

Accidentally become a father

C 11

The first confirmation of a new life rarely comes with emotion.

It comes with paper.

And this morning, paper was waiting for me.

Thin morning light slipped through the curtains.

I woke up first.

It took me three seconds to remember why there were two futons in the room.

Then, I heard the soft rustle of fabric from my left.

Yuna was already sitting up.

Her hair was slightly messy, but her posture was as straight as a model student's.

"What time did you wake up?" I asked.

"Six."

"Why?"

"I don't know Papa's habits."

"My habits aren't interesting."

She nodded seriously, as if processing vital information.

I sat up.

In the morning light, the room looked smaller than it had at night. More real.

"We're heading out for a bit," I said.

"Where to?"

"Social introductions, so we don't become a rumor."

She blinked.

"Is that important?"

"In a small apartment complex, yes."

We changed into simple clothes. I wore a gray hoodie. She wore a white t-shirt and a plain skirt.

The moment I opened the door, the smell of breakfast immediately greeted us.

And as if scheduled by the universe itself—

Door 204 opened at the exact same time.

The middle-aged woman emerged wearing a floral apron. Her hair was hastily pinned up. She held a small bowl in her hands.

Her eyes immediately dropped to Yuna.

"Oh... morning."

"Morning," I replied.

She looked Yuna up and down.

"This is...?"

I didn't give her assumptions time to grow.

"My niece. She's staying here for the time being. I'm her guardian."

Yuna bowed politely.

"Good morning, Obaa-san."

The woman softened slightly.

"Ah, so polite..."

Then her eyes returned to me.

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-one."

"And you're already the guardian of a nine-year-old?"

"Yes."

She narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Her parents?"

"They can't take care of her."

It wasn't a lie.

Just the condensed version.

She nodded slowly.

"Kids these days, huh... so many problems."

"This apartment is soundproof," I said.

She chuckled.

Yuna stood quietly beside me, not speaking unless necessary.

"Where does she go to school?" the woman asked.

Yuna shot me a quick glance.

Half a second.

I answered first.

"It's being taken care of."

"Oh, don't be late registering her. The elementary schools around here fill up fast."

"I know."

She looked at Yuna again.

"What's your name?"

"Yuna," she answered for herself.

"What a pretty name. Just like that idol... what was her name..."

I didn't react.

Neither did Yuna.

"Yeah, the one on TV..."

The woman waved her hand dismissively, giving up on remembering.

"Never mind. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Thank you," I replied.

She went back into her unit.

The door closed.

The hallway returned to silence.

I turned to Yuna.

"Good reflexes."

"About what?"

"Not mentioning your mom earlier."

She gave a small nod.

"That's the hard part."

"Did you practice?"

"A little."

I stared at the empty hallway for a few seconds.

School.

Administration.

Documents.

A birth certificate alone wouldn't be enough.

"Let's go back in," I said.

We stepped back inside the apartment.

The door clicked locked.

I walked over to the table and picked up the birth certificate again.

"To register for school," I said quietly, more to myself than to her. "We're going to need more than just this."

Yuna sat across from me.

"Like what?"

"A family register."

She fell silent.

"Do we have one?"

I stared at the document in my hands.

Good question.

If someone had gone to the trouble of altering a birth certificate...

How far had they gone to prepare the rest?

I set the paper back down.

"We're going to the ward office," I said.

"Today?"

"If I put it off, I'll just get too lazy to do it."

She stood up without a single protest.

As if she had been ready from the start.

And for the first time that morning,

I began to feel that perhaps—

the administrative aspects of my life had already been taken care of by someone else before I even had the chance to think about them.

And if that was true,

then the ward office wouldn't be verifying the truth.

It would be revealing it.

C 12

Some lies collapse when questioned.

Others survive because the system itself agrees to believe them.

Today.

I was about to find out which kind this was.

I sat back down in front of the low table.

Unfolding the birth certificate one more time.

The morning light made the ink of the official seal look clearer.

Yuna sat across from me.

Her hands resting neatly on her lap.

Like she was waiting for exam results.

"To register for school," I said.

"a birth certificate alone isn't enough. Usually, you need a family register. Proof of residency. A legal guardian."

