

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 71: Night Adjustments

The clock read 18:27.

No rain all day.

Good.

The light from the window had shifted.

Dimmer now.

The air was growing cold.

I sat in the same spot.

Not much had changed since the afternoon.

Yuna had eaten a little more.

The same porridge.

More than this morning.

She drank more smoothly, too.

Medicine had been taken.

Temperature was down.

Not normal.

But not high.

Now, there was a different problem.

I looked at her frame.

Her clothes.

Slightly damp.

The sweat from earlier hadn't completely dried.

If left as is, she'd get cold.

Cold = bad.

I stood up.

Grabbed clothes from the small wardrobe.

A thin shirt.

Dry.

Returned to the futon.

"...Yuna."

Her eyes opened slowly.

Faster response than this morning.

"...hm..."

"Change your clothes."

She was quiet.

For a few seconds.

Her brows furrowed slightly.

"...I can do it myself..."

She tried to sit up.

Her hands pressed against the futon.

Her body rose a fraction.

Then stopped.

Unsteady.

Her breathing shifted.

Heavier.

I waited two seconds.

Enough for verification.

She couldn't.

I moved closer.

"...I can..."

She tried again.

Failed again.

Her body fell back onto the futon.

Weaker than before.

I didn't wait any longer.

"Hold still."

I grabbed the hem of her shirt.

Started pulling it up.

Yuna reacted immediately.

Her hands moved to stop me.

Her movements were weak.

Not enough to stop me.

"If it's wet, you'll just get colder."

She fell silent.

I pulled her shirt off slowly.

Avoiding rough movements.

But keeping it quick.

Her hands fell back to her sides.

Her breathing was unsteady.

Grabbed the new shirt.

Put it on her.

Simple movements.

Fast.

Done.

I pulled the blanket back up.

Covering her to her neck.

Yuna didn't speak.

Her eyes weren't looking at me.

Averted to the side.

"...I'm sorry..."

I sat back down.

She was quiet.

For a few seconds.

Then she tugged lightly at her own blanket.

Adjusting its position.

Neater.

Habit.

The clock read 19:03.

The TV was on.

Low volume.

A standard quiz show.

Light from the screen flickered softly across the room.

I sat in my usual spot.

Near the futon.

Not too close.

Not too far.

Yuna was looking at the TV.

Her eyes were half-open.

But focused.

"...that's... wrong..."

Her voice was faint.

I glanced at the screen.

The contestant's answer was indeed wrong.

She was quiet for a moment.

"...it should be... number two..."

"It should."

The corner of her mouth twitched slightly.

Barely noticeable.

But it was there.

A tiny change.

She went back to watching.

Not saying much.

And.

More alive than this morning.

The clock read 21:12.

The show was over.

The TV was still on.

But there was nothing interesting.

I turned it off.

The room fell silent again.

"...Papa..."

"Hm."

"...sleeping?..."

"Yes."

I stood up.

Looked at Yuna's futon.

Then looked at my own futon in the corner.

I pulled my futon over.

Dragged it.

Stacked it underneath Yuna's futon.

An extra layer.

Better insulation.

I grabbed another blanket.

Added it on top.

Two layers.

More stable heat.

Yuna watched.

Her eyes followed my movements slowly.

"...that's... Papa's..."

"Yes."

"...what about... Papa..."

She stopped.

As if searching for the right words.

"...where will you sleep...?"

I didn't answer immediately.

Tucked in the corners of the blanket first.

Making sure there were no drafts.

Then looked at her.

"Anywhere is fine."

She was quiet.

Her eyes didn't blink for a few seconds.

"...it's cold..."

"I have a jacket."

I stood up.

Grabbed my jacket from the hanger.

Put it on.

Zipped it halfway.

Yuna was still watching.

Not speaking.

But not looking away, either.

I headed to the kitchen.

Filled the kettle with water.

Turned on the small stove.

Made coffee.

Simple.

Black.

No sugar.

Steam rose slowly.

I poured it into a mug.

Grabbed a cigarette from the drawer.

Returned to the main room.

Yuna was still in the same position.

Her eyes were half-closed now.

Heavier.

"...Papa..."

"Hm."

"...not sleeping...?"

"No."

She was quiet.

For a few seconds.

"...why..."

I lit the cigarette.

A small flame.

Then out.

"You don't need to know."

She didn't reply right away.

Her breathing was slow.

More stable than before.

Her eyes slowly closed.

Her hand moved slightly under the blanket.

As if confirming something.

Then stopped.

I sat near her.

Not too close.

Not too far.

Coffee in hand.

Cigarette between my fingers.

Smoke drifted slowly into the air.

The clock read 21:26.

The room was quiet.

Only the sound of Yuna's breathing.

Lighter now.

No intention of sleeping.

Chapter 72: A Morning Knock

No intention of sleeping.

I didn't know when the sun had fully risen.

Light had already seeped in.

Bright.

Too bright for this early in the morning.

I was still sitting in the same spot.

