

Accidentally become a father

Chapter 91: A Wet Guest

—

"...Direct hit..."

My expression remained flat.

In front of me—

stood a man.

His expression was just as flat.

The pillow dropped softly between us.

The man was young.

His hair was wet.

Water dripped from the ends of it.

His clothes were soaked too.

—

"...Itsuki."

He held out a hand.

"How have you been."

I looked at his hand for a second.

Then I shook it.

"Hey, Ren."

"...I'm doing fine."

I paused.

"...What about you."

Ren gave a light chuckle.

"Haha... see for yourself."

He lifted his arms slightly.

Water dripped onto the floor.

"...Soaking wet."

I opened the door wider.

"Come in."

"Yeah... thanks."

Ren stepped inside.

His steps were careful.

His shoes left a trail of water.

—

Behind me—

Yuna was still standing there.

The witch hat still on her head.

The wand still in her hand.

She looked at Ren.

Then she looked at me.

Without a word—

she moved fast.

Taking off the hat.

Taking off the robe.

Stuffing them back into the box.

As if nothing had ever happened.

I walked over to the table.

Picked up my phone.

Turned off the music.

The atmosphere shifted instantly.

Only the sound of the rain remained.

—

"Ren."

I turned to him.

"Go ahead and use the bathroom."

"...I'll get you a change of clothes."

Ren nodded.

"Thanks."

He headed straight for the bathroom.

A few seconds later—

the sound of the shower started.

I opened the closet.

Grabbed some clothes.

Not many options.

Good enough.

I knocked on the bathroom door.

"Here."

The door opened a crack.

A hand reached out.

Took the clothes.

—

"By the way..."

Ren's voice came from inside.

"...sorry for dropping by unannounced."

"It's fine."

I leaned against the wall.

"...I'm rarely online anyway."

"That's why I just decided to come over."

I stayed silent for a moment.

"Where'd you come from."

"From home."

He answered casually.

"...I was planning to come here."

"...but then it started raining."

I gave a small nod.

"Oh."

I walked into the kitchen.

Filled a pot.

Placed it on the stove.

The flame ignited.

The water began to heat up.

Behind me—

Yuna approached.

Her steps were quiet.

—

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"...who is he?"

I didn't look back.

"A friend."

"...oh..."

She stayed silent for a moment.

"Want some coffee?"

"Is there anything else?"

I stopped.

Thought for a second.

"...take a look yourself."

Yuna opened one of the pantry cabinets.

Then another.

A few seconds passed.

"...nope."

She closed the cabinet.

"...then never mind."

"Suit yourself."

Yuna didn't hang around.

She walked over to the futon.

And lay down.

Staring at the ceiling.

—

The shower stopped.

The door opened.

Ren stepped out.

His hair was still a bit damp.

But much neater.

He stopped when he saw Yuna.

Yuna immediately sat up.

Cross-legged.

Silent.

Their eyes met.

Briefly.

Ren looked away.

"Hey, Itsuki."

"Hm."

"Are you still working that same job?"

"Yeah... pretty much."

Ren nodded slowly.

He walked over to his wet shoes.

Picked them up.

Brought them over to the sink.

Gave them a quick wash.

The water ran.

Then he came back.

Carrying his shoes and his clothes.

Heavily heading to the dryer.

Threw everything inside.

Turned the machine on.

The whirring sound of the drum began.

Ren stood there for a moment.

Looking around the room.

—

"You don't want to work at my place?"

"No way..."

I poured the coffee into two mugs.

"Your workplace isn't flexible enough."

Ren gave a light chuckle.

"But the pay is great at my place."

"Big pay, but your whole life is just work. That's just another kind of hard life."

—

I carried the coffee.

Placed it on the table.

Yuna was already there.

With her book.

Working on something.

I sat down next to Yuna.

Ren sat down as well.

Across from me.

The dryer whirred in the background.

The rain was still falling.

—

"Papa..."

Yuna slid her book over.

"...what's the answer to this."

I took a quick glance.

"Figure it out yourself."

"...I already taught you how."

"...it's hard..."

Ren stared at Yuna.

Then at me.

"...Itsuki."

I tilted my head up slightly.

"...is she..."

His gaze shifted.

Grew more serious.

Sharper.

The question was clear.

Without being spoken.

—

Chapter 92: Way of Life

—

"...is she..."

I knew what he meant.

I'd noticed him trying to ask a few times already.

But he hadn't found the right moment.

"This is Yuna."

That was enough.

I didn't want to explain it any further than that.

Even if leaving it there would just raise more questions.

—
Ren kept staring.

"...your daughter?"

The question finally came out.

What was I supposed to say?

"No"?... If I said that, would Yuna be hurt?

