

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 121: Summer Festivals 2

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Afterward, we got to work.

The first day wasn't too grueling yet.

Most of it was just unloading and prepping the equipment.

Massive crates were unloaded from the trucks.

Steel trusses.

Stage lights.

Giant speakers.

Spools of cable that must have been hundreds of meters long.

The sound of forklifts echoed constantly.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

People hurried back and forth.

Some shouted for tools.

Some counted inventory.

Some checked off clipboards.

I carried a few steel trusses along with another team.

Summer was no joke.

Even the breeze felt warm.

A few times, I lifted the hem of my shirt slightly to wipe my face.

Until finally—

"Lunch break!"

Someone's voice echoed from a distance.

Like a power switch being flipped.

Everyone stopped dead in their tracks.

"Ah... finally..."

Someone groaned, collapsing onto the grass.

"It's only the first day and I already feel like dying."

"Shut up," another shot back. "We've still got a week to go."

A few scattered chuckles followed.

I grabbed my lunchbox and sat by the edge of the pitch.

Bardy walked over, carrying some cold drinks.

"Here."

He tossed a bottle to me.

I caught it.

"Thanks."

I twisted the cap off.

It was cold.

Condensation clung to the plastic.

A simple thing.

But it felt like a luxury.

We ate while looking out at the unfinished work on the field.

The sun began to shift.

The heat was no longer as unbearable.

And not long after—

"Alright! Back to it!"

"Break is over."

We got back to work.

The massive frames were pieced together.

The stage began to take shape.

Steel was connected.

Nuts and bolts were tightened.

Cables were pulled from one side of the stadium to the other.

Lights were mounted high up on the towers.

Giant speakers were hoisted using cranes.

Little by little—

The form of the stage began to emerge.

Afternoon bled into evening.

Evening faded into night.

The work lights were switched on.

The pitch, which had grown dark, was bathed in light once more.

The hours ticked by.

Until finally, someone checked their watch.

"It's already eight!"

The others immediately started groaning.

"Sigh..."

"My back..."

"My legs... I can't feel them..."

Soft chuckles echoed once more.

Around nine o'clock.

Work was finally halted.

We ate dinner together.

Afterward, most of us started setting up makeshift beds.

Temporary tents had been pitched along the edge of the stadium.

They weren't very big.

Just enough to fit a few people.

I crawled inside.

Took off my shoes.

And lay down.

My body felt heavy.

Incredibly heavy.

Even when I closed my eyes, it still felt like I was lifting equipment.

Outside, the hum of people chatting drifted in.

Some were laughing.

Some were complaining.

Some were still eating.

And slowly—

I drifted off to sleep.

...

The next morning.

I opened my eyes.

Sunlight filtered through the gaps in the tent.

The sounds of the crew could already be heard.

"Let's go, wake up!"

"Get up!"

"Breakfast!"

I sat up slowly.

My hair was a mess.

My body was still aching.

I stepped out of the tent.

The morning air felt far more pleasant.

We washed up as best we could.

Ate breakfast.

And got back to work.

The following day was the exact same.

Wake up.

Eat.

Work.

Nightfall.

Sleep.

Wake up again.

The days blurred together like that.

Until finally—

Day three.

I stood there, looking straight ahead.

The pitch that had once been empty...

Was now completely transformed.

A massive stage stood proudly in the center of the stadium.

Large LED screens had been mounted.

Lighting towers reached into the sky.

Huge black speakers hung off the sides.

The cables were all neatly arranged.

Everything was almost finished.

"Hm..."

I gave a small nod.

Not bad.

From behind, Bardy approached carrying coffee.

"Here."

I took it.

"Look."

I turned to him.

Bardy pointed toward the stadium entrance.

Several vehicles were starting to roll in.

Black vans.

Minibuses.

Production cars.

People began pouring out.

Carrying bags.

Carrying equipment.

Carrying clipboards.

The artists and the event team were starting to arrive.

They walked in, taking in the sight of the stage.

And not long after—

They began to rehearse.

The first notes of music echoed through the speakers.

A soundcheck.

"Check."

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

"Check."

—

The overhead lights began to come on, one by one.

Some were too dim.

Some were too bright.

Then they were adjusted again.

Down below, the staff hurried back and forth.

The artists were starting to check their positions.

Some were practicing their choreography.

Some were testing their microphones.

Others simply sat and read over their materials.

I stood at the edge of the stands.

A warm cup of coffee in my hand.

My eyes lingered on the massive stage.

Three days.

It had only been three days.

But it felt so much longer.

Maybe because ever since arriving here, there had barely been a moment to rest.

Wake up.

Work.

Eat.

Sleep.

And repeat.

—

A gentle summer breeze blew past.

For some reason, my mind began to wander.

To a certain place.

My parents' home.

The wooden porch.

The rice fields.

The hum of the diesel engine out in the fields.

And—

Yuna.

Right. Yuna was still there.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

I stared at the screen for a few seconds.

How was Yuna doing over there?

Was she still following my mother out to the fields?

Was she helping out with the cooking?

Or maybe she was just playing with my younger brother.

—

I opened my contacts.

Dad.

Just as I was about to press the call button—

My phone vibrated.

I looked down.

[Dad]

"Hm?"

I answered it right away.

"Hello?"

A few seconds of silence.

Then—

"Papa!!"

Her voice burst through the speaker.

Incredibly loud.

I pulled the phone slightly away from my ear.

"Yuna..."

Unconsciously, a faint smile formed on my lips.

"Why are you yelling...?"

"How are you, Papa?!"

"Are you okay?!"

"Have you been eating right?!"

"Are you getting enough sleep?!"

The questions fired off in rapid succession.

It left me speechless for a few seconds.

"Hm..."

"Let me answer them one by one."

I could picture her face right now.

She was probably sitting up straight, holding the phone seriously with both hands.

"I'm doing fine."

"I'm eating regularly."

"I'm getting enough sleep."

"Now, what about you?"

"I'm good!"

She answered quickly.

Very quickly.

"You know what, Papa..."

"I went out to the fields with Grandma again yesterday."

"Oh?"

"I helped with the harvest again."

"And then I played with Uncle, and he caught a rhinoceros beetle! Its horn was huge!"

"And then I saw Uncle get chased by a chicken! Good thing it wasn't chasing me."

I simply stayed quiet and listened.

Yuna kept talking.

About the little things.

The smallest of things.

But for some reason, I listened to every single word.

About how my younger brother lost at playing cards.

About the chicken that chased someone.

About the watermelon that turned out to be unripe.

About the neighbor's cat sleeping on the porch.

Things that were, in truth, completely ordinary.

But right now—

It felt rather nice to hear.

"..."

Suddenly, her voice stopped.

A few seconds of silence followed.

Her tone dropped.

It became much softer, almost a whisper.

"Papa?"

"Hm?"

"I miss you..."

...

A gentle breeze blew past.

The sounds of the people in the stadium seemed to fade away for a moment.

I looked down at the pitch.

A few people were still working.

The stage lights shone brightly.

"..."

I slowly rubbed the back of my neck.

And then, I answered.

"Just wait a few more days."

"I'll be home soon."

A brief silence.

Then—

"Okay... Papa..."

Her voice sounded small.

But this time—

I could hear the smile in it.

I could picture it perfectly.

—

The following days went by in a blur.

So fast that it became hard to tell day from night.

The stage at the stadium was finally completed.

The lights came on.

Massive LED screens displayed animations.

The sound of music filled the entire venue.

People began to arrive.

The audience filled the seats.

Cheers.

Shouts.

Flashing lights.

Everything came to life.

I stood backstage with Bardy.

My arms crossed over my chest.

Taking in the results of the last few days' work.

Bardy walked over, carrying a folder.

"Itsuki."

"Hm?"

"Time to head to the next location."

I let out a soft sigh.

"...Another job? Already?"

"Haha."

"No time to rest. Let's go."

—

The next venue was right by the beach.

The moment we stepped out of the truck, the ocean breeze greeted us.

The salty air.

The sound of the waves.

And the summer sun, which felt far more scorching than it did in the city.

The stage this time was smaller than the one at the stadium.

And the event was only for one night.

But the work was exactly the same.

Unloading equipment.

Lifting trusses.

Pulling cables.

Mounting lights.

Day.

Night.

Wake up.

Back to work.

As soon as the event ended—

There was no time to relax.

We immediately tore everything down again.

Lights came down.

Trusses were dismantled.

Cables were rolled up.

Into the trucks.

Done.

Two days passed.

Then we returned to the stadium.

The place that had been filled with music just a few days ago.

Now—

It was quiet.

The spectator seats were empty.

Small pieces of trash were still scattered about.

Paper.

Drink bottles.

And that massive stage stood in silence.

Like the skeleton of some abandoned giant.

We got back to work.

Tearing everything down.

One by one.

Lights came down.

Speakers came down.

Trusses were dismantled.

Into the trucks.

Days passed once more.

Two days.

Two more days.

And before I realized it—

It had been quite a while.

I hadn't seen Yuna.

—

I lifted the last crate into the truck.

And pulled the door shut.

Done.

"Good work!"

"Good work!"

"See you next time!"

"Yeah!"

Voices echoed around me.

I just gave a small wave.

My body felt completely broken.

Absolutely broken.

My shoulders ached.

My lower back throbbed.

My arms were heavy.

And my eyes—

Felt dead.

Even keeping my eyelids open felt like a chore.

I headed back to the apartment.

To drop off my gear.

And the moment the apartment door opened—

My eyes immediately locked onto one thing.

The futon.

"..."

I walked in slowly.

The bag on my shoulder...

Slipped right off.

Then—

Thump.

My body collapsed straight onto the futon.

Soft.

Warm.

Comfortable.

So comfortable.

It felt like my body was sinking into it.

Hah...

Home...

My mind began to blur.

My eyes slowly drifted shut.

I didn't know how much time had passed.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

The sound of someone knocking on the door.

...

Knock.

Knock.

I slowly opened my eyes.

My head felt heavy.

I sat up slowly.

Walked toward the door.

My hand turned the knob.

Click.

The door opened.

"..."

I froze.

There, in front of the door—

Yuna was standing there.

Wearing a backpack.

Her hair a little messy from the wind.

She stared at me for a few seconds.

Then—

A small smile appeared on her face.

"Papa."

"I'm home..."

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Chapter 122: Yuna Comes Home

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"Papa, I'm home..."

Still only half-awake, I opened my eyes a fraction.

"Yuna?"

I lifted my head.

"How did you get here?"

"Who dropped you off?"

"Hehe..."

Yuna let out a small giggle.

She looked immensely satisfied to have caught me by surprise.

"I surprised you, didn't I, Papa?"