My jacket still on.

An empty mug by my side.

I checked the clock.

09:58.

My body felt heavy.

Not in pain.

Just sluggish.

The effects of sleep deprivation.

I stood up.

My movements were slightly delayed.

Like there was a lag between intention and execution.

I didn't try to rush it.

There was no need.

Steps to the kitchen.

Grabbed some water.

Drank it straight.

No glass.

It was faster.

I looked back toward the futon.

Yuna was still asleep.

In the same position.

Her breathing was stable.

Lighter than last night.

Temperature normal.

I had already checked.

Twice.

No need to check again right now.

A knock sounded.

Three times.

Evenly spaced.

Not a neighbor.

Not a courier.

I stopped moving.

Waited.

Another knock.

Firmer this time.

I walked to the door.

Unhurried.

Unlocked it.

Pulled the handle.

The door opened halfway.

A woman stood outside.

Dark brown hair, neatly tied back.

Formal attire, but light.

A work bag in her left hand.

Upright posture.

Her eyes darted immediately.

Quick.

From my face—

down to my shoulders—

to the floor—

into the room behind me.

Observation.

Swift and practiced.

"...Good morning."

Her tone was polite.

But too precise.

Like she was reading from a script.

"Is this the residence of Nishida Itsuki?"

"Yes."

She paused for a second.

Observing again.

More closely.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"...I am Hayase. Yuna's homeroom teacher."

I didn't answer immediately.

Processing.

It made sense.

Yuna had been absent from school for three days.

"Come in."

I opened the door wider.

She didn't enter right away.

Still standing there.

Looking at me again.

Longer this time.

Her gaze wasn't harsh.

But it was deliberate.

Calculating something.

My hair.

My eyes.

Posture.

Standing distance.

Probability: an assessment of the guardian's condition.

"...Thank you."

She finally stepped inside.

Her shoes were removed neatly.

Placed side by side.

She stood just inside the entryway.

Didn't sit down immediately.

Didn't speak right away.

Just looked around.

To the left.

To the right.

To the kitchen.

To the table.

To the floor.

Her eye movements were quick.

But not erratic.

Purposeful.

Like a mental checklist.

I closed the door.

A soft click.

The room fell silent again.

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

She was still standing.

Still observing.

Then, she finally turned to face me.

"...Apologies for coming unannounced."

"It's fine."

She paused again.

Her eyebrows twitched slightly.

Like she was holding something back.

"...We received a message from you three days ago."

"...Regarding Yuna's sick leave."

Silence.

She took a slow breath.

Not a deep one.

Controlled.

"...Usually, if an absence exceeds two days, we are advised to check on the student's condition in person."

I didn't answer.

There was nothing to answer.

She looked toward the futon again.

Her focus stopped there.

For a few seconds.

"...Is she still asleep?"

"Yes."

She didn't move immediately.

But her body leaned slightly forward.

As if to verify.

Her eyes narrowed a fraction.

Searching for signs.

Breathing patterns.

Movements.

Little details.

Professional.

--

"...May I see her?"

"Go ahead."

I didn't move.

She was the one who walked over.

Her steps were light.

Measured.

Silent.

As she approached the futon—
she stopped.

Slightly.

Only for a fraction of a second.

But noticeable enough.

Her eyes changed.

Not panic.

But... surprise.

Very faint.

Almost imperceptible.

Then instantly concealed.

Professional once more.

She knelt down slightly.

Keeping her distance.

Not touching.

Only looking.

Yuna's face was calm.

Breathing stable.

Complexion normal.

Not pale.

Not flushed.

All indicators safe.

She remained quiet for a few seconds longer.

Like double-checking all her assumptions.

Then she stood back up.

Slowly.

Turning to face me.

Her gaze was different now.

Sharper.

More focused.

Not on Yuna.

On me.

"...Yuna looks fine."

"Yes."

Silence again.

Heavier than before.

She didn't speak right away.

Just stared.

Reanalyzing.

Deeper.

"...Have you not slept?"

A direct question.

Without any preamble.

Without sugarcoating.

I didn't answer immediately.

There was no need.

She already had her answer.

I just stood there.

Unmoving.

A few seconds passed.

"...How long?"

"I don't know."

She fell silent.

Longer this time.

Her eyes never left me.

Like trying to reconstruct the situation.

The variables didn't match.

Healthy child.

Tidy environment.

Guardian... not.

"...You've been caring for her alone for three days?"

"Yes."

"...Without any help?"

"Yes."

She took another breath.

Slightly deeper than before.

Still controlled.

But not as smooth as earlier.

A tiny crack.

"...I understand."

Her tone remained stable.

But her eyes didn't entirely agree with that statement.

She didn't understand.

Not yet.

And it showed.

Chapter 73: Discrepancy

And it showed.

She didn't speak again right away.

Her eyes moved.

Not toward me.

Toward the room.

Slower than before.

More detailed.

Like rereading something she had skipped over.

Her steps shifted slightly.

