if that hit the frying pan?!"

"That's dangerous! Do you realize that?!"

Her hand was still holding the knife.

Raised slightly.

A reflex.

Too close.

I immediately grabbed her wrist.

Holding it back.

Gently.

And took the knife from her hand.

"Alright..."

I placed the knife down on the counter.

"There's no need to get that angry."

I turned to look at the two kids.

Mika and Yuna stood frozen.

Especially Mika.

"Did you hear what she just said? You shouldn't bother people while they're cooking," I said calmly.

"It's dangerous."

I bent down slightly.

Picking up the pillows from the floor.

"Do you know why?"

"Think about it yourselves."

I tossed one over.

Then the other.

They caught them on reflex.

Catch.

Catch.

Silence.

Mika lowered her head.

"I'm sorry, Sis..."

Yuna did the same.

"Yeah... I'm sorry, Papa."

I gave a small nod.

"Just don't do it again."

They nodded.

Then turned around.

And scurried off.

Their footsteps quick.

Disappearing from the kitchen.

—

"..."

Misaki stood in silence for a moment.

...

Then let out a long sigh.

And turned back to me.

"Does that... happen often?"

"The pillow throwing?"

"Fairly often."

"And you don't get mad?"

I picked up my knife again.

And resumed chopping.

"Not really."

"Why?"

She returned to her cutting board as well.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Yes, it's a bother."

I nodded.

"But getting angry..."

My knife paused for a second.

"...brings me no benefit, and it only hurts them."

She fell silent.

Digesting my words.

The knife in her hand began to move again.

"Hm..."

"I suppose that's true."

She was chopping slower now.

"But still..."

She glanced slightly toward the kitchen door.

"...it's frustrating to be interrupted out of nowhere."

I let out a soft chuckle.

"Yeah."

"It is."

We went back to chopping.

The sound of knives filled the kitchen once again.

The flames kept burning.

The water began to reach a gentle boil.

Time passed.

Slowly.

Before we knew it—

the dishes were ready, one by one.

Arranged neatly on the counter.

Waiting to be brought to the dining table.

~~ • ~~

Chapter 109: Dining Table - Playing PS2

→ °o° →

"Sis, is breakfast ready?!"

Mika's voice called out from the living room.

"Yuna said we're having beef!"

Misaki turned to me.

"Itsuki-san?"

Her gaze carried a silent question.

I gave a slight nod.

"Yeah... it's ready."

"Let's all eat."

—

The kitchen grew busy once more.

But this time, not with cooking—

but with plating the results.

Plate after plate was picked up.

The pan was moved aside.

The aroma of meat filled the air.

Warm.

Rich.

Tempting.

Misaki moved first.

Carrying two plates at once.

Her steps were steady.

As if she were used to it.

I followed behind.

Also carrying two.

But my steps were more cautious.

Unwilling to drop a thing.

—

We reached the dining room.

The previously empty table.

Now—

began to fill up.

One by one, the dishes were set down.

Grilled beef.

Beef soup.

And a few other dishes she had decided on earlier.

Not long after—

the patter of small footsteps approached.

Yuna.

Mika.

And Hana.

They came in.

Sitting down in their respective seats right away.

Their eyes fixed on the table.

"Whoa..." Mika murmured.

"There's so much..."

Misaki stood beside me.

She reached behind my back.

Untying the apron I was still wearing.

Her movements were swift.

"You won't be needing this."

She took off her own apron as well.

We sat down.

Me.

And Misaki beside me.

Yuna across from us.

Mika and Hana next to her.

Everyone was here.

—

"Make sure to thank Itsuki-san," Misaki said.

"He's the one who brought all this beef."

Mika immediately bowed his head a little.

"Thank you, Mister."

Hana chimed in.

"Thank you, Mister."

Her voice was much softer.

Yuna looked at Misaki.

"Thank you for cooking, Miss Misaki."

Misaki gave a small smile.

I nodded.

"Alright, let's eat."

—

They dug in first.

The clinking of spoons and knives echoed.

Pieces of meat were scooped up.

The first bite.

Their reactions were immediate.

"...Delicious," Mika mumbled.

Hana didn't say much.

But her expression shifted.

Softer.

More gentle.

Yuna—

she ate as usual.

Calm.

As if she already knew how it would taste.

I picked up a piece.