"Uncle dropped me off."

"Oh..."

I gave a slow nod.

"Where is he now?"

"Uncle?"

"Yeah."

"He left right away."

"He said he had some errands to run and needed to be somewhere."

"Hm..."

I nodded again.

"Well then... welcome back."

I reached out a hand.

And gently tousled her hair.

Her hair, which had grown a bit longer, instantly became a little messy.

Yuna didn't protest.

Instead, a soft smile appeared on her lips.

"Did you miss me, Papa?"

"Hard to say."

"Ehh..."

Yuna immediately pouted.

I simply walked past her.

And headed back deeper into the apartment.

Yuna followed right behind me.

As soon as the front door closed, she looked around.

"Woah..."

"It's so dusty in here."

"And we were only gone for a little while."

I glanced down at the floor.

She was right.

A thin layer of dust coated parts of the floor.

Yuna's little footprints were clearly visible on the boards.

I was too tired to care.

My body still felt utterly shattered.

I made my way back to the futon.

And let myself collapse onto it.

*Thump.

Comfortable.

So comfortable.

Meanwhile, Yuna slipped off her little backpack.

Then, she walked over to the window.

*Clack.

The window slid open.

The late afternoon breeze drifted right in.

The air inside the apartment instantly felt a little fresher.

"Papa."

"Hm?"

"Have you eaten yet?"

I stayed quiet for a few seconds.

Then—

*Growl...

My stomach answered for me.

Yuna immediately turned to look at me.

I just closed my eyes.

"Not yet."

"Oh."

"Then I'll make you something to eat."

"Do we even have anything left to cook?"

Yuna marched over to the fridge.

Pulled the door open.

And then...

She froze.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"There's nothing in here."

I let out a soft chuckle.

"Told you."

Yuna shut the fridge.

Then, she opened the pantry cupboard.

A few seconds later—

"Ah!"

"Found something!"

"I found something, Papa!"

I cracked one eye open.

"What is it?"

"Instant noodles."

"Do you want some?"

"Sure."

"That works."

I let my eyes slide shut again.

A moment later, I heard the sound of a pot being placed on the stove.

*Clank.

Then, the faucet turning on.

Running water.

Little footsteps pattered back and forth between the kitchen and the living room.

"It feels so much nicer being at home, doesn't it, Papa...?"

Yuna's voice drifted in from the kitchen.

It sounded a bit distant.

She was probably waiting for the water to boil.

"Hm," I hummed a vague reply.

Shortly after.

The sound of footsteps drew closer.

Then faded away again.

*Swish...

*Swish...

I opened my eyes just a crack.

It turned out Yuna was sweeping the floor.

Gentle, careful strokes.

Trying to keep the dust from kicking up into the air.

"..."

I wanted to help her.

But my body absolutely refused to move.

My eyelids grew heavier and heavier.

My consciousness began to slip away.

And finally...

I fell asleep.

—

Yuna stopped sweeping.

She glanced over at the futon.

And saw that I had already fallen back asleep.

My breathing was steady.

My body perfectly still.

A soft smile touched her lips.

"I guess Papa really is tired..."

She resumed her sweeping.

Once the floor was clean, she headed back to the kitchen.

The water was at a rolling boil.

She dropped the noodles in.

A few minutes later, they were done.

Yuna had to stand on a small step stool just to reach the stove.

Carefully, she scooped the noodles from the pot.

Drained the water.

And transferred them into a bowl.

Her little hands moved slowly.

With the utmost care.

Terrified of spilling a single drop.

Once she was finished, she climbed down from the stool.

She carried the bowl over to the low table in front of the television.

A table located right next to my futon.

She set the bowl down gently.

Then, she walked over to me.

"Pa..."

No answer.

"Papa..."

Her hands gave my arm a gentle shake.

"Mmm..."

My eyes fluttered open just a fraction.

"What is it, Yuna...?"

"The noodles are ready."

"Yeah..."

I gave the bowl a fleeting glance.

And let my eyes slide shut again.

Yuna stared at me for a long moment.

Then, she let out a soft sigh.

"You really are exhausted, aren't you, Papa...?"

She stood up.

And stepped closer to me.

One small foot climbed onto my back.

Followed by the other.

I felt a slight weight settle onto my back.

So incredibly light.

I could barely feel it.

Tiny steps.

Slow and rhythmic.

Starting from my lower back.

Moving up to the center.

Then up to my shoulders.

The gentle pressure felt like a massage.

The heavy ache that had built up over the past few days slowly began to melt away.

Yuna stepped carefully.

Walking back down.

Then up again.

Her tiny footprints moved from my shoulders down to my back.

To my waist.

Down my legs.

And then back up again.

It wasn't heavy at all.

In fact, it was wonderful.

My body felt lighter and lighter.

Sinking into deep relaxation.

The soft rhythm of her little steps seemed to fade into the distance.

My consciousness drifted away with it.

And without even managing to say another word—

I fell fast asleep.

—

[Sleepyhead]

A few days later.

It was a warm morning.

A gentle summer breeze drifted through the slightly open window. Sunlight slanted into the room, illuminating the apartment floor and part of the futon I was sleeping on.

"Papa..."

The voice was accompanied by a soft touch on my cheek.

My eyes fluttered open.

Yuna's face was right in front of me, incredibly close.

Her little hand still rested against my cheek.

"What is it...?"

"Don't sleep all day, Papa."

"Keep me company..."

"Alright..."

I forced myself to sit up.

And leaned my back against the wall.

My eyelids still felt incredibly heavy.

Yuna stood back up.

And walked over to the low table in front of the television.

Scattered across it were books, a pencil, an eraser, and a few pages of summer homework.

She sat down.

Picked up her pencil.

And went back to writing.

The room fell quiet.

The only sound was her pencil scratching against the paper.

I watched her for a few moments.

Then closed my eyes.

Just for a minute, I thought.

But before I knew it...

I drifted back to sleep.

—

A few minutes later.

Yuna glanced over her shoulder.

And sure enough.

I had already fallen asleep.

She immediately raised a hand.

And lightly smacked her own forehead.

"Papa really is a sleepyhead..."

She let out a long sigh.

"Haaah..."

Her index finger began to tap against the table.

*Tap.

*Tap.

*Tap.

Her eyes were still fixed on me.

Then, slowly...

A small smile appeared on her face.

The corners of her lips lifted.

As if an idea had just struck her.

"Hehe..."

Yuna grabbed a ballpoint pen from the table.

She stood up.

And walked slowly over to me.

"What should I draw..."

She crouched beside the futon.

And leaned her face in.

Very close.

So close she could watch the steady rhythm of my breathing.

One hand gripped the pen.

Her other hand gently held my cheek to keep me from moving.

The tip of the pen carefully met my skin.

The first line appeared on my forehead.

Then on my cheek.

Then below my lips.

And finally across my temple.

Yuna drew with absolute focus.

Pulling back every now and then to inspect her work.

Before leaning in to add another line.

"Fufu..."

"This looks better."

She stifled a giggle.

Immensely proud of her masterpiece.

Just then—

*Meow.

*Meow.

*Meeeow.

A cat's meow rang out close by.

"Hm?"

Yuna's head snapped up.

She stood up.

Set the pen back on the table.

And walked over to the side of the television.

A phone sat there, plugged into a charger.

Yuna unplugged the cable.

The screen lit up.

And the cat's meow rang out once more.

—

[Bardy Louis]

Yuna tilted her head.

"Mm?"

She narrowed her eyes, trying to read the name flashing on the screen.

"Who is... Barudi Luois?"

She tried to sound the name out slowly.

Then, she pressed the answer button.

*Click.

"Hello?"

Yuna's voice sounded much quieter than usual.

A man's voice immediately came through from the other end.

"Itsuki, I've got a job for you. It's close to your place."

"Papa is sleeping."

"Huh?"

Bardy's voice sounded confused.

"Wake him up."

Yuna immediately turned to look at me.

I was still slumped on the futon.

"Papa is tired. He can't work."

She explained this with absolute certainty.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"This is Yuna."

"Papa can't work. He's just been sleeping since yesterday."

A soft chuckle came through the speaker.

"Oh, so you're Yuna."

"Yes, I'm Yuna."

"Hey, Yuna."

"What is it?"

"If your papa doesn't work, you won't be able to see the festival, you know."

Yuna froze.

Her eyes went wide.

"Festival?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Eh?"

"Tonight. It's right by your house."

Bardy paused for a moment on purpose.

"Don't you want to see it?"

"I do!"

The answer burst out of her instantly.

"I want to! I want to! I want to!"

"In that case, wake your papa up. And hand him the phone."

"Okay!"

Yuna immediately spun around.

Her little footsteps pattered over to me.

"Papa!"

Her hands grabbed my arm.

"Papa! Wake up!"

She shook my arm back and forth.

"Papa!"

"Papa!"

I furrowed my brow.

My consciousness slowly drifted back.

I opened my eyes a fraction.

"Mm..."

"Papa!"

Yuna's face appeared right in front of mine.

Her black hair cascaded down.

Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"What is it...?"

"Here!"

Without any explanation, the phone was shoved right into my hand.

I glanced at the screen.

[Bardy Louis]

"Hm..."

I brought the phone up to my ear.

"Hey, Itsuki."

"Yeah... I'm awake."

"Good."

"What is it?"

"I've got a job for you."

I rubbed my face slowly.

"Where?"

"Near your house."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"What kind of event?"

"A festival."

I fell silent for a moment.

My eyes flicked over to Yuna.

She was sitting right beside the futon.

Staring at me without blinking.

She was listening intently.

"How big is the event?"

"Pretty big."

"How many days?"

"Just one night."

"Hm..."

I let out a sigh.

"Alright."

"So you can do it?"

"Yeah. I can."

"Great."

Bardy sounded relieved.

"I'll send you the address and the details in a bit."

"Yeah."

"See you tonight."

"See you."

*Click.

The call ended.

I lowered the phone.

Before I could even set it down, Yuna scooted closer.

"Papa!"

"Hm?"

"A summer festival?!"

"Yeah."

"Can I go?"

"You can."

Yuna's face instantly lit up.

It was practically glowing.

As if she had just won a prize.

"But you should go with your friends, okay?"

"Eh?"

"You don't want to?"

Yuna thought about it for a second.

Then, she shook her head.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I want to go with you."

I stared at her.

She stared right back.

She didn't look like she was joking at all.

"Why do you want to tag along with me?"

"I want to watch you work, Papa."

"Hm."

I pushed myself up from the futon.

My back still ached.

My body hadn't fully recovered yet.

I picked up the coffee mug resting on the low table.

It was still warm.

*Sip.

A blend of bitter and sweet immediately spread across my tongue.