And if I said "yes"? Would Yuna just accept it? Because I wasn't her real parent.

Suddenly, a voice spoke up.

"I'm Papa's daughter."

Yuna answered.

Quickly.

Without looking our way.

Her hand was still resting on her book.

Ren fell silent.

His gaze shifted back and forth between me and Yuna.

"...no way."

I took a shallow breath.

"I'm just her guardian."

"...oh..."

The atmosphere shifted a little.

Not exactly tense.

But not relaxed, either.

—
Ren turned to Yuna.

"What grade are you in now, Yuna?"

"Fourth grade."

"What are you studying?"

"Doing homework."

Yuna didn't look up.

Still focused on her book.

Ren gave a small nod.

—
I pushed a mug of coffee toward him.

"Here, drink."

"Yeah, thanks."

Ren took the mug.

Poured a little bit into the saucer.

Then took a sip.

...

Then—

Ren spoke up again.

"Itsuki..."

"Hm."

"About what we were talking about earlier..."

I didn't immediately look at him.

"...isn't a bright future important?"

I stayed silent.

Ren continued.

"Even if it's hard at first..."

"...living like a robot..."

He gave a small laugh.

"but later on, when you're old..."

"...you can live comfortably."

—

I picked up my mug.

I took a sip straight from it.

A balanced taste.

I set the mug back down.

"Logically speaking..."

I paused for a second.

"...that's true."

Ren looked at me.

"But in reality, it isn't."

Silence.

"Think about it."

—

"You work."

"...you earn money."

I stopped.

"Then you get sick."

Ren frowned slightly.

"Because you work too much."

"The money goes to your medical bills."

I stared at my coffee.

"And it's gone."

A brief silence.

"Or..."

"you get stressed."

"So you go on a vacation."

"One day."

"Two days."

I stopped.

"The vacation ends."

I looked at Ren.

"And the money is gone too."

—

Ren stayed silent.

I didn't wait for a reply.

"To me..."

I picked up my mug again.

"...what matters is stability."

Taking a small sip.

"Just having enough."

I put the mug down.

"As for the future..."

I turned my head slightly toward Yuna.

"...I'll find another way."

I raised my hand.

Stroked Yuna's hair.

Gently.

"A more comfortable one."

Ren gave a faint smile.

"Hahaha..."

"Still the same as ever."

"You've always been like this."

—

My hand returned to the table.

"The point is..."

I added.

"...not to sacrifice too much."

"...to the point of losing control over yourself."

The dryer was still whirring in the background.

Yuna scribbled something down.

Ren stared at the table.

Then let out a quiet sigh.

"...I guess you have a point."

A few seconds passed.

I stood up.

"Ren."

He looked up.

"I'll make some noodles."

Ren smiled.

"Sounds good."

"Papa..."

Yuna looked up.

"I want noodles too."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

Ren turned back to me.

"Itsuki..."

"Hm."

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"Mine got wet."

I grabbed my pack of cigarettes from the table.

Tossed it to Ren.

He caught it.

"Thanks."

I headed straight into the kitchen.

"Papa, I'll help."

Yuna followed after me.

—

Chapter 93 - 01:00 AM

—

The sidewalk was empty.

Streetlights stood in a row.

A dim yellow glow.

The road beside it—

deserted.

Occasionally, a single car passed by.

Fast.

Then gone.

The sky was dark.

Not a star in sight.

The air was cold.

Seeping slowly through my clothes.

—

I kept walking.

My pace wasn't fast.

Not too slow either.

I reached into my pocket.

Pulled out my phone.

I checked the time.

1:00 AM.

The dead of night.

Silence.

No sound but my own footsteps.

Because someone didn't show up.

I ended up staying later.

I kept walking.

It was fine.

The pay would be double.

I stopped briefly at a red light.

Even though there was no traffic.

But.

It was all the same.

The light changed.

I walked on.

Taking on a two-person workload.

—

My steps felt heavier now.

My body ached.

My shoulders were stiff.

My back felt strained.

My hands felt slightly calloused.

My eyes were heavy.

Blinking took longer than usual.

I exhaled.

A thin cloud of vapor escaped.

My steps continued.

The apartment building came into view ahead.

Lights in a few units were still on.

Most were dark.

I went inside.

The stairs.

The hallway.

Quiet.

My footsteps echoed louder indoors.

I stopped in front of my door.

203.

—

Yuna...

should be asleep by now.

I took the key from my pocket.

Inserted it.

Click.

The door opened.

The room was dark.

Only a sliver of light bleeding in from outside.

I stepped in.

Closed the door.

My eyes adjusted.

The futon.

Yuna was there.

Fast asleep.