And placed it in my mouth.

...

I paused.

For just a bit longer than usual.

The taste—

it was different.

Deeper.

More... complete.

Savory.

Sweet.

Perfectly balanced.

I swallowed slowly.

"Misaki."

She turned to me.

"Looks like I'll be seeking you out a lot more often."

"Why?"

I raised my fork slightly.

"You know why... the taste."

She smiled.

"Oh... so you like it."

Then—

she picked up a different piece.

"In that case, try this one."

She cut it into a smaller piece.

And then—

brought it toward my mouth.

I froze.

A little hesitant.

"...Seriously?"

She didn't answer.

She simply waited.

I finally opened my mouth.

She fed me the piece.

The flavor was different.

"Hmm..."

I gave a small nod.

"Not bad."

Across from us—

Mika leaned in to whisper to Yuna.

"Hey... why is my sister acting so close to your dad?"

"They only just met, right?"

"I don't know either..." Yuna whispered back.

"Maybe they already knew each other."

I heard them.

But I didn't say anything.

"How about this one?"

Misaki was already offering another piece.

I accepted it.

"Mmm... not bad."

"This one?"

"Not bad."

"And this one?"

"Not bad."

She stopped.

Staring at me.

Her expression shifted slightly.

"Why is that your only answer?"

Her tone carried a hint of annoyance.

Yuna suddenly chimed in.

"That's normal, Miss Misaki."

Everyone turned to Yuna.

"Papa only has two ratings."

"'Not bad' and 'tastes bad'."

...

"Oh..." Misaki turned back to me.

"Is that true, Itsuki?"

"More or less."

Yuna slipped off her chair.

She approached Misaki.

And whispered softly into her ear.

"Try reading Papa's expression..."

"It's a lot more honest."

Misaki gave a small nod.

Then she patted Yuna's head.

"Thank you, Yuna."

I watched the two of them.

"...What did she whisper?"

"It's a secret."

She offered a faint smile.

Then—

"Try this one again."

She offered me another piece.

I opened my mouth.

She fed me.

Warm.

Close.

And for some reason—

for just a moment—

everything felt... peaceful.

—

Time drifted by.

Small talk.

Light laughter.

The plates gradually emptied.

Finally—

we finished our meal.

Yuna, Mika, and Hana went back to the living room.

The sound of the anime resumed.

—

Misaki and I returned to the kitchen.

To wash the dishes.

The water ran.

Our hands moved.

Without exchanging many words.

It was quieter now.

Much more relaxed.

Once we were done—

I walked to the living room.

And sat on the sofa.

The TV played in front of me.

Though I wasn't really watching it.

A moment later—

footsteps approached.

Misaki walked in.

Carrying two mugs.

"Itsuki-san, here."

"Ah... thank you."

She placed them on the table.

Sliding one in front of me.

One for me.

And one for herself.

Then she sat down next to me.

Not too close.

Not too far away.

We took a sip.

Warm coffee.

Its aroma was rich and dark.

The taste was bitter, yet slightly sweet.

"You like coffee too?" I asked.

"I do."

Her answer was simple.

The TV continued to play.

The sounds of the anime filled the background.

I pulled out a cigarette.

And lit it.

The smoke rose slowly.

Dissipating into the air.

"I've packed the leftovers for you to take home," she said.

I turned to her.

"All of it?"

"Yeah."

I shook my head.

"I'll just take a quarter of it."

She frowned.

"That's so little."

"Not really."

I stared straight ahead.

"It's just me and Yuna at home."

She fell silent.

"Well, you could share it with your neighbors," she suggested.

"Yeah... I could."

I nodded slowly.

"But I'd rather you keep it."

She turned to me.

Meeting my eyes.

"You can have it with your family later."

She didn't answer right away.

.

.

.

"Alright."

Her voice was softer.

"Thank you."

I gave a faint shake of my head.

"No need."

I took another sip of my coffee.

"I should be the one thanking you."

I glanced toward the kitchen.

"If you weren't the one... who cooked it."

"That beef probably would've ended up as one of my and Yuna's kitchen experiments."

She let out a small laugh.

"Haha... fair enough."

She nodded.

"I'll accept your thanks."

—

The next day.

Morning.

Sunlight streamed through the window.

Not too bright.

But warm enough.

I sat in front of the TV.

