

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 21: The Transaction

"I thank you."

The words fell flat.

It wasn't the tone of a man bowing his head.

Not the tone of a man in debt of gratitude.

It was more like someone recording a completed transaction.

"I haven't done anything extraordinary," I said.

"You took her in."

"It was the least troublesome option."

"I appreciate that choice."

Silence.

"Is this permanent?" I asked.

"Define permanent."

"Ten years. More."

A faint, almost inaudible breath came through the line.

"As long as it is what is best for her."

A flexible answer. Too flexible.

"And if one day she wants to go back?" I asked.

"We will not close the door."

We again.

I noted his choice of words.

"Does her mother know I'm calling right now?" I asked.

"No."

Silence...

"She chose you."

His tone didn't change. But the weight of the sentence was pointed.

"Oh..."

"She judged you to be stable."

"She judged too quickly."

"She is rarely wrong."

I didn't argue.

Because technically, the arrangement had gone smoothly enough.

"I don't want any legal conflicts in the future," I said.

"There will be none."

"Optimistic words."

"That is...prepared words."

It wasn't a threat. It was a guarantee.

I shifted the school form a little with my fingertip.

"If the school calls you," I said, "in what capacity will you answer?"

"Biological father."

Direct. Without hesitation.

"Without a claim to custody."

"Correct."

"Without intervention."

"Unless it becomes necessary."

That last word carried a subtle edge.

I caught it.

"Your definition of necessary?"

"If her safety is threatened."

Logical.

"Fine."

Silence again.

The conversation held no emotion. No raised voices. But it had structure.

Like a contract being read aloud without the need for signatures.

Chapter 22: Patterns and Lines

"Are there any special requests?" I asked.

"There is one."

I waited.

"Don't make her feel abandoned."

The answer came a fraction of a second slower than the rest.

Still stable. Still controlled.

But a fraction of a second longer.

I looked at Yuna.

She was still staring at the table.

"Too late," I said.

Silence on the other end.

Then I continued,

"She already came here on her own."

This time the pause was longer.

"I understand," he finally said.

No defense.

No clarification.

Only acknowledgment.

I stared at the ceiling of my apartment for a moment.

"Alright," I said. "I'll write this number down."

"Thank you."

"What if I change my number?"

"You won't."

A statement, not a question.

I almost smiled again.

"Another observation?"

"Patterns."

"It's dangerous to work with patterns."

"It's dangerous to live without them."

We stopped there.

There was nothing left to discuss.

"Good afternoon," I said.

"Good afternoon."

Click.

The line disconnected.

The room returned to the size of six tatami mats.

Yuna was still sitting across from me.

She didn't ask right away.

Good.

I placed the phone on the table.

Then pulled the school form closer.

The small box was still blank.

Emergency contact other than guardian.

"He answered," I said.

Yuna gave a small nod.

"He always answers."

"Yeah."

I picked up my pen.

Let it hover over the paper for a few seconds.

"What did you ask?" she asked quietly.

"Not much."

"Are you mad?"

"No."

"Disappointed?"

"I had no expectations."

She stared at me for a few seconds.

As if trying to read something that wasn't there.

I looked down and began to write.

My handwriting wasn't as clean as hers.

Kuroda Seiji.

Below it, the number she had written out earlier.

I stopped after the final stroke.

The black ink looked perfectly ordinary.

Like anyone's name.

But administratively, there was now a line connecting:

Me. Yuna. And the man who spoke without inflection.

Chapter 23: Administratively Speaking

"Done," I said.

Yuna looked at the form.

Her eyes lingered on the name.

She didn't touch it.

Didn't smile.

Made no major reaction.

Just gave a small nod.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For calling."

"It was just procedure."

She looked down slightly.

"You're not mad."

"I told you I wasn't."

"I thought... maybe you wouldn't want to get involved."

I put the pen down on the table.

"If I didn't want to get involved, I wouldn't have called."

She fell silent.

Quiet for a few seconds.

Then she asked quietly,

"Are you scared?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because nothing has changed."

She furrowed her brow slightly.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm still living in this apartment. You're still going to school next week. The bills still come every month. The world doesn't stop just because of one name in a little box."

She looked at the paper again.

"But now it's more official," she said.

"Yes."

"That means... if something happens to me..."

"He will answer the phone."

"And so will you."

"Yes."

She took a small breath.

Then, without much movement, she shifted her futon slightly with her foot.

An inch closer to the table.

A small movement.

Barely noticeable.

But I saw it.

I picked up the folder and slipped all the forms inside.

"Done for today," I said.

"We aren't going anywhere else?"

"No."

She looked relieved.

Then asked in a normal tone,

"Can I watch TV?"

"You may. Human standard volume."

She stood up and walked to the small television on the shelf.

As the screen flickered on, blue light reflected against the white wall.