Toward the small table.

She stopped.

Looking at the surface.

No dust.

No stains.

Items neatly arranged.

Remote control.

Empty mug.

Small ashtray.

All perfectly aligned.

Consistent spacing between objects.

Her eyes moved down to the floor.

Clean.

No trash.

No clothes scattered around.

She turned slightly.

Toward the kitchen.

Her steps were slow.

She didn't ask for permission this time.

She was already inside.

I didn't stop her.

There was no need.

She stood in front of the kitchen area.

Looking at the sink.

Dry.

No piled-up dishes.

The stove was clean.

No burnt food scraps.

The small side rack.

Spices arranged.

No clutter.

She opened the refrigerator.

Her movements were smooth.

Quiet.

Inside:

Eggs.

Vegetables.

Water.

A few basic ingredients.

Not much.

But enough.

She closed the fridge.

Gently.

She didn't turn around immediately.

Remained silent for a few seconds.

Like replaying something in her head.

Then, she finally looked back at me.

Her gaze changed again.

It wasn't just observation anymore.

Evaluation.

"...You cook?"

"Yes."

"...Over these past three days?"

"Yes."

She gave a small nod.

Once.

Brief.

Like making a mental note.

"...What did she eat?"

"Porridge."

"...Just that?"

"At first."

I paused for a moment.

Processing the sequence.

"Then normal meals."

She didn't respond immediately.

Her eyes shifted slightly to the side.

Processing the answer.

"...How many times a day?"

"Three."

"...Fluids?"

"Enough."

She nodded again.

Slower this time.

Deeper.

But her eyebrows didn't relax.

There was still a slight tension there.

She looked toward the futon again.

Yuna was still asleep.

Position unchanged.

Blanket neat.

Not tangled.

She observed that for a few seconds.

Longer than before.

"...Did you adjust the room temperature?"

"Yes."

"...Cold compresses?"

"Yes."

"...Medicine?"

"Yes."

Short answers.

Consistent.

No hesitation.

No doubt.

She fell silent.

For a while.

Her hand gripped her bag slightly tighter.

Not out of nervousness.

More like... holding something back.

"...Did you know the correct dosage?"

"Yes."

"...Based on?"

"The label."

Silence.

She looked at me again.

Longer.

Deeper.

Like trying to find a flaw.

A discrepancy.

Something that didn't add up.

But nothing surfaced.

All the answers were correct.

All the actions were appropriate.

Too appropriate.

She shifted her gaze.

Toward the floor near me.

Stopped.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Focused.

There—

No futon.

No sleeping mat.

Just bare floor.

A slight crease from a folded jacket.

And the imprint of my earlier sitting position.

She looked at it for a few seconds.

Longer than anything else.

Then slowly raised her gaze to me again.

Her face remained neutral.

But this time—

Not entirely.

Something slipped through.

Just a little.

"...Did you sleep there?"

A direct question.

Sharper than before.

I looked toward that spot on the floor for a moment.

There was nothing to hide.

"Yes."

She didn't speak right away.

Her lips parted slightly.

Then closed again.

Suppressing a reaction.

Professional.

"...For three days?"

"Yes."

Silence.

Longer than before.

She took a breath.

Deeper this time.

Not entirely stable.

"...Why?"

I thought for a second.

Looking for the simplest answer.

"It's closer."

She didn't move.

Her eyes remained on me.

Trying to process that.

"If she wakes up, I'm right there."

I gestured slightly toward the futon.

A small movement.

Enough to explain.

She followed the direction with her eyes.

Looked at Yuna again.

Then back to me.

No words for a few seconds.

"...Did you not feel the need to sleep?"

"No."

"...Eat?"

"I did."

"...When was the last time?"

I paused.

Thinking.

Couldn't remember exactly.

"I don't know."

She finally reacted.

Very slight.

Her eyebrows went up.

And down again.

Fast.

But this time, it wasn't completely concealed.

A wider crack.

She averted her gaze.

Slightly to the side.

As if needing a second of distance.

To reconstruct everything.

Healthy child.

Controlled environment.

Proper care.

Guardian—

Outside normal parameters.

"...I understand."

She said it again.

But this time it was clearly different.

The same tone.

The meaning was not.

She didn't understand yet.

And she was understanding less and less.

Chapter 74: Mismatched Variable

And understanding less and less.

The soft rustle of fabric came from the futon.

Faint.

But enough to draw attention.

Her eyes immediately shifted.

Fast.

Faster than before.

A reflex.

Yuna moved.

Slowly.

Her hand slipped out from under the blanket.

Pressing against the futon.

Pushing herself up slightly.

Not unsteady like yesterday.

But still slow.

Not fully recovered yet.

I watched her.

Not moving.

Just observing.

She sat up.

Her back straight.

A little more careful than usual.

Her eyes blinked a few times.

Adjusting to the light.

Then stopped—

on one spot.

The teacher.

"...Sensei..."

Her voice was still quiet.

But clear.