Yuna nodded slowly. "Is that difficult?"

"Bureaucracy is rarely difficult. Usually, it's just tedious."

I grabbed my phone and did a quick search on elementary school registration for this ward.

The requirements were exactly as I expected:

An updated juminhyo.

Guardian information.

And an address within the school zone.

I stared at the name on the certificate again.

Nishida Itsuki.

Under the father column.

There were no strange additional notes.

It was too clean.

"If the person who arranged this certificate was serious about it,"

I muttered, "they definitely took care of the rest."

Yuna looked at me cautiously.

"Are you mad, Papa?"

"No. I just don't like it when someone else finishes my homework without telling me."

"It helps, though."

"True. But it also means they know my address."

She fell silent.

I stood up, grabbing my jacket again.

"Let's go check at the ward office. If the data isn't there, we file it. If it is..."

I paused for a moment.

"It means I'm officially a much busier adult."

Yuna stood up as well.

"If the data is there, does that mean Papa is really my guardian?"

"I already said as much out in the hallway. Now we just have to make sure it wasn't an improvisation."

She looked slightly calmer hearing those words repeated.

Before leaving.

I glanced back at the table where the certificate lay.

It felt strange seeing my name printed as someone's father without ever having signed a thing.

But legally speaking, ink was stronger than feelings.

And if the ink existed in more places than this paper—

Then someone had already decided my role long before I did.

"Let's go," I said.

Yuna put on her shoes without being told.

Her movements were quick.

Efficient.

Like a child who had moved places a few too many times.

I turned off the lights.

Double-checked that the stove was off.

And opened the door.

The day in Tokyo had fully come alive by now.

And somewhere inside that living system of concrete and paperwork,
an answer was already waiting for us.

Chapter 13: Administrative Reality

Tokyo had fully come alive by now.

The traffic was louder.

The air was warmer.

We walked to the nearest station.

Then to the district office.

I didn't hold her hand.

She didn't grab the hem of my jacket this time, either.

But the distance between us remained consistent—

Half a pace by my side.

Nothing more.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

"A little."

"Why?"

"What if the records aren't there..."

"That just means your forgery prep wasn't good enough."

She lowered her head slightly.

"I didn't do it."

"I know."

The district office looked like any other government building—

Clean.

Devoid of any aesthetic ambition.

The automatic glass doors slid open as we approached.

Inside.

The chill of the air conditioning was a constant.

The automated voice calling out queue numbers echoed softly from the speakers.

Yuna surveyed the room with watchful eyes, but without panic.

I took a queue number.

The digit printed on that small slip of paper felt like the beginning of something much more official than buying a futon last night.

I checked the number currently being called.

There were still five people ahead of us.

"Good," I said. "We have time to practice if we need to."

"Practice what?"

"In case they ask about our relationship."

She thought for a moment. "Guardian."

"Good."

"Papa won't say 'father'?"

I stared at the screen displaying the changing queue numbers.

"Administratively," I said quietly, "and biologically."

"I am not your father."

"So Papa won't acknowledge me?"

"I can only be your guardian."

"What about an adoptive father?"

"I don't know."

The next number was called.

I looked at the queue ticket in my hand.

Soon, someone who didn't know me at all.

Would determine whether my name was recorded in the right place—

Or if it wasn't there at all.

Chapter 14: City Hall

The district office waiting room always had the same atmosphere—quiet, yet never entirely peaceful.

It was the kind of place where lives changed without anyone raising their voice.

No drama.

No ceremony.

Just forms.

And signatures.

Somewhere inside this building.

A version of my life already existed on paper.

All I had to do was confirm whether I was the one who had signed it.

The chime of the queue numbers sounded like an alarm too polite to be considered annoying.

Yuna sat beside me, her back perfectly straight.

She was clutching her small bag tightly.

She looked like a model student applying for a scholarship, not someone registering a new family identity.

Our number was called.

We stood up and headed to the counter.

The clerk was a woman in her thirties with neatly cropped hair. A professional smile. An efficient gaze.

"How can I help you?"

"I'd like to verify our family registry and proof of residence for school enrollment," I said, handing over Yuna's birth certificate.

The clerk skimmed it.

Her eyebrows twitched upward.