I sat for a few more seconds in the exact same spot.

Looking at the small box that was now filled.

Kuroda Seiji — Emergency Contact.

A name I didn't save in my phone. A number I might never call again. Unless the world truly forced my hand.

Behind me, the chatter of a daytime broadcast began to play.

Yuna sat on her gray futon.

Her legs folded neatly. Her eyes focused on the screen.

And for the first time since yesterday,

we looked like a normal family.

Administratively speaking.

Chapter 24: The Sound of Habit

The morning light hadn't fully bled into the room yet.

I usually woke up before the sun actually decided to show up.

No alarms.

No extra noise.

Just habit.

But that morning—

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

A sharp sound sliced through the air.

I opened my eyes in a single motion.

White ceiling. Two futons. The sound came from the left.

Yuna sat bolt upright on her futon, reaching for the small white clock beside her pillow.

She turned it off quickly.

Silence returned.

I stared at her.

She stared back.

A few seconds of silence.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Five thirty."

"Why?"

"So I wouldn't oversleep."

"We aren't going anywhere today."

She looked around the room, as if searching for a calendar she might have missed.

"Oh."

I closed my eyes again for a second.

"Do you usually wake up that early?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"So I won't get scolded."

"I never said I'd get mad."

"Not yet."

Her answer came a little too fast.

I opened my eyes again.

"No one here is going to get mad if you wake up at six."

She thought about it for a few seconds.

"Six is cutting it too close."

"Cutting it close for what?"

"To be a good kid."

I sat up slowly.

"You aren't taking a test."

She held the small clock with both hands.

"I'm used to waking up early."

"Alright."

I lay back down.

"Set it for six tomorrow."

She looked hesitant.

"Five past six."

"Six."

"Five to six?"

"Six."

She fell silent.

Then gave a small nod.

"Okay."

Silence again.

Five seconds.

Ten seconds.

Then—

"Are you awake, Papa?"

I opened one eye.

"I am now."

"Oh."

"Are you going back to sleep?"

She looked at her clock.

"I'm already awake."

"That's not an answer."

She stared at her own futon.

Then lay back down.

Rigid.

Like someone unsure if they were allowed to relax.

I stared at the ceiling.

"If there's nothing on the schedule, you can take your time," I said.

No answer.

A few seconds later, I heard her breathing grow more even.

Not asleep.

Just... not tense.

The room fell quiet again.

But it wasn't an empty quiet.

It was the quiet of two people who hadn't fully figured out each other's rhythms yet.

And for the first time since we started living together,

I realized something small but distinct—

there was now another sound that could wake me up.

Chapter 25: The Definition of Home

I woke up about thirty minutes later.

Yuna was already sitting at the low table.

Her hair was combed. Her clothes were neat. Her small watch was placed perfectly straight beside her.

In front of her—there was no food.

She was just sitting there.

Waiting.

"Have you been up long?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you eat?"

"Waiting for Papa."

"I never asked for company while eating."

"But it's polite."

I walked over to the kitchenette.

I opened the fridge. Inside:

eggs, sausages, last night's leftover rice, a carton of milk.

"Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"Statistic for 'a little'?"

"Three out of ten."

"Okay."

I took out two eggs.

Just as I was about to crack them straight into the pan, Yuna stood up.

"I can help."

"Yesterday your statistic was nine out of ten."

"Today it might be a ten."

"Whatever."

She stood beside me.

I handed her an egg.

She carefully cracked it against the edge of the bowl.

The shell split cleanly. Not a single fragment fell in.

"Statistic... ten out of ten," she said quietly.

"Too soon to tell, that's only one."

We cooked in silence.

She didn't say much.

The eggs were finally done.

I moved the pan to the table.

Usually, I ate straight from the pan.

It was practical.

But before I could sit down—

Yuna had already taken two plates from the dish rack.

She set them down carefully. Brought out the chopsticks. Scooped the rice onto each plate in nearly symmetrical portions.

I watched her.

"Are you running a restaurant?" I asked.

"No."

"Why so neat?"

"It's normal."

"Normal according to whom?"

"According to home."

The answer slipped out unintentionally.

Her hands paused for a fraction of a second.

I sat down.

"You don't need to do that here."

She stared at her plate.

"If it isn't neat, it's a mess."

"Being messy isn't a crime, so it's not a problem."

"Papa usually eats from the pan?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it hot?"

"A little."

"Then you should use a plate. Using a pan isn't elegant."

I picked up my chopsticks.

"This apartment doesn't need elegance."

She thought about that.

Then she said quietly,

"But that's too... impolite."

Chapter 26: A Minor Victory

The words weren't meant as an attack.

Just an observation.

I looked around the small room.

Two futons. A low table. A simple shelf.

"What do you think a home should be like?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away.