Her blanket rose and fell in a slow rhythm.

I didn't approach.

Just watched her for a moment.

Then—

my gaze shifted.

The table.

On top of it—

a plate.

A fried egg.

It was already cold.

The shape was a little messy.

The edges were slightly burnt.

—

"...Hm."

I walked over to it.

Set my bag aside.

Sat down.

Stared at the egg for a few seconds.

Yuna had made it.

There was no note.

No written message.

But the meaning was clear.

I picked up my chopsticks.

Took a small bite.

Cold.

A little salty.

Imperfect.

I ate it slowly.

Finished it.

—

I set the chopsticks down.

I stood up.

Didn't change my clothes.

Didn't wash my face.

Went straight to my futon.

Lay down.

My body felt like it was sinking.

My eyes fluttered shut.

Almost immediately.

Just before I drifted off completely—

I heard a small voice.

Coming from Yuna.

"...Papa..."

Softly.

Half-asleep.

My eyes grew even heavier.

My vision darkened.

Then... darkness.

—

Chapter 94: A Different Morning

—

The morning sky.

The air was still cold.

I walked beside Yuna.

The bag on my shoulder felt full.

Heavier than usual.

The straps dug slightly into my shoulder.

Yuna walked by my side.

Small steps.

But she didn't fall behind.

—

"Are you going to work again, Papa?"

"Yes."

"What time are you coming home later?"

"You came home really late last night."

I raised my hand.

Gently patted her head.

Her hair got a little messy.

"Maybe in the afternoon."

I paused for a moment.

"...maybe tonight."

I pulled my hand back.

"I don't know."

Yuna looked down slightly.

"...it depends on the situation."

"...oh..."

She lightly kicked a pebble on the road.

"Well..."

"...I'll have to cook for myself again..."

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Can I eat noodles later?"

"Sure."

She turned to look at me immediately.

"...but only one."

"...yay."

Her voice was quiet.

But clear enough.

—

We kept walking.

The school gates came into view.

A few other kids were already going inside.

Yuna stopped.

Turned to face me.

Held out her hand.

"Salim."

I stopped.

"...oh, right."

I held out my hand.

Yuna bowed slightly.

Touching her forehead to the back of my hand.

A moment later.

She let go.

"Bye, Papa."

I gave a small nod.

"Yeah."

She turned around.

And went inside.

I didn't wait long.

I turned right around.

And walked away.

—

Some time later—

I arrived.

In front of me—

a large field.

Empty.

But not entirely.

By the side of the road—

large trucks were lined up.

Their rear doors open.

Inside—

stage rigging.

Steel.

Wood.

Several massive sound systems were still on the trucks.

Yet to be unloaded.

I stopped for a moment.

Took a deep breath.

The morning air filled my lungs.

Cold.

I exhaled slowly.

Rubbed my face.

Ran my fingers through my hair, pushing it back.

Feeling a little more awake.

I took out a cigarette.

Lit it.

A small flame sparked.

Smoke drifted upward.

Thin.

—

Ahead—

a large generator was turned on.

Brrrrrrm.

A heavy hum filled the area.

One of the sound systems was unloaded.

Ropes were pulled.

Metal scraped against metal.

People started moving.

Without much talk.

Used to the routine.

Cables were pulled.

Connected.

A mic was turned on.

Someone spoke.

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

The voice echoed slightly.

Then—

"Everything's ready!"

A few people answered.

"Ready!"

"Time to work!"

—

Music was turned on.

An instrumental track.

Heavy.

Building up slowly.

Like something being constructed.

Like preparations for war.

Or...

a ritual.

I stood in silence for a moment.

The corners of my lips lifted slightly.

A faint shiver ran across my skin.

I took off my jacket.

Set it aside.

Leaving me in just a t-shirt.

"Time to work."

The first step felt heavy.

The second step—

was lighter.

—

And after that—

It was as if my body were ablaze.

—

Chapter 95: The Foundation of the World

—

I stepped forward.

The ground was cracked.

Dry.

A hot wind blew.

Carrying dust.

The blue sky was bright.

Cloudless.

As far as the eye could see—

Only a vast, endless desert.

—

I stopped.

My hand moved.

A scroll appeared.

I opened it.

Complex lines.

Coded letters.

And a massive structure.

Footsteps approached.

Fast.

A soldier stood before me.

Silver armor gleaming in the light.

While I was clad in pitch-black armor.

"Commander."

"All materials have arrived."

I closed the scroll.

"Good."

I raised my hand to the sky.

The wind stopped.

"We will build it..."

"Here."

—

The voice shook the air.

Dust blasted in all directions.

Echoing far into the distance.

From afar—

a line of giant elephants appeared.