No longer hoarse.

The teacher responded immediately.

Her posture changed.

Lower.

More at eye level.

Her smile appeared.

Professional.

Warm.

Different from when she spoke to me.

"Yuna."

Her tone softened.

"You're awake."

Yuna gave a small nod.

A neat movement.

Practiced.

"...I'm sorry... for missing school..."

A reflex.

Still there.

The teacher paused slightly.

For a split second.

Then smiled again.

"You were sick. It's okay."

Yuna didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes shifted slightly.

Toward me.

Fast.

Just for a moment.

Like a confirmation.

Then back to the teacher.

"...I'm... better now..."

"Yes, I can see that."

The teacher observed her in greater detail now.

Face.

Posture.

Complexion.

Eye movement.

All the indicators.

No signs of severe illness.

Almost normal.

Only lingering fatigue.

"...Have you been eating well?"

Yuna nodded.

"...Yes..."

"Drinking?"

"...Yes..."

"Resting?"

"...Yes..."

Short answers.

But not stiff like before.

Not like a child 'performing'.

More natural.

Lighter.

The teacher noticed.

Her eyes changed slightly.

Making a mental note.

A change.

"...What did you do while at home?"

Yuna thought for a moment.

Didn't answer right away.

"...Slept..."

She paused.

"...Watched TV..."

"...Ate..."

Simple.

Unembellished.

Not exaggerated.

The teacher nodded slowly.

"No studying?"

A light question.

But testing.

Yuna fell silent.

A fraction of a second longer than before.

Her eyes moved again.

Toward me.

Fast.

Then back.

"...No..."

Honest.

Direct.

Not defensive.

The teacher didn't speak right away.

But the corners of her eyes shifted.

Lifting slightly.

Not a smile.

More like... intrigued.

"...Good."

An answer she hadn't expected from herself.

But it slipped out anyway.

"When you're sick, you really should just rest."

Yuna nodded again.

Smaller this time.

More relaxed.

Not stiff.

The teacher stood up slowly.

Returning to her original posture.

Then—

once again—

looked at me.

A comparison was drawn.

Automatically.

Yuna:

neat

stable

responsive

Me:

standing without energy

heavy eyes

minimal reactions

The discrepancy.

Clearer now.

"...Yuna."

"Yes, Sensei."

"Do you know who has been taking care of you all this time?"

The question was light.

But sharp.

Yuna didn't answer right away.

She looked at me again.

Longer than before.

Then back to the teacher.

"...Papa."

A simple answer.

No additions.

No explanations.

But enough.

The teacher fell silent.

For a few seconds.

Longer than all the previous pauses.

Her eyes never left Yuna.

As if looking for another discrepancy.

There was none.

Everything was consistent.

Everything added up.

And that was exactly the problem.

She finally shifted her gaze.

Toward me.

Her look was different again now.

Not just evaluation.

There was something else.

More complex.

Hard to categorize.

"...I understand."

For the third time.

And for the third time—

it wasn't entirely true.

Chapter 75: An Inconclusive Conclusion

And for the third time—

it wasn't entirely true.

The room fell silent again.

No one moved for a few seconds.

Yuna sat on the futon.

I stood near the door.

The teacher... was silent.

Completely silent.

Her eyes shifted slowly.

From Yuna—

to the blanket—

to the floor—

to me.

On repeat.

Like she was trying to find a pattern.

There was none.

She took a breath.

Slow.

Measured.

Then gave a small nod.

Once.

As if finally deciding on something.

"...Very well."

Her tone returned to being professional.

Stable.

Too stable.

"For now, I don't see any issues with Yuna's condition."

"...She can return to school tomorrow."

She paused.

Looked at me again.

Longer than necessary.

"...Assuming her condition stays like this."

Silence.

She didn't move.

As if waiting for something.

An additional response.

An explanation.

Anything at all.

Nothing.

I had none.

She blinked once.

Then looked away.

"...Alright."

The word slipped out again.

Quieter.

Less certain.

She packed her bag.

Neat movements.

Precise.

But slightly faster than before.

Not entirely calm.

"...Then, I will take my leave."

I nodded.

Didn't move.

She turned around.

Walked toward the door.

Then stopped.

Her hand already on the knob.

But she didn't open it.

For a few seconds.

Silence.

Then—

without turning back—

"...Have you really not slept?"

The question came out again.

Quieter.

Less formal than before.

I thought for a second.

Didn't need long.

"No."

Silence.

She still didn't move.

Her hand on the doorknob.

Tightening slightly.

"...And you don't think that's a problem?"

"No."

A direct answer.

No pause.

No hesitation.

She finally turned around.

Slowly.

Her gaze now... was different.

Not sharp.

Not judging.

More like... disbelief.

"...You know,"

She paused.

For a fraction of a second.

Choosing her words.

"...usually, the one I worry about in cases like this is the child."

I didn't answer.

She continued.

"...but this is the first time I've felt—"

She paused again.

Longer this time.