"Eating together," she finally said.

"We are eating together."

"Sitting neatly."

"We are sitting."

"Not rushing."

I started to eat.

"I'm not rushing."

She watched me for a moment.

Then started eating too.

Her first bite was slow.

The room felt different this morning compared to yesterday.

Not because of the food.

Because there was someone trying to make it feel like a permanent residence.

"Can I ask a question?" she said.

"You just did."

"Do you usually eat alone, Papa?"

"Yes."

"Is it lonely?"

I shrugged.

"Practical."

She gave a small nod.

Then said in a neutral tone,

"If there are two people, maybe it doesn't need to be so practical."

I chewed slowly.

"Maybe."

She smiled faintly.

Not wide. Not dramatic.

Just enough to show that she had tallied a minor victory.

And for the first time,

I didn't eat straight from the pan.

After breakfast ended, I stood up and carried the plates to the kitchen.

Yuna had stood up before me.

She washed her own plate.

Her movements were neat. Measured.

I washed the pan.

Done.

I grabbed the small towel I usually used to dry my hands.

Wiped them.

Then hung it over the fridge handle.

Like always.

I turned around—

and saw Yuna staring at the towel.

Silent.

Chapter 27: The New Standard

"Do you see something?" I asked.

"It's uneven."

"What?"

"The towel."

"Its function is to dry."

"It's crooked."

"So am I."

She walked over.

Without another word, she pulled the towel off.

Folded it twice. Then hung it back up in a perfectly symmetrical position.

The ends were flush. The left and right heights were equal.

She took a step back.

Evaluating.

"Now it's right," she said.

"What's right about it?"

"It's balanced."

I stepped closer again. Took the towel. Wiped my already dry hands.

Then hung it back up.

Slightly crooked.

On purpose? Not really. I just didn't think about it.

Yuna looked at it.

Slowly took a breath.

"Papa."

"Hm."

"Now it's messy again."

"It's still usable."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

She thought for a moment.

"If something can be made better, why not do it?"

I leaned against the kitchen counter.

"What percent better is it than before?"

"Twenty."

"Efficiency-wise?"

"Unchanged."

"So it's purely visual."

"That's important."

"For who?"

"For whoever looks at it."

"It's just the two of us."

She looked at me.

"That's enough."

The answer wasn't dramatic.

Not emotional.

But it carried weight.

I looked at the towel again.

"What if I don't care?" I asked.

"I care."

"What if I mess it up on purpose?"

"I'll fix it again."

"Without protesting?"

She thought about it.

"With a little protesting."

"Right now?"

"I am currently protesting."

I almost smiled.

"Alright," I said.

I grabbed the towel again.

Hung it up a bit more evenly.

Not perfect like her version.

But close enough.

She watched.

Then gave a small nod.

"Eighty percent," she said.

"Is that a passing grade?"

"Barely."

"Strict."

She returned to her futon.

I looked at the fridge handle, which now looked... more symmetrical than usual.

This small room was slowly changing.

Not because of new belongings.

But because there was a new standard.

And that standard was about one meter and thirty centimeters tall.

Yuna sat back down on her futon, opening a small notebook.

I sat at the table.

Silence again.

But now there was something different—

even the towel had a place.

Chapter 28: The Shape of Silence

Even the towel had a place.

And for some reason, it made the kitchen feel a little smaller.

Afternoon arrived without a sound.

Sunlight filtered through the small window beside the bookshelf. It wasn't bright, but it was enough to illuminate the fine dust drifting in the air.

I sat at the table with my laptop open.

Not working.

Just checking the stage teardown schedule for the week.

Nothing for today.

Empty.

Yuna sat on her futon, her small notebook open. Her pencil moved slowly.

No television. No alarms. No conversation.

Just two small sounds:

The clicking of laptop keys. The scratch of graphite on paper.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

I realized something.

Usually, when I was alone, silence had no shape.

Now, silence had a distance.

I glanced her way.

She sat perfectly straight. Too straight for a nine-year-old on a day off.

"Don't you want to watch TV?" I asked.

"I'm okay."

"That's not an answer."

She stopped writing.

"I don't want to be a bother."

"You're not."

"I'm worried it'll be noisy."

"This apartment isn't a library."

She gave a small nod.

Then closed her book.

Not because she wanted to stop. But because she was given permission.

She picked up the remote. Turned on the television.

The volume... was incredibly low.

I could still hear the scratching of a pencil more clearly than the TV.

"You can turn the volume up."

"What's a safe number?"

"A human number."

"That's not specific."

"Ten."

She looked at the screen.

The volume was currently at four.

She raised it to seven.

Stopped.

Turned to look at me.

I nodded.

She raised it to ten.

The sound of a daytime variety show filled the room.

The audience's laughter sounded fake and entirely too loud.

Yuna sat back.