Their steps were heavy.

Each footfall shaking the earth.

They were pulling.

Giant blocks of white stone.

Wooden logs the size of towers.

Piles of iron.

—

The elephants raised their trunks.

Their roars answered the command.

I lowered my hand.

Construction began.

Before me—

a giant block of stone.

Its surface was rough.

Heavy.

I took a drag from my cigarette.

The smoke vanished into the dry air.

I stomped my foot.

Dust swirled.

My hands pressed against the stone.

Crack.

My fingers dug into the surface.

I lifted it.

The weight was real.

It rose slowly.

My shoulder took the load.

I walked.

With every step—

the ground trembled slightly.

I arrived.

And set it down.

THUD.

Dust exploded into the air.

I turned around.

—

I saw it.

A soldier trying to mimic me.

He was lifting another block.

Without a proper stance.

Without technique.

"Wait—"

Too late.

The block was lifted.

His body wavered.

The ground beneath him crumbled.

He sank.

Only his shoulders remained above.

Someone dashed in from the side.

High speed.

Sand exploding behind him.

He caught the block.

Moved it aside.

And pulled the soldier out.

I didn't move.

Just watched.

"Are you okay..."

The soldier nodded.

—

On the other side—

another stone was being carved.

A large circle.

Complex symbols.

Like a seal.

A magic technician turned his head.

"Commander."

"What do you think?"

I approached.

Looked at it for a moment.

"Hm..."

"Try activating it."

He nodded.

Placed his hand against the stone.

An incantation was chanted.

A light flared.

THUMP...

A small vibration.

THUMP... THUMP...

Growing stronger.

The ground trembled.

The air vibrated.

I stood in front.

Observing.

Then—

BWOOOM.

A shockwave hit.

My chest vibrated.

My bones felt like they were rattling.

I was pushed back.

"It's too strong!"

I raised my voice.

"Turn it down!"

The technician turned.

"What?!"

"Turn down the bass!"

"What?!"

I stepped quickly.

Shouting right next to him.

"TURN IT DOWN!"

He panicked.

Twisting the control rune.

The light dimmed.

The vibration dropped.

Still strong.

But stable.

I nodded.

"Good."

We lifted the stone together.

And moved it into position.

—

In the distance—

a giant pillar.

Long cylinders.

Lined up.

"How many more?"

Someone asked.

I grabbed the end of it.

"All of them."

He chuckled.

We lifted it together.

Walked.

Heavy steps.

"Did you look at the blueprints yesterday?"

"Nah."

"...I went out with my girlfriend yesterday."

"Check the schedule before you take a day off."

"At least find a replacement."

"Yeah, yeah..."

He chuckled.

"Sorry."

We kept walking.

—

My thoughts drifted a little.

To somewhere else.

By now—

Yuna should be home.

Had she eaten yet.

Or not.

—

[The Empty House]

—

Slow footsteps on the sidewalk.

Three shadows stretched across the asphalt.

Yuna in the middle.

On the left—Mika.

Her steps were light.

Often breaking into small skips as she walked.

On the right—Hana.

Calmer.

Holding her bag with both hands in front of her.

The occasional sound of passing vehicles.

It wasn't crowded.

—

"Yuna..."

Mika turned her head.

"Have you ever been to karaoke?"

Yuna thought for a moment.

"...no."

She tilted her head slightly.

"Why?"

Mika immediately faced forward again.

But her smile was visible.

"I went with my older sister yesterday."

Her hands moved slightly.

"The place was so pretty."

"The lights were all colorful..."

"There were lots of mics..."

"...and the music was really loud."

Hana turned to her.

"Did you sing?"

"Yeah!"

Mika giggled.

"Even though I was bad at it."

Hana smiled too.

"How about we go next week?"

Their steps slowed down slightly.

Hana answered first.

"I have to ask my mom..."

"...if I'm allowed to go."

Yuna looked straight ahead.

A few seconds passed.

"Me too..."

"...I have to ask my papa first."

Her tone was flat.

Mika nodded quickly.

"Oh, right."

"Ask them first, then."

"I hope they say yes."

—

A breeze passed.

Carrying a bit of dust.

Hana spoke again.

"Besides karaoke, where else did you go yesterday?"

Mika perked up immediately.

"First, karaoke."

She held up one finger.

"Then a cat cafe."

Second finger.

"Walked around."

Third finger.

"Lunch at a family restaurant."

Fourth finger.

"Then went home."

She lowered her hand.

"Ooh..."

Hana nodded.

"I've been to a cat cafe too."

"...with my mom a while ago."

Yuna didn't respond immediately.

Her pace remained steady.

Her eyes lowered slightly.

—

"Yuna?"