Not bad.

"Why not just invite Mika and Hana?"

"I could do that."

"See?"

"But I still want to watch you work, Papa."

I gave a small nod.

"Alright, then. Suit yourself."

"Yay!"

Yuna sprang to her feet.

"I'm going with you, Papa!"

"Go get ready first."

She stood perfectly straight.

Heels together.

Chest puffed out.

Then, she raised a hand to her temple.

Offering a crisp salute with a deadly serious expression.

"Ready, Boss!"

I stared at her for a few seconds.

Then, I raised a hand.

Not to return the salute.

But to ruffle her hair.

"Eh!"

Her black hair instantly became a mess.

"Papa!"

I felt its texture against my fingers.

Soft.

But a little dry.

Hm.

That reminded me.

We'd run out of shampoo at home a few days ago.

I should probably buy some later while we're out.

"Papa..."

"What?"

"When a subordinate salutes, the superior is supposed to salute back."

"Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Whose rule is that?"

"My rule."

I nodded slowly.

"In that case..."

I raised my hand.

And offered a lazy, half-hearted salute.

"Ready."

Yuna immediately giggled.

"You're not being serious, Papa."

"I'm really not."

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Chapter 123: [Summer Festival Near Home]

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After that, we got ready.

I didn't have much to bring. Just my work bag containing my laptop, a few files, some measuring tools, and the usual small gear I needed for fieldwork.

Yuna, on the other hand, looked incredibly excited. Even though she wasn't carrying anything at all.

"Papa, are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

And with that, we headed out.

—

It didn't take long to get there.

As we neared the venue, the atmosphere of the streets began to shift.

Several roads were already closed off.

Traffic diversion signs stood at various corners.

Attendants were busy directing the passing vehicles.

Along the streets, festival posters had been put up—who knows since when.

Brightly colored flyers were plastered onto utility poles, notice boards, and storefront walls.

Bold letters announced:

Summer Cultural Festival.

Illustrations of fireworks and lanterns decorated the bottom edges.

And lining that very street was a row of massive trucks.

Some were already being unloaded.

Others were still covered by heavy tarps.

—

Suddenly.

A small hand tugged at my sleeve from behind.

I turned around.

Yuna stood right there.

Her fingers were still gripping my sleeve.

Her eyes darted back and forth.

Taking in the massive trucks.

Taking in the people hurrying by.

Taking in the stacks of equipment she had never seen before.

Her face was full of curiosity.

"There's so much..." she murmured softly.

By the side of the road, a few groups of workers were chatting casually.

The atmosphere was bustling.

But not like a crowded market.

It felt more like a place gearing up to host something massive.

Suddenly, a voice called out from a distance.

"Itsuki-senpai! Over here!"

I looked ahead.

Someone was waving their hand high in the air.

I raised a hand in return.

"Yeah!"

I then reached down and took Yuna's hand.

"Let's go, Yuna."

"Okay."

We walked over to the group.

—

As soon as we arrived, I set my bag down.

"Is everyone here?"

"Yes, senpai."

"Everyone's accounted for."

"Only the Boss hasn't arrived yet."

I nodded.

"Right, Bardy-san won't be here until this afternoon."

I unzipped my bag.

"So, in the meantime, I'll be leading this project."

"Understood."

"Got it."

Yuna stood right behind me.

Quiet.

She didn't say a word.

Her gaze kept drifting toward the large trucks crowding the street.

As if trying to process everything that was happening.

I pulled a stack of handouts from my bag.

And passed them around one by one.

The papers quickly changed hands.

Some started reading right away.

Others quickly flipped through the pages.

"Alright."

I unfolded a larger blueprint.

"The main stage will be set up right at that intersection."

I pointed toward the large crossroad a few dozen meters from where we stood.

"This area will be the center of the event."

They followed the direction of my finger.

"The food and game stalls will line both sides of the street."

"Make sure the spacing matches the blueprints."

"Don't pack them too tightly."

"And leave clear paths for evacuation routes."

Several people nodded, jotting down notes.

I continued.

"Speaker placements are on page two."

"Stage team, structural details are on pages three and four."

"Visuals, audio, and the fireworks team are on the following pages."

Multiple pages were turned in unison.

A chorus of rustling paper filled the air.

"We'll also be utilizing the advertising screens on some of the surrounding buildings."

"We've already secured permission from the property owners."

"That includes several balconies and camera mounting points."

"So make sure everything aligns with the blueprints."

"Got it."

"Understood."

"Copy that."

Affirmations rang out from all around.

Behind me.

Yuna, who had been quietly observing all this time, slowly shifted her gaze.

Not toward the trucks anymore.

Not toward the street anymore.

But to me.

She looked slightly confused.

And a little amazed.

It was likely her first time seeing me work like this.

Giving instructions.

Explaining plans.

Managing so many people all at once.

I tapped the blueprint in my hand.

"Alright."

I looked at their faces, one by one.

"Are there any questions?"

They exchanged glances.

Then shook their heads.

"None here."

"In that case, let's get to work."

"Right!"

They dispersed immediately.

Group after group headed off to their respective tasks.

Within minutes, the crowded area began to empty out.

Everyone was busy moving.

Lifting equipment.

Measuring the site.

Marking installation points.

I let out a soft sigh.

And turned around.

"Yuna."

"Yes?"

"Watch from the side of the road."

"It's dangerous over here."

Yuna followed my gaze.

Beneath a large tree sat a long wooden bench.

It was a safe distance away from the flow of vehicles and heavy machinery.

"Okay, Papa."

She nodded obediently.

No protests.

No further questions.

And she walked over to the bench.

I watched her until she was safely seated.

Only then did I shift my focus back to the work site.

The trucks were being opened.

Equipment was being unloaded.

The hum of a forklift echoed from a distance.

The festival preparations had truly begun.

I stretched my body for a moment.

Crack... pop...

My joints let out soft pops.

Then, I took a deep breath.

"Alright..."

I grabbed my hard hat from my bag.

And placed it on my head.

"Time to get to work."

—

I walked straight over to one of the trucks.

A few workers were already there.

Two men stood in the bed of the truck, while two others waited below to receive the load.

A long steel frame was slowly pushed to the edge.

"Itsuki-san."

One of them looked over at me, keeping a firm grip on the steel frame.

"Who's the kid?"

He nodded toward the bench under the tree where Yuna was sitting.

I took a quick glance.

Yuna was still there.

Sitting quietly, watching the entire work area.

"My daughter."

My answer was short.

But I didn't hesitate for a second to say it.

Because it was the truth.

Yuna is my daughter.

The worker nodded.

"Ah, I see."

The steel frame was slowly lowered.

The men below caught it, shifted its weight onto their shoulders, and walked toward the installation site.

I held out my hands.

"Pass one down to me, too."

"Sure thing."

Another frame was pushed down.

I caught it.

The cold metal pressed against my palms.

"Thanks."

I hoisted it onto my shoulder and carried it straight to the stage construction site.

—

Meanwhile.

Beneath the leafy shade of the tree.

Yuna was still sitting on the wooden bench.

Her legs dangled in the air, the seat just a little too high for her.

She swung them back and forth in small, rhythmic arcs.

Her gaze kept shifting from place to place.

"So this is Papa's job..."

she murmured softly.

She watched the people passing by.

Across the street, a few workers were measuring distances.

A measuring tape was pulled taut.

Someone crouched down.

And pressed a piece of colored tape onto the asphalt.

One.

Two.

Three.

Over and over.

Yuna watched intently.

"Oh... are those markers?"

She began guessing to herself.

Maybe that was where the stalls would be set up.

Or the boundary lines for the road.

Or something else entirely.

Down the street, a vehicle approached slowly.

Trailing behind it was a large container.

Yuna immediately turned her head.

"I wonder what that is..."

Her eyes tracked the vehicle until it came to a stop.

Several people rushed over to it.

One of them carried a massive spool of cable.

Another carried a crate of equipment.

Elsewhere, a few workers were unloading large speakers.

Four people hoisted one up together.

They walked carefully.

Placing it precisely on a designated spot.

Yuna just sat there.

Not doing anything.

But she didn't look bored in the slightest.

On the contrary.

She looked more curious than ever.

"Hm... what's that for..."

A short while later.

The food carts began to arrive.

Several vendors pushed their equipment toward their designated locations.

Some brought folding tables.

Some brought coolers.

And some brought stacks of wooden boards.

They began assembling their respective stalls.

"Oh..."

Yuna nodded slowly.

"So that's where they'll be selling stuff."

Little by little.

The once-empty street began to transform.

Stalls popped up.

Equipment piled in.

The stage framework began to take shape.

Time slipped by unnoticed.

The sun climbed higher.

The air grew hotter.

The asphalt began to radiate heat.

The crew kept working.

Sweating.

Lifting.

Measuring.

Installing.

Until, finally, noon arrived.

—

A few small vehicles pulled up from behind.

The drivers were carrying large bags filled with lunch boxes.

"Alright, everyone!"

Someone shouted.

"Time for a break!"

"Got it!"

"Roger!"

"Thank goodness."

The atmosphere instantly relaxed.

The workers stepped away from their respective tasks.

They moved to the side of the road.

Seeking out the shade beneath the trees.

Some immediately sat down.

Some lay back.

Others cracked open their water bottles first.

I wiped the sweat from my neck.

Then walked over to the bench where Yuna was.

She was still sitting there.

Her position had barely changed at all.

I stopped in front of her.

"Are you bored, Yuna?"

"Not at all, Papa."

"Then why do you look so sleepy?"

Yuna gave a slight start.

By reflex, she rubbed her face with the hem of her shirt.

"I don't."

She shook her head quickly.

"I'm not sleepy."

I stared at her for a few seconds.

Then let out a soft chuckle.

"Alright, alright."

I sat down next to her.

The wooden bench creaked softly.

Not long after, a worker walked over.

In his hands were two lunch boxes.

"Itsuki-san."

"Yeah?"

"Here's yours."

"Thanks."

I took them.

"Good work out there."

"Yeah, you too."

The man nodded, then walked off.

I looked at the two lunch boxes.

Then handed one over to Yuna.

"Here."

"Mm."

Yuna accepted it with both hands.

"Thank you."

"If you're tired, you can take a nap after we eat."

"But, Papa..."

"I'll wake you up when it's time."

Yuna seemed to think about it for a moment.

Then finally gave a small nod.

"Okay."

She popped open the lid of her box.

Her eyes immediately darted inside.

"What's in it?"

"Fried chicken."

Her reply sounded a little more excited.

I proceeded to open my own box.

Then looked at the contents.

"Hm."

"What is it, Papa?"

"I got fried chicken, too."

Yuna stared at me.