Then she looked at me.

"Your relationship to the child?"

"Guardian."

My answer was quick, steady.

Yuna bowed her head politely.

The clerk typed something into her computer.

The room was once again filled with the clatter of keystrokes.

Too rapid to be considered casual.

A few seconds later, her expression shifted slightly.

Not shock.

More like... confirmation.

"The data is already registered," she said.

I didn't react immediately.

Because that sentence contained far more implications than it appeared to.

"Your name is listed as the head of the household."

I paused for a single second.

"Head of the household."

"Yes. The registration was completed a few weeks ago."

A few weeks ago.

That meant all of this had been completed before I had any awareness of it.

Before the knock.

Before the explanation.

Before the choice.

who actually arranged it?

"So I only need to print the latest copy?" I asked.

"Correct. Would you like a juminhyo as well?"

"Please."

She printed a few pages and handed them to me.

The sound of paper sliding across the counter was soft.

Final.

Irrefutable.

I looked down.

And there it was.

Written without hesitation.

Without doubt.

Without permission.

Nishida Itsuki — Head of Household

Yuna – Child

Administratively speaking,

This was an entirely ordinary family.

"Is there anything that needs to be updated?" the clerk asked.

"Not at the moment."

Because if anything needed updating, it wouldn't be a matter for city hall.

Chapter 15: A Matter of label

We turned away from the counter.

And that was when I noticed two pairs of eyes watching us.

A young couple.

Probably in their early twenties. Sitting not too far away in the waiting area. They were whispering far too loudly for it to be considered a secret.

"He's so young..."

"Yeah... and his kid is already so big..."

"People move fast in life, huh..."

I stopped.

Yuna stopped with me.

I slowly turned my head toward them.

"We can hear you," I said flatly.

They flinched immediately.

"Oh—sorry! We were just... uh..."

The man smiled awkwardly. The woman beside him lightly smacked his arm.

"We were just surprised. I mean... you're so young, but you already—"

"The administrative system does not recognize emotional age," I said.

"As long as the forms are complete, everything is legal."

They fell silent.

Yuna gave the hem of my jacket a gentle tug.

I continued in the same even tone.

"And for the record, I'm her guardian."

"Oh!"

The woman instantly looked relieved.

"We thought—"

"Many people think many things," I replied.

The man nodded rapidly.

"Right, right... sorry about that."

"It's fine. Gossip is society's favorite light exercise."

We walked away before they could formulate any new theories.

Once we stepped out of the building.

Yuna looked up at me.

"Papa was a bit sarcastic."

"Just a bit. If I used any more, I'd end up a university professor."

She let out a small laugh. Not a loud laugh, but an honest one.

I glanced back down at the documents in my hand.

Everything was official.

Airtight.

Whoever was behind this had thoroughly paved over all the legal avenues.

I gave a slight shrug.

"Well then."

I muttered.

"If it's this official, I suppose I can't pretend to be ignorant anymore."

Yuna watched me carefully.

"Does Papa regret it?"

"No."

My answer was instantaneous.

I slipped the papers into a folder.

"Problems that other people have already solved are the best kind. All we have to do is execute them."

She looked a little more at ease.

We began our walk home.

At a red light.

Yuna suddenly asked in a quiet voice.

"Papa... if someone asks again later... are we still going to say guardian?"

I stared straight ahead.

Legally, I was the head of the household.

In reality, I had only been a father for two days.

Emotionally... I hadn't done the math yet.

"We'll see what the situation calls for," I finally said.

The light turned green.

And for the first time, a realization dawned on me.

Being a guardian was far easier than being a father.

The only question was—

would I keep choosing the safer word?

Chapter 16: The School Transfer

The district elementary school wasn't far from the apartment.

The building was simple.

The painted walls clean.

The signpost entirely too serious for a place meant for children.

We weren't here to learn.

We were here to hand over paper.

The administration office was on the left side of the lobby.

A female staff member in her forties greeted us with a formal smile.

Clearly well-trained in handling panicking parents.

"I'd like to inquire about the transfer procedures," I said.

Handing over the juminyho and the copy of our family registry.

She read them slowly.

Her eyes drifted from Yuna's name to mine.