Her brow furrowed slightly.

As if unsure whether she should say this or not.

"...that the parent is the more concerning one."

Silence.

Yuna moved slightly behind me.

The soft rustle of the blanket shifting.

I didn't turn my head.

There was no need.

I looked at the teacher.

There was nothing to correct.

"No."

A simple answer.

She blinked.

"...No?"

"It's not a problem."

Silence.

Longer than before.

She stared at me.

For a few seconds.

Then—

very quietly—

she let out a sigh.

Unrestrained this time.

It just slipped out.

"...I have no idea what to write in my report."

The sentence came out half-mumbled, like she was talking to herself.

Not meant for me.

Not meant for anyone.

Yuna lifted her head slightly from the futon.

"...Sensei?"

The teacher changed instantly.

A reflex.

The smile returned.

Quick.

Professional.

"It's nothing."

A soft tone.

Warm.

Just like before.

"Sensei was just thinking."

Yuna gave a small nod.

She looked toward me again.

Briefly.

Then back to the teacher.

The teacher noticed it.

That small movement.

It didn't go unseen.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Not in suspicion.

More like... making a note.

Then finally—

she opened the door.

The outside air rushed in.

Colder.

"...Take care of your health, Yuna."

"Yes, Sensei."

"...And..."

She stopped.

Looked toward me.

One more time.

For the last time.

"...You too."

I didn't answer.

There was no need.

She waited a second.

No response.

Then gave a small nod.

Like she was giving up.

And stepped out.

The door closed.

Click.

Silent again.

No sound for a few seconds.

Then—

"...Papa."

"Hm."

"...Sensei was acting weird..."

I looked toward the door for a moment.

Then back.

"Who knows."

Yuna fell silent.

For a few seconds.

"...Papa is too..."

I didn't answer.

There was nothing to answer.

She pulled her blanket up slightly.

Adjusting her position.

Closer to the edge of the futon.

Closer to me.

A small movement.

Unintentional.

I checked the clock.

10:32.

Chapter 76: An Idea That Couldn't Wait

A white screen.

The cursor blinked.

Fast.

Too fast to follow.

I wasn't watching it.

My fingers moved first.

Typing.

Without pause.

Sentences appeared one by one.

Without thinking.

Just pouring out.

The sequence was already there.

In my head.

If I stopped, it would vanish.

I didn't stop.

A cramped desk.

The computer.

Its fan whirring loudly.

The air in the room was warm.

A little stuffy.

To the side—

a coffee mug.

Empty.

Dregs at the bottom.

Cold.

The story moved.

Faster than usual.

Usually, I would stop.

Evaluate.

Revise.

Not now.

There was no room for that.

If I interrupted it, the flow would break.

I let it run.

One scene finished.

Straight to the next.

No rereading.

No checking.

Inefficient.

But necessary.

The priority right now:

pouring the idea out quickly.

Not accuracy.

My eyes felt heavy.

It didn't matter.

My body protested.

Irrelevant.

I ignored it.

The cursor stopped.

Not because I was done.

Because of a pause.

One second.

Two seconds.

I stared at the screen.

The last line.

Still connected.

Not yet broken.

There was more to come.

I resumed typing.

A notification popped up in the corner of the screen.

Small.

A short chime.

Distracting.

I didn't look right away.

Kept typing.

One more sentence.

Two.

Three.

Then I stopped.

I sat still.

The notification was still there.

An email.

The subject line partially visible.

"Congratulations..."

I moved the mouse.

Click.

The screen changed.

The inbox opened.

The topmost message.

Unread.

I opened it.

Standard formatting.

Formal.

Brief.

Not long.

I read from the top.

The first line.

Then the second.

Stopped in the middle.

"...your novel has received a contract..."

I didn't continue reading right away.

My eyes stopped on that sentence.

For a few seconds.

I scrolled down a little.

To make sure.

Not a misread.

Not spam.

The sender's name was clear.

The details were there.

The formatting was correct.

Nothing was out of place.

I went back to the top.

Read it again.

Slower this time.

Unhurried.

The words were all the same.

They hadn't changed.

I leaned back in my chair.

Slowly.

The chair creaked slightly.

I stared at the screen.

Unblinking.

For a few seconds.

"...I see."

My voice came out quietly.

Barely audible.

I looked at my hands.

I took a breath.

Short.

Then let it out.

Slowly.

Not deep.

Just enough.

The corners of my mouth lifted slightly.

Not wide.

Not obvious.

But it was there.

"...I didn't expect this."

I looked at the screen again.

The sentence was still there.

"...and I wasn't even sure about it before."

I closed the email.

Returned to the document.

The cursor was still in its last spot.

Blinking.

Waiting.

I didn't start typing right away.

My fingers stayed still.

For a few seconds.

Then they moved.

One more sentence.

A temporary stopping point.

Enough to lock the idea in.

No need to continue right now.

If forced, the quality would drop.

I hit save.

The file was saved.

Safe.