Her hands on her lap. Her eyes on the screen.

But her body leaned slightly toward the table where I was sitting.

Not by much.

Just a few centimeters.

As if making sure I was still there.

I closed my laptop.

"Yuna."

"Yes?"

"If you're bored, you can tell me."

"I'm not bored."

"We've been sitting in silence for almost twenty minutes."

She thought about it.

"That's not a bad thing."

"It's not."

"But... it's a little different."

"Different how?"

She slowly hugged her knees.

"Usually, when it's quiet, I'm alone."

The answer was light.

As if it didn't matter.

But the words carried weight.

"And now?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away.

Then she said,

"Now there are two in the quiet."

I looked at the TV screen.

The show wasn't funny.

But the laugh track kept playing.

"Is a two-person silence heavier?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"It's more... real."

The word came out without any dramatic effect.

Just an honest observation.

I stood up from my chair.

Walked to the kitchenette.

Took out two glasses.

Poured some milk.

Returned to the table.

I placed one glass in front of her.

She looked at it, then up at me.

"No special occasion," I said.

"Why milk?"

"Because it's what we have."

She held the glass with both hands.

Warm.

She didn't drink it right away.

Just held it for a moment.

Then scooted a little closer.

Her gray futon touched the leg of the table.

The distance between us was now less than a meter.

The television was still on.

The laugh track could still be heard.

But this six-tatami room felt different.

Not livelier.

Not dramatically warmer.

Just—

Fuller.

Chapter 29: The Neutral Ground

Evening descended slowly, without fanfare.

The light in the window shifted from white to pale orange, then to gray.

I hadn't turned on the main light yet.

The television had been on since the afternoon.

The program had changed three times.

Now it was the local news.

Yuna sat in the exact same position. I was at the exact same table.

Only the distance between us no longer felt unfamiliar.

My stomach growled quietly.

"Hungry?" she asked immediately.

"Do you have a radar?"

"I heard it."

"Should we order in or cook?"

She thought about it seriously.

"If we order, is that wasteful?"

"A little."

"If we cook?"

"More dishes to wash."

She weighed the two options as if deciding her future.

"Cook."

"Alright."

We made a simple dinner. Rice. Eggs again. The last of the sausages.

No debate about plating this time. She still arranged it neatly. I didn't protest.

After eating and washing the dishes, night truly set in.

The main light was on.

The room turned a warm yellow.

We sat side by side in front of the TV.

The distance was... normal.

Between us, on the small table—

the remote.

Silent. Neutral. Like a referee.

The news broadcast ended.

Commercials started rolling.

We both looked at the remote.

Neither of us moved.

Chapter 30: The Choice

"What do you want to watch?" I asked.

"Up to you, Papa."

"That's a lazy answer."

"I'm not picking."

"Why?"

She stared at the screen.

"If I pick, Papa will get bored."

"I never said that."

"Not yet."

The exact same answer as this morning.

I picked up the remote.

Then stopped.

"If I pick, you'll get bored."

"I won't say it."

"That doesn't mean you aren't."

A brief silence.

The detergent commercial ended.

A comedy show started.

The laugh track was entirely too loud again.

We watched for about ten seconds.

Neither of us laughed.

I pressed the channel button.

The channel flipped.

An evening drama. Too serious.

Changed it again.

A documentary about deep-sea fish.

Yuna leaned in a little.

"Are those real?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That fish looks like an alien."

"They probably think we're weird too."

She stared at the screen intently.

"What do you usually watch, Papa?"

"Anything."

"That doesn't help."

"I don't have strong preferences."

"Nothing you really like?"

I thought about it.

"No."

She fell silent for a few seconds.

Then said quietly,

"Then, can we pick what I like?"

"What do you like?"

She hesitated.

Then pointed at the remote.

"Game shows."

"Game shows?"

"Yes. They answer questions. If they're wrong, they fall."

"That's a rather specific type of entertainment."

She lowered her head a little.

"Sorry."

"I didn't say no."

I changed the channel again.

Found it.

A game show with a colorful stage and an overly energetic host.

A contestant answered incorrectly.

The floor opened up.

They fell into a foam pit.

The audience laughed.

Yuna held her breath for a fraction of a second.

Then let out a small laugh.

Not loud.

But genuine.

I glanced at her.

She quickly returned to neutral.

"Funny?" I asked.

"Kind of."

I leaned back slightly.

The remote was still in my hand.

Then, without a word, I placed it back in the middle of the table.

No closer to me. No closer to her.

Neutral.

The next contestant started answering.

Yuna unconsciously leaned in a little closer again.

Her shoulder almost touched my arm.

She didn't pull away.

Neither did I.

And for the first time that day,

no one tried to be too neat. No one tried to be too practical.

The remote stayed in the middle.

But the choice was already clear.