Then back again.

"Your relationship?"

"Guardian."

An automatic response.

Yuna bowed politely.

The staff member nodded.

Then began explaining in a professional tone.

"Since this is an inter-district transfer, we only need her previous academic records, a copy of the guardian's ID, and for this form to be filled out. There is no entrance exam."

She handed over a stack of paperwork.

I looked at it.

Five pages.

Japanese bureaucracy never did things halfway.

"When does she start?" I asked.

"If the documents are completed this week, she can begin next week."

Fast.

Efficient.

Undramatic.

I nodded.

"School supplies?" I asked.

"Oh, the uniform can be ordered through the school co-op. We will provide the list of requirements once registration is complete. For now, a regular bag and standard stationery will suffice."

Good.

That meant we didn't need to buy anything today.

Yuna stood quietly beside me throughout the entire exchange.

No interrupting.

No visible nervousness.

As if she were already used to bouncing between systems.

We left the administration office with a folder much thicker than before.

Outside the school gates.

Yuna stared out at the empty field.

Classes hadn't been let out yet, so it was still quiet.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

She thought about it for a few seconds.

"Ready to pretend to be normal."

"Good. That's a crucial skill."

She offered a small smile.

I looked at the school building one last time.

This place was about to become our new routine.

Routine meant stability.

Stability meant fewer problems.

In theory, anyway.

"Let's go home," I said.

Halfway through our walk.

I glanced at the topmost form.

There was a small field that needed to be filled:

Emergency contact other than the guardian.

My hand stopped.

Other than the guardian.

I looked over at Yuna.

She was walking.

Her eyes tracing the pavement.

As if the world wasn't hiding a massive secret inside that tiny box.

I looked back at the paper in my hand.

The field was blank.

And for the first time today,

I honestly had no idea whose name to write down.

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 17: The Blank Space

The space was blank.

We walked along the sidewalk toward the apartment.

The school form was still in my hand.

At the bottom of the second page was a small box.

Emergency contact other than guardian.

Other than guardian.

Yuna walked half a step beside me.

"Yuna," I said.

"Yes?"

"If there's an emergency at school, who do you think they should call besides me?"

Her footsteps slowed for a fraction of a second.

Then returned to normal.

"What kind of emergency?"

"Fainting. An accident. A fight. Or if you start crying."

"I'm not a crybaby."

"You never know."

She stared straight ahead.

The pedestrian light turned red.

We stopped.

Traffic flowed past on the street in front of me.

"Can your parents be reached?"

She didn't answer right away.

Usually, she was quick.

Not this time.

The light turned green.

We crossed.

Halfway across the street, she said quietly,

"There is one person."

"Who?"

She gripped her bag straps a little tighter.

"Someone."

We reached the sidewalk on the other side.

"Your father?" I asked flatly.

She didn't nod.

She didn't shake her head.

"He... cares about me... probably," she finally said.

Probably?

Who.

Her mother?

Her father?

Or

A relative.

I looked at the form again.

The empty box didn't look very big.

But it felt like a single point connecting far too many things.

"Do you have the number memorized?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Write it down later."

She gave a small nod.

We continued walking.

The afternoon breeze lightly stirred the hair resting on her forehead.

I didn't ask anything else.

Because the answer was already clear enough.

And for the first time since she arrived.

Maybe.

I would be speaking directly with the person who orchestrated all of this.

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

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 18: Ten Digits

The apartment door closed.

Click.

Our shoes sat side-by-side on the rack.

I sat down at the table and placed the school form in the center.

"The number," I said.

Yuna took off her bag slowly.

Unhurried.

She sat across from me, unzipped her bag, and took out a small pencil case.

From inside, she pulled out a blank scrap of paper.

Not a pre-prepared slip.

Not a ready-made secret note.

She was actually writing it out right now.

I watched her hand.

Her handwriting was neat.

I didn't expect this writing.

Come from a child.

Ten digits.

She stopped after the last number.

Didn't add a name.

Didn't add any symbols.

Just numbers.

She slid the paper toward me.

"There."

I looked at the string of numbers.

No special area code that I immediately recognized.

Not a service hotline. Not a public corporate number.

A personal number.

"Who is it?" I asked.

