

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 9: The Second Presence

The apartment stairs felt narrower as we climbed.

The rolled-up futon under my arm slightly blocked my downward view.

Yuna walked two steps ahead of me, her pace light but controlled.

We reached the second-floor corridor.

I opened the door to 203.

We went inside.

I closed the door. Turned the lock.

The room was just as we had left it—small, neutral, silent.

But now, there was a large, extra object in my hands.

I set the rolled-up futon on the floor.

"The opening ceremony," I said flatly.

Yuna knelt down.

watching with utter seriousness.

I tore open the plastic.

The faint scent of new fabric immediately diffused into the air.

The futon slowly expanded as it was freed from its roll.

I laid it out on the left side of the room.

leaving about an arm's length of space between it and my own futon.

"Safe distance," I said.

"From what?" she asked.

"From gossip."

She turned toward the wall, as if she could see unit 204 straight through the concrete.

"And if the distance isn't enough?"

"I'll buy a measuring tape tomorrow."

She stifled a smile.

The gray futon looked simple.

Plain.

Unobtrusive.

It suited a room that likewise harbored no aesthetic ambitions.

I stood in the middle of the room and looked around.

Two futons.

A low table.

Two pairs of shoes on the rack.

A minor visual change.

But the atmosphere had shifted.

Yuna sat on her futon.

She pressed her palms into the surface.

"It's soft," she said.

"Standard."

She lay down for a moment, staring up at the ceiling.

The apartment ceiling was plain white. There was a small stain in the corner near the kitchen.

"Papa's apartment is really quiet."

"That's the point."

"Am I intruding?"

"Not yet."

She turned her head.

"Not yet?"

"It's only been a few hours."

She rolled over and sat back up.

Then, as if just remembering something, she asked,

"What do you do for work, Papa?"

I sat down on my own futon.

"Stagehand."

"What's that like?"

"Set up. Tear down. Lift heavy gear. Run cables. Stand for long hours."

"Cool."

"It's not."

"Why?"

"Because nobody knows my name."

She tilted her head.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not really."

"Do you like it?"

I thought about it for a second.

"'Like' is a strong word."

"So that means?"

"Neutral."

She nodded slowly.

"Did you ever meet Mama at work?"

The question came out calmly.

Not like an interrogation.

I didn't answer immediately.

"A few times."

"Mama's pretty, right?"

"Yeah."

"A lot of people like her."

"Yeah."

"You didn't?"

Chapter 10: The Distance That Began to Shrink

"You didn't?"

I looked at her.

"I said she was pretty and had a nice voice."

"Just that?"

"That's enough."

She fell silent.

Stared at her own hands resting on the futon.

"If you liked Mama, maybe I wouldn't have had to come here."

Her tone was light.

But a little too light.

I leaned back on my hands.

"If I liked your Mama, my life would probably be a lot more complicated."

She whipped her head around.

"Why?"

"Because wildly popular people usually bring a lot of noise with them."

"Am I noisy?"

"Not yet."

She let out a small sigh.

Then lay back down on her futon.

Staring at the ceiling.

The room now held two people staring upward from two different spots.

And the arm's length of space between us felt like an invisible line that we were slowly testing.

The main light was still on.

I sat up slightly and reached for the wall switch.

"What time is lights out?" Yuna asked.

"Now."

Click.

The room plunged into dimness.

dark.

Yuna was still lying down, but her eyes were open.

"Do you usually sleep early?" I asked.

"If I'm told to."

"Nobody's telling you to right now."

She was quiet for a moment.

"What if I don't sleep?"

"You still have to wake up tomorrow."

"What for?"

"To live."

She turned her head slightly toward me.

"Do you always answer like that, Papa?"

"Long answers are exhausting."

A brief silence.

The sound of a passing car echoed in the distance.

"You didn't ask about Mama," she said softly.

"I know enough."

"Aren't you curious?"

"I know she's an idol. That alone explains why your life is so complicated."

"Aren't you mad, Papa?"

"At what?"

"Because you suddenly have a child."

I stared at the ceiling.

"If I were mad, what would change?"

She didn't answer right away.

"You could have just rejected me."

"I could have."

"You could have sent me away."

"I could have."

Her voice grew smaller.

"But you didn't."

I let out a soft sigh.

"You showed up with official documents. That takes a lot of effort."

"That wasn't me."

"I know."

She went quiet.

Truly quiet this time.

Not the kind of silence waiting for a response.

But the kind of silence of someone who had lost their script.

"I don't like acting," I said suddenly.

She stiffened slightly.

"I know you're smart," I continued. "You can give quick answers. Put on the right expressions. Look tough."

Silence.

"But this is a small apartment. There are no cameras here."

She didn't move.

"If you're tired of being a good kid, then don't be."

The blue light from outside was just enough to show the thin line of her tense shoulders.

"I don't have to be a good kid?"

"Just don't become a criminal."

That drew a short breath from her, almost like a laugh.

Then—

A small voice.

Very small.

"Papa."

I waited for the correction to leave my mouth.

It didn't.

I simply replied,

"Hm?"

"If I get a little noisy... can I still stay?"

I closed my eyes.

"As long as you don't use a megaphone."

A few seconds of silence.

Then, the soft rustle of fabric.

As if she had rolled over to face me.

"Good night, Papa."

The inflection was different this time.

Not a statement.

Not a strategy.

More like an experiment.

I opened my eyes a fraction.

The ceiling remained plain white.

"Good night."

No correction.

No rejection.

Just two gray futons in a small Tokyo apartment.

And an arm's length of space that felt just a little bit shorter than before.