I pulled my hands away from the keyboard.

Slowly.

My body felt heavier now.

More noticeably.

I stood up.

The chair slid back a little.

Walked to the kitchen.

Grabbed a mug.

Turned on the tap.

Filled it with water.

Then stopped.

Thinking.

Coffee.

I grabbed the coffee powder.

Poured it in.

Hot water.

Steam rose.

A strong aroma.

Sharper than before.

I picked up the mug.

Turned around.

Looked at the wall clock.

10:41.

I stopped.

For a few seconds.

Processing.

The schedule.

School.

Dismissal time.

I was late.

Chapter 77: An Additional Variable

I was late.

The sound of a key.

From the door.

A small click.

I looked over.

The door opened from the outside.

Slowly.

Yuna walked in first.

Shoes taken off neatly at the genkan.

Positioned perfectly straight.

A habit.

She stepped inside.

Her movements were normal.

No lingering signs of illness.

Fully recovered.

"...Papa."

"Hm."

"I'm home."

"Yeah."

I paused for a moment.

Then added.

"I forgot to check the time."

Yuna didn't answer right away.

She looked at me.

Once.

"...It's fine."

Her tone was flat.

Not forced.

Not like before.

I gave a small nod.

Matter resolved.

Other footsteps sounded.

From outside.

Two pairs.

More hesitant.

Stopping in front of the door.

Not entering right away.

Yuna looked back.

"...It's fine, just come in."

Her tone was a little lighter.

Different.

Two girls walked in.

Slowly.

Their steps were cautious.

Shoes taken off.

Not as neatly as Yuna's.

They stood in the genkan for a few seconds.

Moving no further.

Their eyes darted around.

Fast.

Into the room.

To the table.

To the kitchen.

Their eyes did the talking.

This house is small.

That was what I thought.

Then—

they stopped on me.

Silence.

For a few seconds.

I stood in the middle of the room.

Coffee mug in hand.

Messy hair.

Haggard face.

One of them gulped.

Very quietly.

But audible.

"...Um... e-etto..."

She tried to speak.

Failed at first.

Stopped.

Took a breath.

Tried again.

"...Excuse me, sorry for intruding..."

Her voice was quiet.

Tense.

The other one just bowed her head slightly.

Didn't speak.

But her eyes stayed on me.

Wary.

Yuna stood in front of them.

Slightly forward.

Like it was her default position now.

"...This is my Papa."

A simple introduction.

No extra details.

Unnecessary.

I suppose she was starting to take after me.

I nodded.

Once.

"Come in."

They looked at each other for a moment.

Like silent communication.

Then stepped inside.

Slowly.

Their steps halted in the middle of the room.

Not sitting down.

Not knowing where to go.

I looked at them.

A brief evaluation.

School friends.

Objective: group work.

High probability.

"Are you here for group work?"

One of them immediately nodded.

Fast.

"Y-yes."

Still tense.

The other one followed up.

"Yes... we have an assignment..."

Her voice was even quieter.

I nodded.

Made sense.

"Take a seat."

I pointed to the small table.

They moved.

Slowly.

Sitting across from it.

Posture stiff.

Hands on their knees.

Not touching the table yet.

Yuna sat beside them.

More relaxed.

Not stiff.

A clear difference.

I watched them for a few seconds.

No one spoke.

One of them finally whispered quietly to Yuna.

"...Yuna..."

"...Your Papa..."

She didn't continue.

Yuna turned her head slightly.

"...What about him?"

Her tone was normal.

"...Never mind..."

She immediately shook her head.

Quickly.

The other one stared in my direction again.

Longer this time.

There was something in her expression.

Not just fear.

Curiosity.

I looked away.

No need for additional interaction.

I sat on the chair near the kitchen.

Took a sip of coffee.

Quite hot.

Burned my tongue.

A lapse in focus.

At the table—

the sound of bags opening.

Books being taken out.

Pencils.

Erasers.

Movements were starting to normalize.

Yuna opened her book too.

Her movements were efficient.

Not making much noise.

One of them glanced in my direction again.

Slowly.

"...Yuna..."

"...Your Papa..."

Stopped again.

Searching for the right words.

"...is scary..."

The voice was barely audible.

Yuna didn't answer immediately.

She wrote something in her book first.

Before speaking.

"...He's not."

A short answer.

Without explanation.

I heard her.

Nothing that required a comment.

The wall clock read 10:49.

Situation stable.

Variables increased.

But still under control.

Chapter 78: An Inefficient Method

Situation stable.

Variables increased.

But still under control.

Books open on the table.

Pages full of numbers.

Word problems.

Standard.

One of them pointed at a question with a pencil.

"This one first..."

The other nodded.

"...number three..."

Yuna looked.

Didn't answer immediately.

Read it first.

I cast a quick glance.

Without getting closer.

The problem was simple.

But long.

Inefficient.

The girl who spoke earlier began reading out loud.

"A merchant has 24 apples..."

She stopped.

Counted on her fingers.