She gave a small shrug.

"The person who will always answer."

Who?

The answer is full of mystery.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Yes."

"No matter the time?"

She thought for a moment.

"If not him, his assistant."

I raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Assistant."

She realized she had said too much.

But she didn't take it back.

I took my phone out of my hoodie pocket and set it on the table.

The black screen reflected both our faces.

"I'm going to call it now."

She didn't answer right away.

She just sat up a little straighter.

Her hands returned to her lap.

Like a child waiting for grades to be announced.

"Do you want to listen?" I asked.

She shook her head slowly.

"It's up to you, Papa."

A deliberate choice of words.

I punched the numbers into the phone.

One digit. Two. Three.

Ten.

I stared at the call button for a few seconds.

then he was already waiting.

I pressed the green button.

It rang.

Once.

Twice.

Click.

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

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Chapter 19: The Voice

Connected.

It connected too quickly to be called a coincidence.

An adult man's voice came through.

"Yes."

A calm voice. Steady. No greeting.

I looked at Yuna.

She wasn't looking at me.

Her gaze was fixed on the surface of the table.

"This is Nishida Itsuki."

Silence.

"I know."

His voice was flat.

Not flat like someone who was tired.

Flat like someone who had already read a script before the call even took place.

He seemed to have been expecting it.

I didn't stand up. I stayed seated on the floor of my own apartment. Yuna was across the table.

Silent.

Barely even moving.

"I am filling out the school forms," I said.

"Hm... go on."

"There is a section for an emergency contact other than the guardian."

"Yes... there is."

His answer was short.

As if he had been waiting for those exact words.

"Yuna gave me this number."

"Yes, she knows my number by heart."

No follow-up questions asking how she was doing or if she was alright.

Just...

I leaned back slightly against the wall.

"For some reason, out of nowhere... I have a newly registered family record from just a few weeks ago."

"Yes."

"I didn't sign anything."

"Legally speaking, there are other ways to handle that context."

His tone didn't rise. It wasn't defensive. Merely explaining.

Like he was discussing a work contract.

"An efficient explanation," I said.

"I value efficiency."

A brief silence.

I could hear the background on his end of the line.

It sounded dead quiet.

No sound of a television.

No sound of passing vehicles.

Probably an office.

Or perhaps a private room.

"Yuna is doing fine here," I said.

"I know."

"I'm just letting you know."

"We appreciate the information you have provided."

We.

I glanced at Yuna.

She didn't move.

"The purpose of this call is simple," I said.

"Will this number always be active if the school calls?"

"Yes."

"Who will answer?"

"Myself, Kuroda Seiji. Or my assistant."

"Understood."

Neither of us tried to dominate the conversation.

Nobody asked for a progress report.

Nobody asked for proof.

Just two adults discussing procedures.

"Can she hear this conversation?"

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

Chapter 20: Minimum Intervention

"Can she hear this conversation?"

I looked at Yuna.

"Good."

One word.

But it didn't imply relief.

More like confirming that a protocol was proceeding according to plan.

I tapped the table lightly with my finger.

"One more thing."

"Go ahead."

"Is there anything else you've taken care of without my knowledge?"

Silence.

Not a nervous silence.

A measured silence.

Then the answer came.

"Everything necessary so as not to inconvenience you."

A polite phrase.

But it carried weight.

I almost smiled.

"The definition of 'inconvenience' is relative."

"I tried to adhere to your standards."

I raised an eyebrow slightly.

"My standards?"

"Minimum intervention. Maximum stability."

He said calmly.

As if he knew exactly what kind of person I was.

I looked at Yuna again.

She still wasn't looking at me.

"An interesting observation," I said.

"Observation is my job."

Of course.

A lawyer.

I didn't need to ask.

It was obvious.

"Let's get one thing straight," I said. "I didn't ask for any of this to happen to me."

"Yes."

"But I am also not going to reject what has already happened."

"Yes."

"We are in agreement that the priority is Yuna."

"That has been the point from the very beginning."

His reply was quick.

No openings.

No emotional undertone.

Just facts.

"I thank you."

The sentence was spoken in the exact same tone as his previous ones.

Not warm.

Not cold.

Just a technical response.

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