For a few seconds.

Then let out a small sigh.

"Obviously."

"Why is that?"

"They came from the same place."

"Oh, right."

Yuna shook her head slowly.

For whatever reason.

Then the corners of her lips curled up slightly.

I laughed along.

"Haha..."

"Let's eat."

"Yeah."

And for a while, the sounds of construction were replaced by the sounds of people enjoying their lunch beneath the shade of the summer trees.

—

Suddenly—

"Itsuki!"

Someone called out from a distance.

I snapped my head toward the voice.

"Yeah?!"

A plastic bottle sailed through the air, heading straight for me.

Without bothering to stand, I raised a hand and caught it effortlessly.

Smack.

The bottle came to a dead stop in my palm.

Before I could even see who threw it, a second bottle was already airborne.

I extended my other hand.

Smack.

Caught again.

"Thanks!"

"No problem!"

I raised the bottle slightly in acknowledgment.

Beside me, Yuna sat in stunned silence.

Her eyes were wide.

Her mouth was slightly agape.

She stared at me as if she had just witnessed a miracle.

I set the bottles down next to me.

"What is it?"

"Papa..."

"Hm?"

"That was amazing."

"Just catching a couple of bottles?"

"It wasn't just catching."

Yuna set her lunch box aside.

And stood up.

"Teach me!"

"Huh?"

"Teach me how to catch like that!"

She thrust both hands out in front of her, mimicking the motion of catching a flying object.

"I want to do it too."

I let out a soft chuckle.

"It's just practice, really."

"Then teach me."

"Alright, later."

"And..."

Yuna raised one arm.

She then shifted her stance, pantomiming someone lifting something incredibly heavy.

Her expression was dead serious.

"Teach me how to be as strong as you, Papa."

I stared at her ridiculous pose for a few seconds.

Then, I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"Hahaha..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're laughing, Papa."

"Hahaha..."

"Why? Is it funny?"

"You look like a tiny construction worker."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Not at all."

I was still smiling.

"If you want to be that strong, you'll have to work out."

Yuna sat back down.

"But I've never seen you work out."

I popped the lid of my lunch box back open.

"Because I don't."

"Huh?"

"I don't do any special training."

"Then how are you so strong, Papa?"

I thought about it for a moment.

"Because I've been doing this job for a long time."

"Hm?"

"It's like they say—experience never lies."

Yuna blinked a few times.

She looked like she was trying to process that.

"Oh..."

"So, if I help lift things a lot, I'll get strong too?"

"You will."

"What if I carry my school bag every day?"

"A little bit."

"What if I carry you, Papa?"

I immediately turned to her.

"That's impossible."

"Aw..."

Yuna looked a little disappointed.

I just chuckled.

And with that, we went back to enjoying our lunch.

—

Time marched on.

The sun began its slow descent.

The midday heat gradually mellowed.

The shadows of the trees stretched across the street.

Little by little, the festival grounds began to take their final shape.

Food stalls now stood neatly in rows along the street.

Lanterns were strung up.

Cables were neatly tucked away.

The main stage stood sturdy and imposing at the center of the intersection.

The large display screens were powered on.

Speakers were locked into their designated spots.

Event staff began arriving, all sporting their official uniforms.

Performers began showing up one by one as well.

Some were running sound checks.

Others could be seen rehearsing on stage.

And the most noticeable change of all—

The attendees began to arrive.

At first, it was just a handful of people.

Then a dozen.

Then dozens more.

The atmosphere, once dominated by the sounds of construction, slowly gave way to the hum of conversations and laughter.

The festival was truly going to kick off tonight.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

And walked over to the bench beneath the tree.

The spot where I had left Yuna waiting.

As soon as I got there, a small smile crept onto my face.

Yuna had fallen asleep.

Her head was tilted to the side.

Her black hair was slightly tousled by the breeze.

Both her hands were folded neatly in her lap.

She had probably tried her best to stay awake, but sleep had won out in the end.

I stood in front of her.

"Yuna."

"Mm..."

No real response.

"Yuna."

This time, I gently patted her head.

"Time to wake up."

Her eyelids fluttered.

"Papa...?"

She finally opened her eyes.

Still half-asleep.

"What's wrong...?"

She slowly rubbed her eyes.

"It's late afternoon."

"Hm..."

"Let's head home for a bit."

"Home?"

"We'll come back here later."

A few seconds later, her senses fully returned.

She looked around.

And froze.

Her eyes went wide.

"Woah..."

She stood up from the bench.

And took a few steps toward the street.

Her head turned every which way.

Taking in the rows of stalls.

Taking in the lanterns.

Taking in the massive stage.

Taking in the glowing screens.

Taking in the people starting to flood the street.

"Papa..."

Her voice was filled with awe.

"Is it finished?"

"Yeah."

"That was so fast."

Yuna kept staring straight ahead.

For a long time.

A very long time.

"Woah..."

She murmured it again.

This time much softer.

"You're amazing, Papa."

I scratched the back of my neck.

"It wasn't just me."

"But you too, Papa."

I gave her a faint smile.

"Alright, let's go."

"Where?"

"Home."

"Why?"

"We need to take a bath first."

"Oh."

"Then have dinner."

"Oh."

"And then we come back to the festival."

Yuna's eyes instantly lit up.

"The festival!"

"There you go, wide awake now."

"Hehe."

She nodded vigorously.

"Then let's go home!"

And this time, it was Yuna who took the lead, marching ahead while I followed closely behind her on our way home.

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Chapter 124: Summer Festival [Yukata]

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Evening had fallen.

The sky was no longer bright, replaced instead by a deep, dark blue stretching out over the city. The air should have felt cool, but the sheer density of the crowd made the atmosphere a little stifling.

We had returned to the festival grounds.

"Woah... there are so many people."

Yuna stared straight ahead, her eyes sparkling.

Lanterns hung all along the street, illuminating every corner of the festival. Rows of food and game stalls formed a sea of light stretching far into the distance. The sounds of laughter, music, and overlapping chatter blurred together into a lively hum.

Several attendees were dressed in brightly colored yukata. Not all of them, but enough to make the atmosphere feel entirely different from an ordinary day.

I followed Yuna's gaze.

Her eyes were fixed on a few young women and children wearing beautiful yukata adorned with summer flower patterns.

"What is it, Yuna?"

"Huh?"

She immediately snapped her head toward me.

"U-Um... it's nothing, Papa."

Then she tugged at my hand.

"Come on, Papa. Let's go look around."

Her small hand gripped mine tightly as she began to pull me forward.

"Alright, alright."

I matched her pace.

Hm... what do we have here?

My eyes swept over the rows of stalls lining both sides of the street.

Yakitori.

Yakisoba.

Candy apples.

Cotton candy.

Goldfish scooping.

Shooting galleries.

Ball tosses.

RC cars.

Ice cream.

And so much more.

There was a lot to do here.

And even more money to be spent.

I glanced down at Yuna.

She was still holding my hand, looking this way and that. Her eyes darted around, captivated by everything around her.

I knew that look.

The look of someone trying very hard not to ask for something.

The problem was...

If we bought everything that caught her eye, my wallet was going to meet a tragic end tonight.

I slowed my pace.

And came to a stop.

The sudden tension tugged at Yuna's arm, bringing her to a halt as well. She turned back and looked up at me.

"What is it, Papa?"

"Yuna..."

"Yeah?"

She waited patiently.

"If you want something, just say so."

Yuna blinked a few times.

Then she looked to her left, then to her right, taking in the bustling rows of stalls.

A second later, she looked back at me.

"I don't really want anything, Papa."

Her words were accompanied by a small smile.

A smile that was just a little too sweet to be one hundred percent believable.

Right at that moment—

"YUNAAA!!"

A voice called out from a distance.

Yuna whipped her head around.

Her eyes widened slightly in surprise.

—

In the distance, someone was running toward us.

"Yunaaaa!"

The voice grew louder.

It was Mika.

Behind her was Hana, dressed in a soft pink yukata with cherry blossoms scattered gracefully across the fabric. Beside her walked Misaki, Mika's older sister, with her usual calm and measured steps.

"Yuna!" Mika called out again.

"Mika?"

Yuna blinked in surprise.

A few seconds later, Mika came to a halt right in front of us.

"You came too!"

"Of course I did. I'm here with Hana and my sister."

Mika glanced back, pointing at the two of them.

I took a look at the three of them.

Mika was dressed in her usual clothes.

So was Misaki.

Hana was the only one wearing a yukata.

"By the way, Yuna..." Mika narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Where were you the past few days? I came by your house a couple of times, but no one was ever home."

"Hehe... sorry." Yuna scratched her cheek. "I was visiting my grandpa out in the countryside."

"Oh, I see. You should've told me."

"Yeah, I will next time."

"You're not wearing a yukata?" Mika asked.

Right then, Misaki and Hana finally caught up to us.

"Don't worry, Yuna," Misaki said with a faint smile. "You don't have to wear a yukata to enjoy a festival."

She then turned to me.

"Itsuki-san, good evening."

"Hey, Misaki. Good evening."

As usual.

Every time we met, the same thought crossed my mind.

Misaki really was beautiful.

Her short hair was neatly styled, and her outfit was simple, free of any flashy accessories. But it was exactly that simplicity that suited her so perfectly.

"How have you been?" Misaki asked.

"I've been good. Though the work never seems to end."

"Pfft."

Misaki stifled a small laugh.

"Same here. It's like that at my work, too. The customers just keep coming."

"Haha. That's just how it goes. Summer is always a busy season."

Meanwhile, right beside us.

Yuna was inspecting Hana from head to toe.

Then she stepped closer.

"That really suits you, Hana."

"Eh?"

Hana looked slightly embarrassed.

"Really? Thank you... My mom dressed me in it."

Her cheeks flushed a light pink as she answered.

"Aw... I want to wear a yukata too."

Mika immediately turned to her older sister.

"Siiiiis..."

She shot her a pleading look.

Misaki merely glanced at her.

"You don't own a yukata."

"We could buy one."

"They're expensive."

"But—"

"We'll wait until we have some extra money."

"Fine..."

Mika instantly gave up, retreating back to Yuna and Hana.

"Why aren't you wearing a yukata, Yuna?"

"Hehe. I don't have one."

Yuna let out a small laugh as she said it.

"Oh, same here then."

Mika nodded in satisfaction, seemingly pleased to have found a comrade in her misfortune.

Standing between them, Hana looked a little nervous.

"U-Um... well..."

Both of them turned to her.

"What is it?" Mika asked.

"Yuna... Mika..." Hana bowed her head slightly. "I think you both look really pretty just the way you are."

"Eh?"

"You really mean it?"

Hana nodded shyly.