Mika glanced over.

"Have you ever been to a cat cafe?"

Yuna shook her head slowly.

"...no."

Short.

A brief silence.

Mika didn't speak right away.

Then—

"Just ask your dad to take you."

"Or..."

She looked at Hana for a moment.

"...we can all go together later."

"If he doesn't want to."

Yuna gave a small nod.

"...I'll try asking him."

Her voice was quiet.

The intersection appeared ahead.

Their steps slowed.

"This is my stop."

Hana stopped first.

"Me too."

Mika stopped.

Yuna stopped as well.

"Bye..."

"Bye."

"...see ya."

They parted ways.

Yuna's footsteps were now alone.

Slower.

Her bag slipped slightly on her shoulder.

She adjusted it.

No more sounds of her friends.

Only her own footsteps.

—

In front of the door.

Yuna stopped.

Took out her key.

Fumbled slightly to find the keyhole.

Click.

The door opened.

Silent.

She stepped inside.

Closed the door quietly.

Took off her shoes.

Lined them up neatly.

Small steps padded further inside.

The room was still.

"Papa..."

No answer.

Yuna stood there for a moment.

As if waiting.

Nothing.

She walked over to the window.

Opened it.

The wind blew in.

The curtains fluttered slightly.

The air shifted.

It felt more alive.

Yuna turned on the TV.

Sound instantly filled the room.

Commercials.

A bit noisy.

Yuna sat down for a moment.

Then she said softly—

"...this is better."

"...like always."

—

Yuna stood up again.

Her eyes moved to the small kitchen.

A few steps.

She opened the cabinet.

Two packets of instant noodles.

She took one out.

Her hand paused there for a moment.

Looking at the other one.

Then she closed the door.

A small stool was dragged over.

The faint scrape of wood against the floor.

She stepped onto it.

Grabbed a small pot.

Stepped back down.

Filled it with water.

The water ran.

A quiet, steady sound.

She turned on the stove.

Click.

Whoosh.

The flame flared to life.

Yuna opened the noodle packet.

Without overthinking it—

she dropped the contents straight into the pot.

—

A few seconds passed.

She blinked.

"...eh."

She leaned her head closer to the pot.

The seasoning packet had gone in too.

"Ah..."

She quickly plunged her hand in.

Snatched it out.

The water was still cold.

"...good thing it wasn't hot yet."

She pulled her hand back.

Dripping slightly.

She tore the seasoning packet open.

Poured it onto a plate.

Her movements were clumsy.

Some of it spilled over the edge.

Yuna didn't clean it up.

She just stared at it for a moment.

Then turned back to the pot.

"Five minutes..."

"...Papa said."

She left the stove running for a moment.

Walked into the front room.

Sat in front of the TV.

Picked up the remote.

Click.

The channel changed.

Click.

Changed again.

Click.

Stopped.

—

The screen showed the ocean.

Deep blue water.

Small fishes swimming in a school.

Yuna leaned in slightly.

"Oh..."

"...colorful fish."

A small orange fish swam by.

"What is that..."

Text appeared on the screen.

"Clownfish."

"...clownfish..."

Yuna repeated softly.

She looked at the clock on the wall.

Her eyes widened slightly.

She stood up immediately.

Walked quickly to the kitchen.

Turned off the stove.

Lifted the noodles.

Drained the water haphazardly.

Put them onto the plate.

She carried the plate carefully.

Sat at the table.

Picked up her chopsticks.

Stirred the noodles.

The color of the seasoning began to even out.

She took a bite.

Put it in her mouth.

Chewed slowly.

"...tastes good."

She paused.

"...but..."

"...it feels like something is missing."

Chopsticks still in her hand.

—

Her eyes moved.

To the left.

An empty chair.

To the right.

The window.

Slightly open.

No one was there.

She lowered her head slightly.

Took another bite.

And ate.

Not too fast.

Not too slow.

—

Time passed.

The sunlight shifted.

Entering at a steeper angle through the window.

Yuna stood up.

Went into the bathroom.

The sound of running water.

A little while later—

She came out.

Her hair was wet.

A towel draped over her head.

She rubbed it gently.

Grrr...

She stopped.

Her stomach growled again.

Yuna walked to the kitchen.

Opened the cabinet.

One packet of noodles left.

Beside it—

eggs.

vegetables.

onions.

Her hand moved toward the noodles.

Almost touching it.

She stopped.

"...just one."

The voice surfaced.

Calm.

Like always.

Yuna didn't turn around.

She wasn't startled.

Her hand slowly changed direction.

Grabbed an egg.

Then an onion.

"...Papa usually uses these."

She turned on the stove again.

Poured in some oil.