"...then sells 8..."

Paused again.

"...then buys 12 more..."

She furrowed her brow.

"...so how many are there now...?"

Silence.

The other one started writing.

Slowly.

$$24 - 8 = 16$$

Then stopped.

Thinking.

$$16 + 12 = \dots$$

She counted again.

It took time.

Yuna watched.

Didn't answer right away.

Waiting.

Thinking.

"...twenty-eight..."

The answer came out.

Quiet.

Uncertain.

The first girl nodded quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, twenty-eight."

Written down immediately.

Without double-checking.

I watched for a few seconds.

Nothing wrong with it.

But—

their method of calculation.

Slow.

Inefficient.

I took a sip of coffee.

Warm now.

They moved on to the next problem.

Longer.

More numbers.

"A child has 50 yen..."

"...then buys candy for 18 yen..."

"...then buys a drink for 22 yen..."

"...how much money is left?"

The first girl started writing again.

$50 - 18 = \dots$

She stopped.

Counted on her fingers.

Slowly.

"...Lend me your fingers for a sec..."

I watched.

For a few seconds.

Enough.

This was irritating.

"32."

I spoke.

Three heads immediately turned.

In unison.

Silence.

"...Eh?"

The one holding the pencil blinked.

"...but... I'm not done yet..."

"Continue."

She looked at her paper again.

Still hesitant.

"...then... 32 minus 22..."

She started counting again.

"10."

I spoke again.

Silence.

Longer this time.

The other girl stared at me.

"So fast..."

Almost a whisper.

I didn't answer.

Unnecessary.

Yuna looked in my direction.

Briefly.

Then back to her book.

"...ten."

She wrote it down.

Without hesitation.

The others remained silent.

Looking at the number.

Then looking at me.

Then back at the number.

"...how can you answer it straight away...?"

The question slipped out.

Directed at no one.

I set down my mug.

A quiet clink.

"Easy."

"But..."

She didn't continue.

Unsure which part to explain.

I stood up.

Approached the table.

Normal pace.

Unhurried.

They tensed slightly.

Posture shifting.

Sitting straighter.

I looked at the problem.

Closer.

"50."

I pointed.

"Minus 20."

I paused.

One second.

"30."

They watched.

Following along.

"Add back 2."

"32."

Silence.

"...oh..."

One of them let out a sound.

Quiet.

"Minus 22."

I continued.

"Minus 20 first."

"The result is 12."

"Minus 2."

"10."

I stopped.

Didn't explain further.

Unnecessary.

Silence for a few seconds.

"...that's... faster..."

One of them spoke.

Eyes still on the paper.

The other nodded slowly.

"Yeah..."

Yuna didn't speak.

She just rewrote the steps.

Neater.

Simpler.

I stood there for a few seconds.

Watching them work.

Their method changed.

Slightly.

Not drastically.

But there was a change.

I went back to my chair.

Picked up my coffee again.

At the table—

the atmosphere wasn't as tense as before.

"...your Papa is smart..."

A small whisper could be heard.

Yuna stopped writing for a moment.

Didn't turn her head.

"...he's nothing special..."

A flat response.

But, her lips curved up slightly.

I heard it.

Nothing that required a response.

The clock ticked.

11:03.

Group work proceeded.

Faster than before.

More efficient.

Chapter 79: An Expensive Solution

The group work proceeded.

Faster than before.

More efficient.

The final page was closed.

Pencils were set down.

A small sound.

"...done..."

One of them leaned back slightly.

Let out a breath.

Lighter.

The other looked at the results.

Flipped through the pages once more.

Double-checking.

"...I think that's it..."

Yuna closed her book.

Neatly.

Unhurried.

"...yeah."

Silence for a few seconds.

No one stood up right away.

As if unsure of what to do next.

I checked the clock.

11:18.

Fast enough.

I stood up.

They turned their heads immediately.

Reflexively.

"Let's head out."

Silence.

"...eh?"

"...head out?"

"To get some food."

They looked at each other.

A quick glance.

Unsynchronized.

But clear enough.

Surprised.

"...you don't have to..."

One of them shook her head immediately.

"...we already ate..."

The other chimed in.

"Yeah... it's fine..."

Polite tone.

But hesitant.

I looked at them.

Briefly.

Analysis:

Small house.

Weird guardian, namely me.

No snacks provided.

Possibilities:

Social distance increases.

Carries over to school.

Potential for bullying rises.

Solution:

Eliminate that possibility.

"I'm paying."

Flat tone.

Leaving no room for negotiation.

They fell silent.

Not refusing right away anymore.

Yuna stood up first.

"...let's go."

Her tone was normal.

As if this were a normal occurrence.

They looked at each other again.

Then stood up as well.

Faster.

I grabbed my wallet.

Slipped it into my pocket.

Washed my face briefly.

Wet hair.

Combed it with my fingers.

We left.

The door was closed.

Click.

Narrow corridor.

Footsteps sounded clearer.