"Thanks, Hana..." Mika said with a smile. "But I still want to wear a yukata like yours."

She then nudged Yuna's arm.

"You feel the same way, right, Yuna?"

"Uh..."

Yuna hesitated.

Her eyes shifted to Hana's yukata for a brief second.

Then down to her own clothes.

"A little... maybe."

"See? I knew it!"

Mika exclaimed, feeling vindicated.

Suddenly, her eyes caught something up ahead.

"Hey, look!"

She pointed a finger toward the row of stalls a few dozen meters away.

"There's a yukata rental stall!"

We all naturally followed her gaze.

Nestled among the food and game stalls, there was indeed a stall with several yukatas hanging up on display.

"Oh, you're right," Misaki murmured.

Before anyone could say another word, Mika was already on the move.

"Come on, Yuna! Let's go look!"

She broke into a half-sprint toward the stall.

"Eh— wait for me!"

Yuna quickly hurried after her.

Misaki, Hana, and I simply exchanged glances.

Then, we eventually set off, following right behind them.

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Chapter 125: Summer Festival [Yukata] 2

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Upon reaching the front of the stall, our pace naturally slowed.

Rows of yukatas were neatly displayed under the glow of paper lanterns. There were various sizes, ranging from children's to adults. The colors were just as diverse—red, blue, purple, white—adorned with beautiful summer flower patterns.

"Woah... there are so many yukatas..." Mika murmured, her eyes sparkling.

"Yeah..." Yuna agreed softly.

Yuna, Mika, and Hana stood there, gazing at the lineup of yukatas in awe. Their eyes darted from one garment to another, as if they didn't know where to look first.

"Hey, Mika," Misaki called out to her younger sister. "I didn't bring much money today, so try to hold back, okay?"

"Aw... Siiis..."

Mika immediately pouted.

Her small shoulders slumped in disappointment.

At the same time, Yuna's gaze, which had been fixed on the yukatas, slowly dropped. She didn't say a word, simply looking down in silence.

Hana, meanwhile, remained standing quietly, admiring the display without saying much.

Hm...

I looked at the three of them.

Then at Yuna again.

Ah...

Forget about the money.

Just this once.

Just this one time.

"Yuna. Mika. Hana."

"Yes, Papa?"

Yuna turned her head immediately.

A faint glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes, though she tried her best to hide it.

Mika and Hana also turned to look.

I stepped forward to the front of the stall.

"Excuse me."

The stall owner turned around.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to rent yukatas for the three of them."

"Right away."

The stall owner offered a warm smile.

I turned back to face them.

"Which ones do you want? Go ahead and pick."

"Really?!"

Mika's eyes instantly lit up.

"Thank you, Uncle!"

"B-But, Papa..."

Yuna looked hesitant.

I reached out and gently patted her head.

"It's okay."

Yuna looked up at me.

"I know you want one. So go ahead and pick."

A few seconds later, Yuna gave a small nod.

"Mm..."

Even so, her expression was a mix of happiness and guilt.

That was when Misaki approached.

She leaned in slightly toward me.

"Itsuki..."

Her voice was soft, barely more than a whisper.

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing?"

She glanced toward the girls.

"I can't just keep spoiling Mika like this."

The faint sound of her breath brushed against my ear.

I offered a small smile.

"It's fine."

"..."

"They're still kids."

Misaki remained silent, listening.

"They might forget a lot of things once they grow up. But I don't want one of their childhood memories to be the time they had to hold back when they really wanted something."

Misaki's gaze shifted slightly.

I continued.

"I don't want to see Yuna suppressing her feelings like she just did."

I glanced over at Yuna, who was currently browsing the yukatas.

"Compared to that, money isn't a big deal."

Misaki let out a soft sigh.

"But, Itsuki... wouldn't money like this be better spent on everyday necessities?"

"Don't worry."

I looked at her.

"Those are definitely necessities."

"And in my opinion, this is a necessity too. Just a different kind."

Misaki fell silent for a moment.

Then, a faint smile graced her lips.

"Alright then."

But a second later, she added, "But who is going to pay for all this? I really didn't bring much money today."

I smiled.

"I am."

"Oh..."

Misaki couldn't say another word.

She merely gave a slight shake of her head as she turned her attention back to the kids.

Meanwhile, Yuna and Mika were already standing in front of the stall owner.

Mika didn't even need much time.

Her hand immediately pointed to one of the yukatas hanging near the top.

"I want that one!"

A bright red yukata patterned with white summer flowers.

"Ooh, an excellent choice."

The stall owner took it down from its hanger.

"You're going to look absolutely lovely in this."

They also grabbed a pair of *geta*—traditional wooden sandals—and handed them to Mika.

"Yay!"

Mika happily hugged the yukata to her chest.

Then, she jogged back over to Misaki.

"Sis! Help me put it on!"

"Yes, yes... alright."

Misaki took the yukata and crouched down in front of her younger sister. With practiced movements, she began helping Mika into the garment.

Meanwhile, Hana simply stood near the display racks. She browsed through a few yukatas for a moment before stepping back.

On the other hand, Yuna was still inspecting the row of hanging yukatas.

Her eyes stopped on one that hadn't been displayed yet. It was still neatly folded on a shelf. The colors were simple—a blend of black and white with a subtle, understated pattern.

"U-Um... I want that one."

Yuna pointed at the folded yukata.

"Hm? This one?"

The stall owner picked it up and unfolded it slightly.

"Yes, that one."

"Ooh... an unusual choice."

The stall owner smiled.

"But I think it will suit you perfectly."

They handed the yukata and a pair of *geta* to Yuna.

"Thank you..."

Yuna accepted them carefully.

Then, she immediately walked over to me.

"Papa, help me put it on."

She held the yukata out to me.

"Me?"

I stared at the garment for a few seconds.

"I don't know how to put that on."

"Eh?"

"Try asking Misaki for help."

"Really?"

Yuna looked a little confused.

"Alright then."

She promptly turned around and walked over to Misaki.

I looked over at Hana, who was still standing by herself.

"Hana, aren't you going to pick one?"

Hana turned to me.

"I'm already wearing this one."

She held up the edge of her sleeve.

"And... I actually like this one best."

Her answer was soft as usual, accompanied by a small, polite smile.

"I see."

I nodded.

"That's fine, then."

I walked up to the payment counter.

Then, I suddenly remembered something.

Oh, right.

Misaki.

I glanced back over my shoulder.

"Misaki."

"Yes?"

Her voice called out from a short distance away.

"If you want one, you can get a yukata too."

"Eh?"

Misaki froze instantly.

A flustered look crossed her face.

"Eeeeh... there's no need."

"Why not?"

"There's just no need."

"But if you want to—"

"No."

Her answer came much faster this time.

"Besides, it's already hot out. Wearing a yukata would just make it worse."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Alright then."

I finally gave in.

Misaki let out a sigh of relief.

I turned back to the stall owner.

"Here's for the two yukatas."

I handed over the money.

"Thank you very much."

The stall owner counted the bills and handed me my change.

"Please leave your ID card as a deposit. You can pick it up when you return the yukatas."

I pulled out my ID and handed it over.

"Thank you for your understanding."

"Sure."

With that settled, I walked back toward the others.

Not far away, Mika had already finished getting dressed.

The red, floral-patterned yukata really suited her.

She stood in front of Hana, spinning around in circles.

"Look, Hana!"

Spin.

"What do you think?"

Another spin.

"It looks good on me, right?"

Hana smiled and gave a small round of applause.

"Yes."

Her smile widened.

"It suits you very well, Mika."

"Really?!"

"Really."

Mika immediately let out a joyous laugh.

Without realizing it, a small smile tugged at my lips as I watched them.

—

I slipped a hand into my pocket.

I pulled my phone out just enough to expose the camera lens.

Then, I pressed the volume button.

Click.

Click.

Click.

A few photos were taken in secret.

After that, the phone went right back into my pocket.

Not long after, Yuna finished getting dressed as well.

Clack.

Clack.

Clack.

The sound of wooden *geta* approached.

Yuna walked over to me.

The black-and-white yukata she had chosen looked far better on her than I had imagined.

"How do I look, Papa?"

She came to a stop right in front of me.

I observed her for a moment.

"Yeah, not bad."

"Just 'not bad'?"

"Not bad."

Yuna immediately pouted.

I held back a laugh.

"But why did you pick those colors?"

Hearing the question, Yuna's expression shifted into one of satisfaction.

As if she had been waiting for me to ask.

"I like this one."

She looked down at her yukata.

"Besides..."

"Hmm?"

"You don't like loud colors, Papa."

I blinked.

"So I picked this one."

"Hm..."

I didn't answer right away.

"Alright."

Over to the side, Mika was trying to run in her *geta*.

Clack-clack-clack-clack!

Her footsteps were quick and erratic.

"Hahaha!"

She laughed out loud.

"Look at me, Yuna! Hana!"

"I can run in these wooden sandals!"

Her yukata fluttered slightly as she ran in circles.

Her face was brimming with joy, as if she had just discovered an incredible new ability.

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Chapter 126: Candy Apple

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A short while later, we finally arrived at a candy apple stall.

Candy apples were lined up neatly across the wooden counter. Their glossy red sugar coats caught and reflected the glow of the paper lanterns strung along the street.

"Sis..."

Mika looked up at Misaki, her eyes full of hope.

"Alright, alright."

Misaki let out a small sigh and stepped forward.

I glanced over at Yuna and Hana.

The two of them were standing a short distance away. Every now and then, their eyes would dart toward the candy apples before quickly looking away, pretending they weren't interested.

Even though it was obvious they wanted one.

It has to be fair, I thought to myself.

I stepped forward and stood next to Misaki.

"We can't just let one of them enjoy it alone," I said softly.

Misaki turned to me.

"But what about the money?"

"Forget the money. It's about letting them share the moment."

"Hm..."

Misaki gave a small nod.

"I understand."

She turned back to face the stall owner.

"Three candy apples, please."

But before the stall owner could even move, we both felt a sudden tug on the hems of our clothes from behind.

We turned around at the same time.

Yuna and Mika were standing there.

Each of them was lightly gripping the edge of our clothes.

Hana stood right behind them.

"Sis..."

"Papa..."

Yuna shook her head slowly.

"You don't have to buy one for me, Papa."

Mika nodded in agreement.

"Just one is fine, Sis. Besides, I wouldn't be able to finish it by myself."

She glanced back at Yuna and Hana.

"We can split it three ways."

Hana, standing behind them, immediately nodded in agreement.

Misaki and I looked at each other.

We were close enough that I could see the warm glow of the lanterns reflected in her eyes.

Then, a faint smile graced Misaki's lips.