Cracked the egg into a bowl.

A tiny piece of shell fell in.

Yuna looked at it.

"...hm."

She didn't fish it out.

Peeled the onion.

Chopped it.

The pieces were big.

Uneven.

Into the bowl they went.

A pinch of salt.

She stirred it.

Poured it into the frying pan.

Ssssssss

The sound of sizzling oil.

Yuna stepped back slightly.

Watching.

Waiting.

—

A little while later—

On the table.

A plate of rice and egg.

Yuna sat down.

Looked at it.

....

She picked up her spoon.

Stopped again.

"...something is missing."

She stood up.

Grabbed the soy sauce.

Poured a generous amount.

Sat back down.

Took a bite.

Put it in her mouth.

Her expression shifted slightly.

"...salty."

"...bitter."

She kept eating anyway.

The TV was still on.

Playing an anime now.

A character was running.

Tripped over a rock.

Fell.

Face-first into the mud.

Yuna stopped eating.

Her eyes widened.

"...pfft—"

She choked.

Quickly stood up.

Grabbed a glass.

Poured some water.

Drank.

And took a deep breath.

—

Chapter 96: A Man-Made Battlefield

—

The music thundered.

It wasn't just music.

It sounded more like... the signal of a war beginning.

The pound of the bass.

The trembling ground.

The clash of metal.

—

"What a pain..."

I walked at a brisk pace.

"...to think they'd move the schedule up."

My hand gripped a plastic bag of iced coffee.

I bit the corner.

And took a sip.

Bitter.

Cold.

I kept walking.

People sprinted past me.

Carrying barricades.

Hauling cables.

Dragging poles.

Shouts rang out over one another.

"Hurry up!!"

"Lift that!!"

"Don't go that way!!"

—

Ahead of me—

The main stage.

A replica of the Parthenon.

White.

Massive.

Towering pillars.

Still half-finished.

But it was already enough to... look magnificent.

I paused for a moment.

Staring at it.

The artists would eventually emerge from the gaps between those pillars.

Entering.

Exiting.

Vanishing.

In the center—

A long stoa.

Extending out into the crowd.

A straight path.

Where they would walk.

Where they would be seen.

All around—

Iron barricades.

Layered zones.

The closer to the stage—

the tighter they got.

Beyond that—

No enclosures.

Just high fences.

And an open field.

I resumed my pace.

Stepping onto the stage.

Pulling back the curtain.

—

A white corridor.

Clean.

Quiet.

A stark contrast to the outside.

A row of doors.

Bearing the artists' names.

I opened one.

A vanity table.

A large mirror.

Surrounded by lights.

A small sofa.

A fitting curtain.

Tidy.

I stepped out.

Entered the next door.

The same.

They were all the same.

Nothing was missing.

I walked to the end of the hall.

Opened the restroom door.

Tested the water.

Normal.

I closed the door.

"...good."

I pulled out my paper.

Checked it off.

✓ Main stage

I turned around.

Ran outside.

Jumped onto the stoa.

—

My footsteps echoed loudly against the wooden surface.

I stopped in the middle.

Stomped my foot slightly.

It didn't wobble.

I shook the railing.

It didn't budge.

"Solid."

✓ Walkway

✓ Railings

I hopped down.

In the distance—

The gates.

People were gathering.

Village officials.

Police.

Ambulances.

Firefighters.

Portable toilet trucks.

I checked my watch.

14:20.

"...and yet it's still early afternoon."

But everyone was already moving as if it were the night of the event.

I made another checkmark.

✓ Security

✓ Safety

✓ Facilities

—

My walkie-talkie crackled to life.

"Is the backstage area ready?"

"Not yet! We're short on manpower!"

I looked around.

No one was standing idle.

Everyone was on the move.

"Then just finish as much as you can."

"Copy that."

Click.

I was about to start running again—

Ring...

My phone vibrated.

I picked it up.

—

[Bardy Louis]

I answered.

"How are things holding up over there, Itsuki?"

I walked briskly toward the gates.

"Pretty bad."

"Hahaha... sorry about that, the schedule got moved up."

"And?"

"Why did you call."

"Just wanted to see how you were doing."

I stayed quiet for a moment.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"...because of me, you're taking my place."

"There's no need to apologize."

"You're sick."

"Alright then... hope it goes smoothly."

Click.

The call ended.

—

I arrived at the gates.

The plastic bag of coffee in my hand was empty.

I threw it away.

My pace slowed.

I looked at all of them.

Then—

"Good afternoon."

I shook their hands, one by one.

The village officials.

The police.

The medics.

The firefighters.

"My apologies."

"The event was moved up on such short notice."

One of them shook his head.

"It's no problem."