Yuna stood beside me.

Both hands on her hips.

"Breakfast, done."

"Dishes, done."

She took a short breath.

"Time to play the PlayStation."

I glanced at her.

"What about your summer vacation homework?"

She stared straight at me.

Dead serious.

"Come on, Papa..."

"The homework can wait."

She pointed at the TV.

"Playing the PS cannot."

"It has to be now."

"Alright, alright..."

I pressed the power button on the PS.

Then the TV.

The TV turned on.

The PlayStation logo appeared on the screen.

I grabbed two controllers.

Handed one to Yuna.

"What do you want to play?"

"I want to race bicycles,"

Yuna said, her eyes fixed on the screen.

"Oh... that one."

I selected the game.

The game loaded.

The main menu appeared.

Selected Multiplayer.

The screen changed.

Character selection.

Vehicle selection.

"Papa..."

I didn't turn my head.

"What?"

"Why are you using a sheep, Papa?"

I glanced at the screen.

My character was standing—

on top of a sheep.

Meanwhile, Yuna's character was just riding a bicycle.

"I like sheep."

Yuna looked at me.

"I want to use a sheep, too."

I held out my hand.

"Give me the controller."

She handed it over.

I started pressing the D-pad.

Right.

Right.

Right.

A few times.

Finally—

it appeared.

A sheep.

"Here."

I handed the controller back.

"Yay!"

She smiled, satisfied.

I changed my own vehicle.

A deer.

Yuna immediately glanced over.

"...I want that one too."

"Don't be a copycat."

"Okay, okay..."

—

The race began.

First map.

A forest.

Lots of trees.

A dirt path.

A small river.

"Wow..." Yuna muttered.

"The map is so pretty."

"It is."

The screen counted down.

3...

2...

1...

"Go."

Yuna immediately mashed the buttons.

Fast.

Repeatedly.

Her sheep dashed forward.

Pretty fast.

She pulled ahead.

"Haha!"

"I passed you, Papa!"

I wasn't doing anything.

I had set my controller down.

I picked up my coffee mug.

Took a sip.

Calmly.

"Look, Papa!"

"I'm in first place now!"

"Yeah, yeah..."

I set down the coffee.

And picked up my controller again.

"Huh?" Yuna glanced over.

"You're in last place, Papa?"

"Come on, take it seriously!"

"Alright..."

I leaned forward slightly.

Focused.

My hands started moving.

Fast.

Up.

Down, down.

Up, up.

Down, down.

Cheat activated.

Small text appeared on the screen.

"What was that, Papa?"

"God Mode."

I pressed again.

X.

X.

X.

I held the button down.

My deer—

leaped.

It ran incredibly fast.

Unnaturally so.

Its stamina didn't decrease.

"Huh??"

Yuna immediately turned her head.

"Papa, you're cheating!"

"Cheating?"

"Indeed."

My deer barreled through the course.

Leaping over rocks.

Rivers.

Crashing into everything.

Dying—

respawning.

Instantly running again.

Without pause.

Without slowing down.

Yuna's expression changed.

Serious.

She mashed her buttons even faster.

But—

her sheep began to slow down.

Its steps grew heavy.

Sometimes it just stopped.

Sometimes it veered off into the grass.

"Papa..."

"It's glitching."

"No..."

I kept my eyes on the screen.

"That's just how it is."

"But my sheep..."

"Why can't I control it?"

"Is my sheep tired of running?"

Yuna stopped pressing the buttons.

Stared at the screen.

Her sheep had stopped in the grass.

Eating.

"Come on, sheep..."

"Eat a lot..."

"So you can run fast again."

I smiled faintly.

"Wait for me, Yuna..."

"Papa will be there soon."

My deer started overtaking the others.

One.

Two.

Three.

My rank climbed.

"Sheep, that's enough resting."

"Now it's time to run again."

Yuna started pressing X again.

Yuna's sheep began to move.

Xxxxxx.

Pressing it rapidly.

Her sheep ran fast.

Jumping over the river.

Jumping over the tracks.

Crashing into a tree.

Dead.

Respawn.

Walking slowly.

Then sprinting fast again.

"Huh?" Yuna pointed at the screen.

"Why do you have a bottle, Papa?"

In its hand—

my character was holding a water bottle.

"Is that not allowed?"