"Itsuki, look at them."

"Yeah."

A smile mirrored on my own face.

"Turns out they're smarter than we thought."

"Right."

A warm, indescribable feeling welled up inside me as I watched them.

There was no arguing.

No selfishness.

Instead, they were putting each other first.

Misaki turned back to the stall owner.

"Cancel the three."

She smiled.

"We'll just take one."

"Could you slice it into three wedges, please?" I added.

"Right away."

The stall owner immediately got to work.

Taking a candy apple from the display, the owner first removed its wooden stick.

Then, the apple was carefully sliced into three nearly equal wedges.

After that, each piece was pierced with a shorter wooden skewer.

"Here you go."

"Thank you."

Misaki paid, then received the three slices of candy apple.

She handed them down to Mika.

Mika immediately jogged over to Yuna and Hana.

"Here."

She handed one slice to Yuna.

Then another to Hana.

"Thank you, Mika."

"Thanks."

The three of them stood close together.

Then, I don't know who started it, but—

"Let's try putting them together."

The three small hands reached out.

The separated slices were pressed back against each other, forming a single, whole apple once again.

They stared at the result for a few seconds.

Then—

"Hahahaha..."

"It actually fits back together!"

"Even after it was cut apart!"

"It looks so funny though."

Their laughter blended into the lively clamor of the festival around us.

The paper lanterns swayed gently in the night breeze.

People continued to pass by in every direction.

But for a fleeting moment, our attention was entirely captivated by the three children, laughing happily simply because they had managed to piece an apple back into its original shape.

Misaki glanced over at me.

"So this is what their friendship is like."

I nodded slowly.

"Haha..."

My gaze remained fixed on them.

"It reminds me of my own friends from when I was a kid."

"Whenever we got a treat, we'd always split it just like that."

"Even though, looking back now, it would've been much easier if everyone just got their own."

Misaki let out a soft laugh.

"But it wouldn't feel the same, would it?"

"Yeah."

I nodded.

"It really wouldn't."

—

After that, we continued our stroll down the festival street.

Up ahead, Yuna, Mika, and Hana walked side-by-side in their yukatas. They each still held the slice of candy apple they had shared earlier.

Paper lanterns hung overhead.

Their warm glow illuminated the street packed with festival-goers.

Meanwhile, Misaki and I followed a few steps behind.

From time to time, the girls would stop at the various stalls.

Browsing.

Asking questions.

Then walking on.

And before I knew it, the amount of snacks in their hands had grown.

Nothing excessive.

Just enough to show how much they were enjoying the night.

At one stall, Hana bought a cotton candy with her own pocket money.

The cloud of white spun sugar was almost as big as her head.

"Whoa..."

Mika stared at it in awe.

Yuna leaned in to look, too.

Hana smiled shyly.

Then, without a second thought, she tore the cotton candy into pieces.

"Here."

A piece for Mika.

A piece for Yuna.

And the rest for herself.

"Thank you, Hana."

"Thanks."

Hana simply gave a small nod and a gentle smile.

Not long after, Misaki bought two Kiko ice pops.

She snapped them in half, making four pieces in total.

Then, she handed them out one by one.

One for Hana.

One for Mika.

One for Yuna.

And the last one for herself.

"Sorry, Itsuki."

Misaki chuckled.

"There were only enough pieces for the four of us."

"It's fine."

I shrugged.

"I don't really eat ice pops anyway."

"Really?"

Misaki looked mildly surprised.

"Yep."

Yuna chimed in before I could answer.

"Papa likes coffee."

"Oh..."

Misaki glanced at me.

"I didn't know that."

Yuna suddenly held up her ice pop.

"Papa, you can have a bite of mine if you want."

"Here."

She offered it up to me.

"There's no need."

"Come on, just a little bite."

I let out a soft sigh.

"Alright."

I leaned down slightly and took a small bite from the tip of the ice pop Yuna was holding.

A burst of cold hit my tongue.

Immediately followed by the strong, sweet tang of orange.

"Orange."

I gave a small nod.

"Not bad."

"Hehe."

Yuna looked satisfied, a bright little smile spreading across her face.

We resumed our walk.

Not long after, a takoyaki stall caught my eye.

The savory aroma wafting from the hot grill, mixed with the scent of sweet sauce, instantly caught my attention.

I stopped.

And bought a portion.

It came with six pieces.

As the stall owner handed over the paper boat, I turned back to the others.

"Here."

I offered the container to them.

"Try some. Take one each."

The three of them quickly gathered around.

They each picked out a piece.

"Ah... it's hot!"

Mika blew gently on her takoyaki before taking a bite.

"But it's so good."

"Mhm."

Hana nodded slowly.

"It really is."

"Yeah."

Yuna nodded in agreement, her cheeks puffed out as she chewed.

I glanced over at Misaki.

"You should have one too, Misaki."

"I'm fine."

She shook her head.

"I'm already full. I ate earlier."

"Here."

I pierced one with a skewer.

Then I held it out to her.

"I told—"

She stopped mid-sentence.

"...Alright, fine."

Misaki finally gave in.

She leaned in slightly.

And took a bite of the takoyaki right off the skewer I was holding.

"How is it?"

"It's actually really good."

"Told you."

I gave a faint smile.

For some reason, this entire atmosphere felt incredibly comforting.

The paper lanterns.

The bustling festival.

The girls laughing just up ahead.

And these simple conversations, far away from the stress of work.

A fleeting thought crossed my mind.

I never would have imagined I'd be spending a night like this.

I took another piece for myself.

It was still warm.

A rich, savory-sweet flavor flooded my mouth the moment I bit into it.

The texture was perfectly soft, with a pleasant chewiness on the inside.

"Hm..."

I nodded.

"Not bad at all."

There was only one piece left.

I turned to Misaki again.

"Here."

I offered it to her.

"For you."

"There's still some left?"

"The last one."

Misaki let out a soft laugh.

"I'll take it, then. Thank you."

She lightly grasped my hand holding the skewer, leaning in to take the final bite.

After that, side by side, we continued our stroll through the lively festival crowds.

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Chapter 127: A Whisper in the Ear

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The Goldfish Scooping Stall

At last, we stopped in front of the goldfish scooping stall.

A shallow pool took up almost the entire stall. Inside, dozens of small goldfish swam to and fro. Their scales caught the glow of the paper lanterns, flashing with hints of gold every time they darted around.

Sometimes they moved quickly.

Other times, they simply drifted, suspended in the completely still water.

"Do you want to try catching them, Yuna?" Mika asked.

Yuna stared at the pool for a long time.

"Umm... I don't have an aquarium."

She turned to look at me.

"Besides, would Papa even let me?"

"I'll go first, then."

Mika immediately turned around and ran over to Misaki to ask for permission—and money.

Hana, on the other hand, had already made her move.

She paid the stall owner, received a paper scoop, and crouched by the edge of the pool.

Her expression was entirely serious.

Calm.

Not rushed in the slightest.

I walked over to Yuna and pulled out a few coins.

"Here."

Yuna looked up at me.

"Give it a try, if you want."

"But I don't have an aquarium."

"I'll make one for you later."

Yuna's eyes immediately went wide.

"Really, Papa?"

"Yeah."

Her face lit up.

"Thank you!"

She took the coins and jogged over to the stall owner.

A moment later, she was holding her own paper scoop, crouching down right beside Hana.

Seconds after that, Mika returned with her scoop in hand as well.

She took her place on Hana's other side.

"What do you think, Itsuki?"

Misaki's voice came from beside me.

She walked past me, stepping a little closer to the pool.

"Do you think they'll catch any?"

"I don't know."

I took a few steps forward to join her.

"It's a pretty tough game."

We stood behind them, quietly watching.

It didn't take long for the difference in their skills to become glaringly obvious.

Yuna and Mika looked incredibly tense.

They dipped their scoops into the water.

The moment a fish swam close—

Splash!

They moved way too fast.

Much too fast.

Their paper scoops tore instantly.

"Ah!"

Mika lifted her ruined scoop, staring at the hole in the center.

"This is really hard."

"Yeah..."

Yuna nodded dejectedly.

"It really is."

Hana, however, was completely different.

She remained perfectly still.

Her scoop was submerged in the water.

She barely moved a muscle.

The fish around her didn't seem bothered at all.

They continued to swim leisurely.

Calm.

Natural.

Then, a small goldfish swam directly over her scoop.

Hana didn't react immediately.

She waited.

Just for a moment.

Then, slowly...

Very slowly...

She lifted the scoop.

The fish still hadn't realized what was happening.

It was only when it neared the surface that it began to thrash in panic.

But Hana was faster.

With a light, fluid motion, she lifted it completely out of the water.

The first fish was caught.

"Whoa!"

Mika half-stood from her crouch.

"Hana, you're amazing!"

Yuna stared in absolute awe as well.

"You actually caught one."

"Please teach me."

Hana let out a soft chuckle.

Her laugh was as gentle as always.

"Haha... there's really no secret to it."

"Then how do you do it?"

"You just have to stay calm."

Hana pointed at the surface of the pool.

"If you rush it, the fish will swim away."

"That's all."

"That's it?" Mika repeated.

"That's it."

Yuna and Mika exchanged a look.

Then, they turned their attention back to the pool.

"Alright."

"Let's try again."

They both lowered fresh scoops into the water.

This time, they tried to mimic Hana.

Remaining perfectly still.

Taking their time.

Waiting.

Truly waiting.

Behind them, Misaki crossed her arms, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Itsuki."

"Hm?"

"What do you think now?"

I watched Yuna and Mika for a few seconds.

Then, I gave a casual reply.

"I still don't think they're going to catch anything."

Misaki shot me a look.

"That's so mean."

I chuckled softly.

"Haha."

"You're the one who asked for my opinion."

"Fair enough."

Misaki joined in my laughter.

While we were talking, Hana successfully caught a second fish.

And a few moments later...

A third.

"Whoa..."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Look at Hana."

"She's really a pro at this."

"She really is."

Misaki nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on the little girl.

"Even though she makes it look so simple."

"Mhm."

I kept my gaze on Hana, who was still kneeling calmly by the pool.

"It's always the quiet ones who are the most dangerous."

Blissfully unaware of my comment, Hana remained entirely focused on her task.

Meanwhile, right beside her, Yuna and Mika were still struggling desperately against tiny fish that were proving to be much more slippery than they had ever imagined.

—

Yuna and Mika were entirely focused on the pool.

They crouched there, barely moving, trying to remember exactly what Hana had done.

The water settled back into a calm stillness.

Small fish began to swim closer.

Mika gripped the handle of her scoop tightly.

The moment a fish passed right over it, she began to pull it slowly upward.

The fish was lifted along with it.