"We know it wasn't your decision."

I nodded.

"And to the village officials..."

"Thank you for allowing us to use the field."

An old man smiled.

"We're actually thrilled."

"Our village gets to host such a huge event."

I gave a slight bow.

"Please, come inside."

"We've prepared a space for you backstage."

We started walking.

Moving together.

The walkie-talkie crackled again.

Kzt—

"What is it?"

The voice on the other end sounded panicked.

"...there's a problem with the generator."

—

—

[A Machine That Must Run]

"Isn't there a technician on site?"

"The guy who owns the generator left this morning!"

I paused for a moment.

"...then wait for me there."

Click.

I turned back around.

"My apologies."

"It seems there's a minor issue with the generator."

"I'll need to step away for a moment."

"Not a problem."

I turned away.

Someone ran past me.

My hand instantly shot out.

Grabbing their shoulder.

"Escort them backstage."

I was already running again.

—

Out of the field.

Away from the stage.

The sound of music faded.

Replaced by the sound of an engine.

Thump thump... thump...

Unstable.

Someone waved their hand.

"Over here!"

I approached.

A massive generator.

A dull iron body.

Vibrating unnaturally.

Thump thump... thump thump...

I stood in silence.

Observing.

"Hm..."

Beside it—

an old backpack.

I picked it up.

Heavy.

"...right."

—

I opened it.

Box wrenches.

Open-end wrenches.

A spark plug socket.

A socket wrench.

And several new spark plugs.

I took one out.

Still clean.

Gleaming.

I killed the engine.

Click.

Silence.

Instantaneous.

I popped the engine cover.

Dust.

An old machine.

I unplugged the spark plug wire.

Grabbed the spark plug socket.

Slotted it in.

A perfect fit.

I turned it.

It didn't budge.

Harder.

Still nothing.

"Hand me that box wrench."

"This one?"

"Yeah."

I hooked it on for leverage.

Pressed down.

Crack.

It loosened.

I removed the wrench.

Turned the socket.

It came free.

I inspected the tip.

A little charred.

Nothing severe.

But enough to cause... issues.

—

I reconnected it to the wire.

"Start it."

"Is it safe?"

"Just do it."

He ran to the front.

Turned the key.

Grrrk...

A spark jumped.

Weak.

"...that's enough."

I picked up the new spark plug.

Installed it.

"Now."

Grrrk...

A spark flared.

Strong.

Steady.

"...good."

—

I screwed it back into the engine block.

Click.

Click.

Not too tight.

Just enough.

I closed the engine cover.

Turned it back on.

Thump... thump... thump...

Smooth.

Rhythmic.

Stable.

"Since when do you know how to do this?"

I didn't look at him.

"Automotive school."

I stood up.

"It's done."

Flipped the breaker.

Thrum.

The lights flickered on.

The sound system roared to life.

The bass returned.

The world grew loud once again.

I started running again.

My hands were still dirty.

I didn't care.

Arriving backstage.

They were already seated.

Drinks.

Snacks.

Beside them.

"Thank you for waiting."

I checked my watch.

15:15.

—

I got straight to the point.

"Village Head."

"What is the status of the parking arrangements?"

He stood up.

Handing me a folder.

"These zones here."

"We have them prepared."

"The residents and neighborhood heads are on standby as well."

I glanced over it.

Organized.

"Thank you."

He smiled.

"This benefits us too, after all."

I nodded.

"Officer."

He stood up.

"Security looks solid."

"The fences are sturdy."

"We'll position our personnel at the vulnerable points."

"Thank you."

"Medical team."

A doctor raised his hand slightly.

"We're ready."

"Firefighters."

"Ready."

I made my checkmarks.

✓ Parking

✓ Security

✓ Medical

✓ Firefighters

"Thank you for your cooperation."

—

Ring...

My phone vibrated.

"Excuse me."

I stepped away.

And answered.

"The audience is starting to arrive."

I stopped in my tracks.

"The operational team?"

"Nowhere in sight."

"...don't let them in yet."

"Copy that."

Click.

I walked toward the front of the stage.

The panels were still being assembled.

Time was ticking.

I took out my phone again.

Made a call.

—

[Bardy Louis]

It connected.

"Where is the operational team?"

"They haven't arrived."

"Hm... hold on."

I remained silent.

Pulled out a cigarette.

Lit it.

Smoke drifted slowly upward.

The sky was changing colors.

From blue to orange.

Dusk.

"They'll be there in ten minutes."

—

—

[A Wave of Humanity]

A crowd was beginning to form.

In front of the gates.

At first, just a few people.

Then, it kept growing.

Voices began to rise.

Not shouts.

But loud enough to feel... crowded.