"I guess..."

"...but what's it for?"

Yuna asked without looking away from the screen.

I looked ahead.

One racer.

Pretty close.

"Watch this."

I pressed the Circle button.

Click.

The bottle was thrown.

Hitting them right in the head.

The racer fell over.

"Papa, you're mean!"

"It's a game, Yuna."

"But still!"

I kept pushing forward.

Catching up to the rest.

Wham.

Wham.

Wham.

One by one, they fell.

My rank climbed again.

Now—

I was in second place.

"Almost there..." I muttered.

.

.

.

Visible on the screen.

Yuna's character was right in front of mine.

"Yuna..."

I glanced at her.

"I'm right behind you..."

"Huh?!"

Yuna instantly panicked.

Pressing her buttons even faster.

I simply held down the X button.

My deer slowly caught up.

Right beside her.

Running neck and neck.

A sheep and a deer.

"Hello, Yuna."

She turned her head.

Her eyes widened.

"Papa...?"

"Don't..."

"Don't throw it!"

My character raised the bottle.

"Relax."

I pressed the button.

Click.

The bottle flew.

Past Yuna.

Hitting the NPC up ahead.

"That was close..." I muttered.

"Papa!! But that almost hit me."

"It was still just an 'almost'."

The finish line was in sight.

Yuna was still in first place.

I was in second.

Just a little more until the finish.

—

Ding-dong.

The doorbell rang.

I glanced at the door.

"Yuna."

"Hold on!"

"I'm about to win!"

"Yuna..."

My voice was flat.

"It might be your friend."

She hesitated.

"Really...?"

"Go check."

She stared at the screen.

Then at the door.

Let out a small sigh.

"Fine..."

She set her controller down.

Stood up quickly.

And ran to the door.

I waited.

One second.

Two seconds.

...

My hand moved.

Pressing a button.

Click.

Wham.

Yuna's character fell over.

My deer immediately overtook her.

The finish line—

crossed.

First place.

Yuna.

Second place.

I leaned back.

Picked up my coffee again.

Took a sip.

"Haa..."

Peaceful...

—

I won.

→ • ←

Chapter 110: [ The Problem ]

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"Morning, Yuna."

The voice came from the front door.

Yuna, who had just opened it, immediately stood up straight.

There—

Misaki.

Behind her were Mika and Hana.

Mika immediately stepped forward.

"Yuna!! Let's go out!"

Her voice was full of excitement.

Hana chimed in.

"Yeah, Yuna... didn't we already plan this?"

"The karaoke?" Yuna asked.

"Yeah!" Mika nodded quickly.

"But not just karaoke—we also want to go to the cat cafe, the park, to—"

She stopped.

Turned to Misaki.

"Where else, Sis?"

Misaki smiled softly.

"Let's just head out first."

"We'll see where else we want to go later."

Then she looked at Yuna.

"How about it? Want to come?"

Yuna hesitated for a moment.

Then looked back inside.

"Let me ask Papa first!"

She immediately ran inside.

Her little footsteps were quick.

"Papa!"

I was still sitting in front of the TV.

"Hmm?"

"Mika and Hana invited me to go out!"

"Miss Misaki is coming with us!"

She stood in front of me.

Her eyes were sparkling.

"Can I?"

I looked at her for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Sure."

She immediately broke into a wide smile.

"But don't stay out too late."

"Okay!"

"Thank you, Papa!"

She immediately turned around.

Ran back to the door.

"I'm coming!"

"Wait, let me change my clothes first!"

She went back further inside.

—

I stood up.

Walked to the door.

...

They were still there.

Waiting.

Misaki turned her head as I approached.

"Morning, Itsuki-san."

"Yeah, morning."

We looked at each other.

Briefly.

Then both of us looked away.

Mika and Hana were busy in their own little world.

Whispering.

Letting out occasional giggles.

Misaki glanced inside the house.

For a second.

As if observing.

"..."

Then she looked back at me.

"Itsuki-san..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you want to come too?"

"To hang out."

I shook my head.

"No."

"I'll just stay home."

She frowned slightly.

"Why?"

"Do you have work to do?"

"Not really."

Silence.

...

...

...

Her gaze changed.

Slightly... thoughtful.

I could guess why.

A modest house.

A small apartment.

Yesterday—

premium meat.