Right up near the surface.

Mika's eyes immediately lit up.

"Come on... come on..."

But the moment the fish started to thrash, Mika panicked. She jerked the scoop up way too fast.

Rip.

The thin paper tore instantly.

The fish splashed right back into the pool.

"Ah..."

Mika's shoulders slumped.

"I was so close, too."

Beside her, Yuna remained perfectly still.

Her gaze was locked onto a fish swimming lazily past.

She raised her scoop, little by little.

The fish rose with it.

The surface of the water drew closer.

Yuna stayed calm.

Almost too calm.

When the fish finally realized it was being lifted, it immediately darted to the side and swam away.

It slipped right out.

"Tch... missed."

Yuna hissed softly.

Mika immediately burst into laughter.

"Hahaha, Yuna can't do it either!"

"Haha..."

Yuna joined in the laughter, though she sounded just a tiny bit annoyed.

Mika stood up and walked over to her older sister.

"Sis..."

"Yes?"

"Help."

Misaki let out a long sigh.

"Alright..."

She walked over and crouched by the edge of the pool.

Yuna turned to look at me.

That single look was more than enough to convey what she wanted.

"Yeah, yeah..."

I stepped forward and took a crouch next to Misaki.

Meanwhile, Hana had already finished.

She was busy transferring her catch into a water-filled plastic bag.

I glanced over at Misaki, who was about to lower her final scoop into the water.

"Careful. It'll tear."

Misaki gave a small smile and glanced back at me.

"You be careful, too."

The two of us lowered our scoops into the water.

The thin paper slowly soaked through.

I began observing the movements of the fish.

"Alright..."

"Come to think of it, the more angled the scoop is, the less water pressure the paper has to take."

"Then it's just a matter of waiting for a fish to pass."

"They'll swim away if the water moves too much."

"So the key is to move slowly, guide it near the surface, and lift it at the exact right moment."

I began putting my theory into practice.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

A fish drifted right over the scoop.

I lifted it.

Up, little by little.

"Good..."

"Just a little more..."

Right as it neared the surface, I pulled it up just a bit faster.

Rip.

The paper gave way instantly.

The fish bolted off.

I stared down at the ruined scoop.

"...Yeah."

I gave a small nod.

"This game really is tough."

Beside me, Misaki actually seemed to be having more luck.

A fish sat perfectly atop her scoop.

She lifted it.

Higher.

It even cleared the surface of the water.

"Itsuki!"

I whipped my head around.

"Quick, the bowl!"

"Got it!"

I hastily grabbed the small plastic bowl resting by the pool.

Misaki tried her best to balance the fish.

Slowly.

So slowly.

Then, suddenly—

Rip.

The fish dropped right back into the water.

"Aaa..."

Misaki hung her head.

"I'm terrible at this."

I let out a soft laugh.

"Hahaha."

"Alright, one more try."

I reached into my pocket to grab some more coins.

But Misaki caught my wrist, stopping me.

"Wait."

"Hm?"

"Look at them."

I turned to look.

Misaki did the same.

Over there, Hana was walking toward Yuna and Mika.

In her hands were three small plastic bags, each holding a fish.

"Mika."

"Yuna."

"These are for you."

The two of them were immediately taken aback.

"Huh?"

"But these are yours." Yuna shook her head. "You caught them."

"Yeah." Mika nodded in agreement. "They're your fish."

Hana offered a small smile.

"It's okay."

"I already have a lot of fish like this at home."

"Really?"

Mika's eyes immediately sparkled.

"I want to see them sometime!"

"I'll take it, then."

Yuna carefully accepted one of the plastic bags.

"Thank you, Hana."

"Thank you!"

Mika chimed in.

"You're welcome."

Mika immediately held her plastic bag up to eye level.

A tiny fish swam around inside.

Mika stared at the fish.

The fish stared back.

Or at least, that was how Mika saw it.

They locked eyes for a few seconds.

Then, with utter conviction, Mika spoke.

"Fish..."

"From now on, your name is Johnson."

"How about it? Do you like it?"

The fish just kept swimming, offering no reply.

Mika gave a serious nod.

"Alright."

"I'll take that as a yes."

Yuna immediately leaned in.

"Hello, Johnson."

Hana leaned in as well, offering a tiny wave.

"Hello."

Watching the scene unfold, Misaki and I could only smile.

Then, suddenly, Misaki leaned in close beside me.

Very close.

I could feel the warmth of her breath near my ear.

"Umm..."

It seemed like she was about to say something.

But she stopped herself.

Instead—

Whoosh...

She blew lightly right into my ear.

"Hey!"

I instantly jerked a step back.

A ticklish sensation shot straight down my neck.

My hand flew up reflexively to rub my ear.

"That tickles."

Misaki immediately burst out laughing.

"Hahaha."

"I didn't think you'd react like that."

Her laugh sounded light.

Not overly loud.

But free enough that her eyes crinkled slightly at the corners.

Bathed in the warm glow of the paper lanterns, her smile looked incredibly bright.

I looked away for a moment.

Trying my best to ignore the slightly strange rhythm of my heartbeat.

What is actually wrong with me...

I can't let myself get swept up in the mood just because of something like this.

Yet, for some reason, the harder I tried to ignore it, the clearer Misaki's smile became in my mind.

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Chapter 128: The Little Bell

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We finally resumed our walk through the festival.

Paper lanterns swayed gently overhead. The lively festival music, the laughter of the crowd, and the calls of the stall vendors all blended together.

It wasn't long before we stopped in front of a shooting gallery stall.

All sorts of prizes were lined up on wooden shelves.

Teddy bears.

Keychains.

Little toys.

And an ornamental little bell, hanging all the way up in the top corner.

The rules were simple.

Knock a prize down, and you get to take it home.

I stared at the stall for a moment.

Then, I turned to Misaki.

"Do you want to give it a try, Misaki?"

"Huh?"

She looked a bit surprised.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to play."

"In that case..."

A small smile touched Misaki's lips.

"I'll play too."

I stepped right up to the front of the stall and paid.

The stall owner handed over a toy rifle and three pellets.

By the time I received my gear, Misaki was already standing right beside me.

—

I glanced over my shoulder.

Yuna, Mika, and Hana were standing a few steps back.

"Don't wander off, you three."

"Okay!"

They answered in near unison.

I turned back to the stall.

Then, I took a good look at the distance.

"Wait..."

"Was it always this far?"

The targets were set about five meters back from the counter.

Not incredibly far.

But not exactly close, either.

"Having second thoughts, Itsuki?"

Misaki's voice came from beside me.

I looked over.

She already had her rifle raised, carefully taking aim.

Her posture was surprisingly serious.

She looked like a sniper locking onto a high-priority target.

I let out a soft laugh.

"No."

"If anything, this just makes it more of a challenge."

I raised my own rifle.

The toy gun was modeled after an old bolt-action rifle.

It looked like a simplified version of something from the World War era.

Though it was just a toy, it felt like it had decent accuracy.

My eyes scanned the prize shelves.

"That teddy bear over there..."

"It looks pretty light."

"A slight hit should be enough to knock it down."

I aimed right at a small, pink teddy bear.

Dead center on its head.

Before I knew it, the corners of my mouth curled up slightly.

"Perfect."

Click.

I pulled the trigger.

The pellet flew.

Smack.

It clipped the bear's ear.

The plush toy wobbled for a second.

Then, it toppled right off the shelf.

"Oh?"

The stall owner raised an eyebrow.

I gave a small, satisfied smile.

"Haha."

Then, I turned to Misaki.

"How are you holding up?"

Misaki didn't reply.

She was still entirely focused on aiming.

A few seconds later—

Click.

The pellet flew.

And...

It missed completely.

By a mile.

It didn't even hit the shelf.

"Itsuki..."

Misaki turned her head slowly.

"You ruined my concentration."

I burst out laughing.

"Hahaha."

"Alright, alright."

"I won't distract you anymore."

Misaki gave a soft hmph.

Then, she loaded her next pellet.

I did the same.

The second pellet slid into place.

I raised my rifle once again.

"Alright..."

"Another bear."

"Target locked."

I pulled the trigger.

Smack.

The pellet hit the toy square in the chest.

It instantly tumbled off the shelf.

I gave a satisfied nod.

"Hm."

I turned my gaze back to Misaki.

Right at that moment, she pulled her trigger.

Click.

The pellet shot in a straight line.

It nearly grazed the little bell hanging at the very top.

But it still missed.

I immediately laughed.

"Hahaha."

"A miss again."

Misaki furrowed her brow.

"I think you should aim for something a bit bigger."

"That bell is way too small."

"No."

Misaki replied without a second of hesitation.

Her eyes remained fixed on the top shelf.

On that exact same bell.

"I want that one."

"Hm?"

"So I'm going to get it."

I stared at her profile for a few seconds.

Then, I let out a soft laugh.

"Alright."

"If that's what you want."

"Have it your way."

Behind us, Yuna, Mika, and Hana were now watching with intense focus.

They seemed far more invested in Misaki's stubborn quest for that little bell than in my actual string of successes.

—

I raised the toy rifle once again.

Same target.

The pink teddy bear sitting right at the front.

Beside me, Misaki was still stubbornly aiming for the little bell hanging way in the back, past the rows of prizes.

I took a slow breath.

Then, I pulled the trigger.

Click.

The pellet shot straight and true.

Hitting the teddy bear dead center on the forehead.

The plush toy wobbled for a second, then tumbled right off the shelf.

I lowered my rifle.

"Here you go. Congratulations."

The stall owner smiled, handing over the three teddy bears I had managed to knock down.

"Yeah, thanks."

I took them.

Then, I looked over my shoulder.

"Yuna."

Yuna, who had been watching the whole time, immediately jogged over to me.

"Yes, Papa?"

"Here. For you and your friends."

I handed her the three bears.

Yuna accepted them with both hands.

Then, she turned around.

"Mika, Hana."

She handed one bear to Mika, one to Hana, and kept the last one for herself.

"These are for you. From Papa."

"Thank you, Yuna! Thank you, Mister!" Mika cheered with a wide smile.

Hana, meanwhile, gave a polite little bow.

"Thank you."

I gave a small nod.

Then, I looked back at Misaki.

She was still standing in the exact same spot.

One eye squeezed shut.

The other narrowed in intense focus on her target.

Her expression was dead serious.

"Misaki."

I called out to her.

Misaki reflexively turned her head.

And at that exact moment—

Her finger accidentally squeezed the trigger.

Click!

The pellet flew.

I wasn't even sure where it went.

Then—

Ding!

The little bell let out a sharp, clear ring.

Everyone standing around the stall immediately turned to look.

I blinked.

Misaki blinked.