Three behind.

Me in front.

"...Yuna..."

A quiet whisper.

"...seriously...?"

"...yeah..."

A short reply.

"...your Papa... is pretty nice, huh..."

Yuna didn't answer right away.

Her pace remained steady.

"...he's nothing special..."

She said.

But on her face.

She looked more confident and cheerful.

Down the stairs.

Slow steps.

Unhurried.

The outside air was warmer.

The sun was already high.

Bright light.

I stopped briefly.

Looked around.

Evaluating locations.

Convenience store.

Cheap.

Fast.

Not strong enough to leave an impression.

If it's too cheap:

Value drops.

A small restaurant at the end of the street.

Better.

I walked in that direction.

They followed.

Without protest.

The glass door was opened.

A small bell rang.

A light sound.

We entered.

Cold air from the AC.

A contrast to the outside.

I chose a table.

Four chairs.

They sat down.

Slower.

Still a little stiff.

Menus taken.

Opened.

Their eyes moved quickly.

Prices read.

A small reaction.

Suppressed.

"...anything."

I spoke.

They stopped.

Looked up.

"...anything?"

"Yes."

Silence.

Yuna looked at the menu.

Not for long.

"...this."

She pointed at one.

Instantly.

The other two were still hesitant.

Their eyes shifted from the menu—

to me—

back to the menu.

"...just this one..."

A safe choice.

Not too expensive.

The waiter arrived.

Orders given.

Written down.

Done.

Silence for a moment.

Then—

slowly—

the atmosphere changed.

"...earlier... that calculation method..."

One of them started speaking.

Looking at me.

Still cautious.

"...could you show us again...?"

I looked at her.

Briefly.

"I can."

She smiled slightly.

The tension eased slightly.

The other one also leaned closer to the table.

More engaged.

Yuna didn't say much.

But her posture was more relaxed now.

I looked at them.

Re-evaluation.

Risk decreased.

Sufficient.

Chapter 80: The List

The morning was calmer.

No alarms.

No school schedule.

The light filtered in slower.

Sunday.

I stood in the kitchen.

Opened the upper cabinet.

Rice.

Only a little left.

Not enough for three days.

I closed it.

Opened the fridge.

Eggs.

Two left.

Bottom shelf.

Vegetables.

None left.

I closed the fridge.

Moved to the side shelf.

Instant noodles.

Three packets.

No need to buy a lot.

Maybe five.

Sugar.

Less than half left in the jar.

Salt.

Still enough.

But running low.

Checked the coffee sachets.

Almost out.

One left.

Needed.

I paused for a moment.

Calculating.

Rice.

Eggs.

Coffee.

Vegetables.

Protein.

Chicken.

Cheaper.

Tofu.

Tempeh.

Quick to cook.

Always needed.

I moved to the bathroom.

Body wash.

Shampoo.

Toothpaste squeezed to the very end.

Almost empty.

Won't last long.

Detergent.

Enough.

Not needed.

Back to the kitchen.

Small box on top of the shelf.

Medicine.

Fever reducers.

Painkillers.

Toothache medicine.

Medicated oil.

Still have some.

Bandages.

A few.

Enough.

The list was complete.

No need to write it down.

Memorizing it was enough.

The sound of small footsteps could be heard.

From behind.

Quiet.

"Papa."

"Hm."

"Today's a day off."

"Yeah, I know."

The footsteps drew closer.

Stopped beside me.

Yuna looked toward the kitchen.

Her eyes moved.

"...going to cook?"

"Groceries."

She was silent for a moment.

Processing.

"...can I come?"

I looked at her.

Briefly.

"Yes."

No reason to refuse.

Yuna gave a small nod.

She turned around.

Her steps were faster than before.

Getting ready.

I looked back at the kitchen.

Double-checking.

Making sure nothing was missed.

Gas.

Still have some.

Electricity bill.

Water bill.

Already paid.

I grabbed my wallet.

Jacket hanging on a chair.

I took it.

And put it on.

Yuna returned.

Her clothes were neat.

Hair combed.

Not messy.

Ready.

"Ready."

"...Okay."

I opened the door.

We stepped out.

The door was closed.

Click.

Empty corridor.

Footsteps sounded clear.

Two people.

Side by side.

Down the stairs.

Slowly.

Unhurried.

Yuna walked beside me.

Not too close.

Not too far.

The same distance as usual.

"...Papa..."

"Yeah?"

"...what are we going to buy?"

I answered without looking.

"Rice."

"...eggs."

"...coffee."

"...chicken."

"...tofu."

"...vegetables."

I paused for a moment.

Adding.

"...soap."

"...shampoo."

"...toothpaste."

Yuna gave a small nod.

Committing it to memory.

"...that's a lot..."

Silence.

Steps remained steady.

We stepped out onto the street.

Brighter light.

Warm air.

I looked ahead.

The direction of the store.

A short distance.

Beside me—

Yuna's footsteps.

Not falling behind.

Not pulling ahead.