The contrast.

It was only natural for her to wonder.

"Hey, Misaki."

She snapped out of it.

"Hm? What is it?"

I stepped closer.

One step.

My hand reached up.

Touching her shoulder.

I leaned down slightly.

Getting closer to her ear.

"It seems..." I whispered softly,

"your head has been full of questions since you saw my house."

She instantly stiffened.

"N-No—"

"I know."

I cut her off gently.

Then whispered again.

"There's no need to think about it."

I took a small breath.

"Yuna and I are doing fine. And this is just how I live."

I pulled away.

My hand dropped.

Taking one step back.

—

"Papa!"

Yuna returned.

Her clothes were neat.

Ready to head out.

I glanced at her.

Then back to Misaki.

Her expression had changed.

Slightly different from before.

From inside—

the sound of a game could still be heard.

A menu screen left unclosed.

"What were you doing just now?" Misaki asked.

"I heard a sound."

"PS," I answered.

"Yeah!" Yuna immediately chimed in.

"I was playing with Papa earlier!"

She pouted.

"...but Papa cheated."

Mika and Hana immediately turned their heads.

"What's a PS?"

They asked almost in unison.

Yuna smiled.

"I'll tell you guys later."

Misaki looked at me again.

Then—

"Itsuki-san..."

"Just come with us."

I shook my head.

"No, I'll just stay home."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then gave a small nod.

"Alright..."

I almost turned around.

Then stopped.

"Oh, right."

I looked back.

"Look after Yuna."

"Don't let her come home too late."

Misaki nodded.

"I understand."

She glanced inside the house one more time.

The sound of the game could still be heard.

"Next time..." she said softly,

"can I play that game with you?"

"If there's time."

She smiled faintly.

"Alright."

She stepped back a little.

"We'll be going, then."

"Bye, Mister!" Mika said.

Hana gave a small bow.

"Papa, I'm heading out..."

Yuna approached.

Bowed her head.

Her hands reached for mine.

Her forehead touched the back of my hand.

Salim.

"Hm. Be careful."

They turned around.

Started walking.

Footsteps fading away.

Their voices slowly disappearing.

—

I stood at the doorway.

Watching them go.

Until they disappeared at the end of the street.

.

.

.

I went back inside.

Closed the door.

Click.

—

The sounds of the house returned to normal.

But quieter.

—\$

I stood in the middle of the room.

The TV was still on.

The sounds of the game were still playing.

"Haa..."

I let out a long sigh.

My head felt full.

Noisy.

I stepped closer.

Pressed the button.

Click.

Click.

The screen went black.

The PS powered off.

Silence.

Quieter than before.

But the noise in my mind only grew louder.

—

My hand reached up to the top of the cabinet.

Grabbed a notebook.

A writing notebook.

With a pen tucked into the side.

I sat down.

Leaned back.

Opened it slowly.

The first page that opened—

was full.

Slanted cursive.

Messy.

Some parts neat.

Others—

barely legible.

Scribbles.

Numbers.

Symbols.

Little notes in the margins.

Even I—

needed time to decipher my own handwriting.

I turned the page.

One.

Two.

Three.

Further back—

the denser it got.

Almost no empty space left.

Until finally—

a blank page appeared.

—

I took the pen.

Held it in the air for a moment.

Thinking.

The tip touched the paper.

I started writing.

Slowly.

Short.

Fragmented.

This month.

Summer.

Yuna.

Me.

Next line.

Monthly.

Daily.

School.

Food.

Then—

Bills.

My hand stopped for a moment.

Then moved down to the bottom of the page.

Stagehand.

Monthly.

Core.

Event.

I stared at it.

Silent.

For a few seconds.

...

Then—

Thud.

I tossed the notebook onto the table.

My hands went up to my head.

Messing up my own hair.

"Argh..."

I looked down.

"What's the way out..."

—

I reached for my coffee.

Took a sip.

It tasted—

bitter.

I picked up the notebook again.

Opened it.

The same page.

The pen touched the paper once more.

Future.

The handwriting was neater this time.

Longer.

Overall expenses.

I stopped.

Drew a line.

Then wrote beneath it.

Covered by stagehand income.

Almost 100% of my monthly salary.

The tip of the pen paused.

A little longer this time.

Then moved again.

Savings haven't grown these past few months.