The two of us stared at the bell for a moment.

Then, we looked at each other.

"Whoa."

I raised an eyebrow.

Misaki was still staring at me.

As if her brain hadn't fully processed what had just happened.

Then, she brought both hands up to her chest in tight little fists.

"Yay..."

It was a remarkably small celebration.

Incredibly restrained.

But it was obvious she was happy.

The stall owner hurried over.

In his hands were a gift card and the little bell.

"Congratulations."

He handed them over to Misaki.

"You've won the grand prize."

Misaki took them slowly.

"A prepaid gift card... for ten thousand yen?"

Her eyes immediately widened.

She flipped the card over a few times.

Then, she checked the printed amount again.

"Haha... I didn't think I'd actually hit it."

Her voice sounded like she still couldn't quite believe it.

I let out a soft laugh.

"Haha, snap out of it. You won."

I kept my next thought to myself.

Even if it was pure luck.

Misaki kept staring at the card for a few more seconds.

As if calculating exactly how many things she could buy with it in her head.

Then, she walked over to me.

"Here."

She held something out.

The little bell that had been the grand prize target.

I looked down at it.

Then, I looked at her.

"Why are you giving this to me?"

"Why?"

Misaki seemed to think about it for a second.

Then, she shrugged.

"I don't know."

"I just felt like giving it to you."

"That's all."

I stared at the bell for a few seconds.

Then, I took it.

"Alright."

"I'll gladly accept it, then."

"Don't lose it."

"I won't."

Misaki gave a small smile.

Then, she started walking again.

I walked right beside her.

Her hands were still gripping the gift card tightly.

"What's with that look?"

"Why do you look so thrilled just over a prepaid card?"

Misaki immediately turned to me.

"You really don't get it, do you?"

"Guess not."

"With this, I can go shopping without spending a dime."

She held the card up high.

"It's free, Itsuki."

"Free."

"Haha."

I chuckled.

"Alright, alright."

"Now I get it."

Misaki looked satisfied.

She went back to gazing at the card as she strolled leisurely.

And it was only a few steps later that—

I realized something.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

I looked behind us.

No Yuna.

No Mika.

No Hana.

I stopped in my tracks.

"..."

Misaki stopped as well.

Then, she slowly turned around.

Her gaze went blank for a few seconds.

Then, her expression shifted.

"Itsuki..."

"Yeah."

"Where are they?"

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Chapter 129: The Blonde Princess

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Misaki froze.

She went completely still.

Rooted to the spot.

Her smile vanished.

Her eyes darted left and right, searching for the little figures that had just been right next to us.

But they weren't there.

Not a single one of them.

My heart began to pound.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

It beat so hard the sound filled my ears.

And because of that, my mind flooded with possibilities.

Too many possibilities.

And all of them bad.

Without saying a word—

I broke into a run.

"Eh— Itsuki!"

Misaki's voice called out from behind.

But I was already moving.

This festival was built around a four-way intersection.

The main stage was right in the middle.

One road was blocked off for staff and event operations.

That meant there were only three main paths crowded with visitors, games, and rows of stalls.

Three possibilities.

Three directions.

And three missing little girls.

Should I check the outer edges first?

Or the inner section near the stage?

If they got lost, chances are they just kept walking forward.

But if something happened—

I gritted my teeth.

No.

Don't think about that.

I kept running.

My eyes swept both sides of the street.

Every narrow alley between the buildings.

Every gap.

Every shadow.

Every group of people.

The festival sounds that had seemed so lively just moments ago now felt like a grating noise.

Music.

Laughter.

Vendors calling out.

Everything blended into one chaotic mess.

I forced myself to focus.

I had three clues.

Three voices.

Yuna's voice.

Mika's voice.

And Hana's voice.

If I could just hear one of them—

"YUNA!!"

I yelled.

A few people turned their heads.

Others gave me strange looks.

I didn't care.

I kept running.

"YUNA!!"

No answer.

I quickened my pace.

The outer edge of the festival finally came into view.

The end of the street.

Rows of lanterns.

The parking lot.

And the main road just beyond it.

Nothing.

They weren't here.

I immediately spun around.

My breathing was growing heavy.

My heartbeat pounded even louder.

I ran in the opposite direction.

Toward the center of the festival.

Toward the stage.

If they were wandering aimlessly, they would most likely be drawn there.

The crowd was getting thicker.

I had to weave through the masses.

Occasionally bumping into someone's shoulder.

Occasionally excusing myself to push past.

But I kept moving.

Fast.

Faster.

Halfway there, I threw a glance at the spot where I had last seen Misaki.

Empty.

She was gone too.

Probably searching down a different path.

The stage finally came into view.

Spotlights.

Large screens.

A sea of people.

The tight, uneasy feeling in my chest worsened.

"YUNA!!"

I shouted once more.

Louder this time.

Then—

"Papa!"

I froze.

I stopped in my tracks.

It was Yuna's voice.

Clear.

Crystal clear.

But from where?

I immediately looked left.

Nothing.

Looked right.

Nothing.

Behind me.

Still nothing.

I forced myself to stand still.

Listen.

My eyes and ears were my only clues.

The bustling festival suddenly felt like an ocean of chaotic noise.

Music.

Conversations.

Laughter.

Footsteps.

All bleeding together.

Then—

"Itsuki! Over here!"

Another voice cut through.

Misaki.

I immediately whipped my head toward the sound.

In the distance.

Through the crowd.

Someone was waving their hand.

High in the air.

Over and over again.

I headed straight toward her.

My frantic sprint gradually slowed.

Getting closer.

Getting clearer.

First, I saw Misaki.

Then Mika.

Then Hana.

And finally—

Yuna.

Still wearing her black-and-white yukata.

Still holding the teddy bear I had won for her.

Still standing there with the exact same expression as a few minutes ago.

The tightness that had gripped my chest finally loosened.

I let out a long exhale.

Without even realizing it.

Turns out they were completely fine...

That was the first thought that crossed my mind.

I kept walking closer.

And only then did I realize—

they weren't alone.

Bardy Louis was standing right there.

Beside him was a girl I had never seen before.

She had long hair.

A brilliant golden blonde that shimmered under the light of the festival lanterns.

The school uniform she was wearing was clearly not a Japanese one.

The cut was entirely different.

The crest was unfamiliar too.

She stood calmly beside Bardy.

Observing.

As if piecing something together in her mind.

And for some reason—

that girl's gaze had been locked on me this entire time.

—

"Itsuki!"

Bardy called out to me from a distance.

I raised a hand to let him know I heard him.

Then, I walked over, coming to a stop in front of them.

"Papa?"

Yuna looked a little surprised, noticing my heavy breathing as I approached.

I looked straight at her.

"Yuna."

"Yeah?"

"Next time, don't just wander off without saying anything."

Yuna blinked.

"Or else?"

I stared at her for a few seconds.

"Or else I'm sticking a GPS tracker on you."

"Huh?"

Yuna's face instantly twisted in confusion.

Beside her, Misaki held back a laugh.

"That's going a little overboard," she said.

"No, it isn't."

"That's going a little overboard," Yuna parroted, though I doubted a kid her age even knew what a GPS was.

"No, it isn't."

"Papa's weird."

"Mm."

Yuna let out a long sigh.

"I'll tell you next time."

"Good."

Bardy, who had been quietly watching our exchange, finally spoke up.

"Itsuki, are you alright?"

"Yeah."

I nodded.

"I'm fine."

Even though sweat was still clinging to my neck and temples.

And my heartbeat had only just settled down a few moments ago.

But at least everything was fine.

No one was lost.

No one was hurt.

That was enough.

Bardy gave a small smile.

"So this is your daughter."

He turned to Yuna.

"Hello, Yuna."

"Hello."

Yuna replied with a polite little bow.

Misaki, Mika, and Hana, however, still looked a bit lost.

They obviously had no idea who this man was.

Seeing this, I decided to clear things up.

"Let me introduce you."

I gestured toward the blonde man.

"This is Bardy-san."

"My boss."

"The one who gave me my job."

"Oh..."

Misaki's face lit up with understanding.

She offered a polite bow.

"Good evening."

Mika and Hana hurriedly followed suit.

"Good evening."

Bardy let out a soft chuckle.

"No need to be so formal."

I turned my attention back to Yuna.

"So?"

"Why did you wander off?"

"Um..."

Yuna scratched her cheek.

Then, she pointed a finger at Mika.

"Mika asked me to follow her."

"Hey!"

Mika protested immediately.

"Okay, it was me!"

"And why did you do that?" I asked.

"Because we saw someone with really pretty hair."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Oh."

"Well, just tell me next time."

"Okay..."

Yuna replied softly.

Only then did I really look at the girl standing beside Bardy.

Long, golden blonde hair.

Pale skin, like porcelain.

And a foreign school uniform I had never seen before.

She had been completely silent this whole time.

Her eyes would occasionally glance at me.

Then dart over to Misaki.

Before returning to me again.

She looked a little nervous.

Bardy smiled.

"Itsuki."

"Allow me to introduce her."

He placed a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder.

"This is my daughter, Yuria."

The girl looked a little startled at being nudged forward.

Still, she took a small step ahead.

Her shoulders were visibly tense.

Her hands were clasped tightly together.

Then, she spoke.

Her Japanese was fairly good.

But there was a distinct, undeniable foreign accent.

"H-Hello..."

She offered a small bow.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

Her eyes flicked toward Misaki for a second.

Then back to me.

As if she were trying to gather her courage.

I gave a faint smile.

"Alright."

"Let me introduce us, then."

"I'm Itsuki."

I pointed at myself.

"Your father's colleague."

Then, I gestured to Misaki.

"This is Misaki."

"My friend."

Misaki looked slightly surprised to hear that, but she didn't say a word.

I continued.

"This is Yuna, my daughter."

Yuna raised a small hand.

"Hello."

"This is Mika."

"Hi!"

"And this is Hana."

Hana gave a polite bow.

"It's nice to meet you."

For some reason, after hearing those introductions, the blonde girl's expression softened.

Her stiff shoulders visibly relaxed.

As if something I said had brought her relief.

Then, she took another step closer.

And extended her hand.

Offering a handshake.

I looked at her hand for a moment.

Then, I accepted it.

Her hand was cold, yet soft.

A moment later—

the sound of loudspeakers from the direction of the stage echoed across the entire festival grounds.

"Check... check... one, two, three..."

The sound of the microphone test boomed through the speakers.

The crowd immediately began to turn toward the stage.

The spotlights flared to life.

Then, the energetic voice of the MC rang out.

"Welcome to this year's Summer Festival!"

Cheers erupted from all directions.

"It is now eight o'clock!"

"And it's time for our main event to begin!"

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