Decreasing.

Emergencies → use savings.

I pressed the pen a little harder.

The ink looked thicker.

Savings:

1,800,000 Yen.

I stared at that number.

Silent.

A number accumulated over three years.

Slowly—

eroding.

In danger of continually decreasing.

I took a breath.

Wrote again.

Desires:

A stable life.

A house of our own.

The next writing—

pressed deeper.

Heavier.

Threatened.

—

"What's the way out..."

I whispered softly.

The pen moved again.

What's the way out

What's the way out

What's the way out

What's the way out

The sentence filled the page.

Repeating.

Without pause.

Without pattern.

Until there was almost no space left.

I stopped.

My hand trembling slightly.

Took a deep breath.

Then—

wrote again.

Main problem =

...

The pen stopped.

For a few seconds.

Then—

I wrote one word.

Yuna.

I stared at it.

For a long time.

...

...

...

My hand moved.

Crossing it out.

Once.

Twice.

Over and over.

Until the word—

was no longer visible.

Covered in ink.

Unreadable.

I took a breath.

Deeper.

"No..."

I shook my head slowly.

Yuna wasn't the problem.

Yuna—

was me.

A part of me.

I wrote again at the bottom.

Slower.

Without Yuna...

The pen stopped.

A few seconds.

Then continued.

Empty.

Without purpose.

Without drive.

A mess.

—

I turned the page.

A new page.

Blank.

Title.

Way out.

Beneath it—

Needs.

Solutions.

Capital.

Skills.

I stared at it.

For a long time.

...

Work somewhere else.

I wrote quickly.

Then—

stopped.

High pressure.

Inflexible.

I crossed it out.

"Impossible..."

—

The notebook dropped into my lap.

I leaned back.

Grabbed a cigarette.

Lit it.

A small flame.

The first puff of smoke escaped.

Then the second.

And the third.

I took a deep drag.

Exhaled slowly.

The smoke rose.

Hung in the air.

The longer I sat—

the thicker it got.

The room began to cloud with a thin haze.

Like something that refused to leave.

"A way out..."

I stared blankly ahead.

Then—

a thought surfaced.

Slowly.

Simple.

Ask someone with more experience.

I wrote down one word.

(Father)

The pen stopped.

—

I closed the notebook.

Slowly.

Stood up.

Placed it back on top of the cabinet.

Walked to the windows.

Opened them one by one.

The outside air rushed in.

Fresh.

Different.

I turned on the fan.

The smoke began to move.

Out.

Slowly fading away.

I stood there.

Looking outside.

Taking a deep breath of the air.

Exhaling.

"Haa..."

Silence.

Calmer.

But not yet over.

I stared off into the distance.

As if looking at something that wasn't there.

It seems...

I need to go home.

To the village.

—

Meanwhile—

The sound of music filled the small room.

Colorful lights spun slowly.

A large screen displayed the lyrics of a song.

Yuna stood at the front.

Holding the mic.

A little stiff.

Mika had already taken her turn singing.

Full of energy.

Jumping all over the place.

Hana sat on the sofa.

Humming along quietly.

As for Misaki—

she leaned back casually.

Watching them.

"Yuna, your turn!" Mika called out.

Yuna stared at the screen.

The lyrics rolled.

She took a breath.

Then began to sing.

Her voice was soft.

But stable.

Not off-key.

Mika paused for a moment.

Turned her head.

"Eh... not bad."

The song ended.

A smattering of light applause.

Yuna smiled faintly.

Then sat down.

"Hey, Yuna," Mika approached.

"Why didn't your dad come along earlier?"

Yuna shrugged.

"Mmm... maybe Papa doesn't like singing."

She thought for a second.

"But..."

"Papa's voice is good."

Mika was immediately intrigued.

"Seriously??"

Hana also turned to look.

"What's it sound like?"

Yuna furrowed her brow.

Trying to explain.

"Like..."

She moved her hands.

"...hoo haa... dom bar... hoo haa..."

Misaki blinked slowly.

Confused.

"...What is that supposed to mean?"

Mika and Hana looked at each other.

Then nodded.

"Oh... I get it."

"Yeah, yeah... that one."

Misaki just stayed silent.

Still not understanding.

—

A while later.

They stepped out.

Moved to another place.

A cat cafe.

As soon as the door opened—

the atmosphere changed.

Calmer.

Warmer.

The distinct smell of animals.

And—

lots of cats.

"There are... so many cats..." Yuna muttered.

She stood near the door.

A little hesitant.

"They don't scratch, right?" she asked quietly.

"No, they don't," Misaki answered casually.

"They're all tame."

"Look at this, Yuna!"

Hana was already sitting on the floor.

Surrounded by several cats.

Her hands petting them gently.

The cats looked perfectly comfortable.

Mika jogged over.

Scooped up a cat.

"I like this one!"

"I want to take it home!"

"You can't do that, Mika."

"It belongs to this place."

"Aww... come on, sis..."

Yuna walked slowly.

Approaching a cat.

"Here, kitty..."

She reached out her hand.

The cat backed away.

Retreated.

"Come here..."

Yuna took a small step forward.

The cat turned around.

Walked off.

Yuna stopped.

Looked at another cat.

Approached again.

That cat also moved away.

One.

Two.

All the same.

None of them came close.

She turned her head.

Looking at her friends.

Mika—

laughing while hugging a cat.

Hana—

sitting calmly, cats in her lap and by her side.

Misaki—

with two cats in her lap.

Petting them slowly.

Calm.

Yuna looked down slightly.

"I want to..." she muttered softly.

"...pet a cat too."

She walked toward Hana.

"Hana..."

Hana turned.

Immediately understood.

"Oh... here."

She lifted one of the cats.

Offered it to Yuna.

"Here you go."

Yuna reached out her hand.

Slowly.

Almost touching it—

"Nya!"

"Ah—"

The cat scratched her.

Fast.

A reflex.

Yuna pulled her hand back.

"Ow..."

A red line appeared.

A little blood welled up.

"Yuna!"

Hana immediately panicked.

Let go of the cat.

The cat ran off.

Hana grabbed Yuna's hand.

"Are you okay?!"

"I'm... okay..."

Yuna's voice was quiet.

A single tear fell.

Misaki had already stood up.

Approached.

Looked at the scratch.

Without saying much—

she turned around.

Went over to the staff.

Spoke for a moment.

Then returned.

Bringing a band-aid.

"Here."

She held Yuna's hand.

Cleaned the scratch.

Her movements were gentle.

Careful.

She applied the band-aid.

"There. It's fine. It'll heal in no time."

Yuna just nodded.

Silent.

—

Afternoon.

At home.

The door opened.

Creak.

Yuna stepped inside.

Her footsteps were slow.

Inside—

I was sitting.

At the table.

My left elbow propping up my head.

My right hand holding a cigarette.

My eyes were on the clock.

Tick... tick... tick...

The sound of the hands was clear.

Small footsteps approached.

I glanced over.

Yuna.

Her head was bowed.

"Welcome home..." I said softly.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm home, Papa..."

She walked closer.

Right up to me.

Then—

thud.

She dropped to her knees.

Her body slumped forward.

Her face pressed against my thigh.

"What is it..."

"Tell me."

"Papa..."

Her voice was weak.

"Yeah..."

She completely slumped over now.

Her head resting in my lap.

"I went to a cat cafe earlier..."

"Hmm..."

"I wanted to pet a cat..."

Her voice trembled.

"...but none of them wanted anything to do with me..."

I stayed silent.

Listening.

"They all walked away..."

"Ran..."

"...and scratched me..."

Her hand lifted.

Showing the band-aid.

Then dropped again.

"Oh..."

My hand moved.

Stroking her hair.

Slowly.

"There, there..."

"It's alright."

She started to cry softly.

Sniffling.

My hand didn't stop.

Rubbing gently.

Comforting.

Quiet.

Only the sound of breathing.

And soft sobs.

"Come with me tomorrow."

She paused.

Slightly.

"Where...?"

"To my father's place."

She turned her head.

Looked up at me.

Her eyes were still wet.

"Papa's... dad's place?"

"Grandpa's?"

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

Her expression changed.

Slowly.

The sadness faded.

Replaced by—

something lighter.

Her head returned to my lap.

Her eyes began to close.

A small smile appeared.

"I like it... when Papa pets my head..."

I heard her.

But didn't answer.

My hand kept moving.

Slowly.

Rhythmically.

Inside my chest—

there was something warm.

Quiet.

But I could feel it.

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