I walked closer.

Several people were already standing by the fence.

Holding up something around their necks.

Lanyards.

Brightly colored.

I didn't linger.

I spoke up immediately.

"My apologies."

"Preparations are not yet complete."

"No entry is permitted just yet."

A few of them fired back immediately.

"But we already paid!"

"We have access passes!"

I glanced at their badges.

"...please keep waiting."

A flat tone.

It didn't rise.

It didn't fall.

Behind them—

People kept arriving.

Footsteps.

Chatter.

Bags.

Water bottles.

Growing denser.

The streets were filling up.

The air shifted.

Warmer.

Heavier.

—

The police arrived.

Two officers.

Then three.

They took their place beside me.

And began to help explain the situation.

"Please step back."

"The event is not open yet."

"Please wait patiently."

Their voices were louder.

Firmer.

The crowd was pushed back slightly.

But it didn't thin out.

If anything... it grew.

My phone vibrated.

I answered.

"They're here."

"Do you see the large vehicles? The buses."

I turned my head.

In the distance—

One.

Then two.

Large buses.

Rolling in slowly.

"...yes."

"I see them."

Click.

—

The buses stopped.

The doors opened.

People stepped out.

In uniform.

Swift.

Well-trained.

They didn't look around.

They got straight to work.

Opening the cargo holds.

Pulling out equipment.

Cameras.

Tripods.

Cables.

The operational team.

The broadcasting team.

Finally.

I stepped forward.

"Clear a path."

The police moved immediately.

Forcing a gap through the crowd.

People shifted.

Reluctantly.

The team walked through without stopping.

Straight inside.

Someone approached me.

"Is everything ready?"

I didn't answer right away.

Pulled out a sheet of paper.

Looked it over.

Almost everything was checked off.

I grabbed my walkie-talkie.

"Status report."

—

One by one, voices came through.

"Stage section, ready."

"Lighting, ready."

"Sound, complete."

"Audience zones, ready."

"Security, ready."

No long pauses.

Fast and efficient.

"...good."

I took a short breath.

"Time to rest."

"Understood!!"

Click.

I looked at the person in front of me.

"Everything is ready."

"I leave the rest to you."

He nodded.

"Thank you."

I didn't reply.

I just turned around.

And walked backstage.

My pace slowed.

I glanced back for a moment.

From a distance—

The operational team had begun their work.

Fast.

Organized.

They checked the ID badges.

Sorted the crowds.

Directed them to their zones.

Controlled the flow.

Like a dam that finally had its floodgates opened.

I stopped watching.

And kept walking.

Backstage.

The atmosphere was different.

Quieter.

A large mat was rolled out.

Several people were already lying down.

Some were eating.

Some were just sitting in silence.

I approached.

Someone chuckled.

"Oh, Itsuki."

"Come on over."

"Must be tough being the acting head."

The others chimed in.

"Hahaha, look at his face."

"He's exhausted."

I glanced at them.

Tired faces.

Drenched shirts.

"...you guys too."

"Look at your shirts."

"They're soaked."

"Soaked with what?"

Someone said.

I sat down.

"...sweat, what else."

Another answered loudly.

A few seconds of silence.

They looked down at their own clothes.

Then—

"Hahahaha!"

Laughter erupted.

"Alright, alright."

Someone raised their hand.

"Let's rest for now."

"We have to work again tonight."

I immediately lay down.

Among them.

My back touched the mat.

My body felt heavy.

The noise from outside could still be heard in the distance.

But...

it was fainter now.

—

Chapter 97: A Sea of Light

—

Night had fallen.

But the field was never dark.

It blazed.

Bright.

As if daylight had been forced to stay.

Spotlights pierced the sky.

White.

Gold.

Pale blue.

Moving slowly.

As if searching for something up there.

Over there—

The stage stood.

A replica of the Parthenon.

Pillars towering high.

The lighting from below made it look... alive.

Long shadows fell behind it.

—

In front of it—

The stoa stretched out in a straight line.

Small lights along the path glowed.

Forming a line.

Like a path leading to an altar.

All around—

Iron fences gleamed in the light.

Small pillars stood at various points.

Everything was pristine.

Everything was orderly.

Tens of thousands of people filled the field.

Packed.

Barely a single gap.

The voices of humanity merged into one.

A wave.

Rising.

Falling.

The air was hot.

Sweltering.

Despite the night.

Operational staff moved quickly.

Slipping through narrow gaps in the crowd.

Police were stationed at key points.

Near the stage.

Near the entrances.

Medical teams in their tents.

Small white lights glowing inside them.

Everything was ready.

—
On the stage—

An MC stood.

A spotlight fell right on him.

A voice echoed through the mic.

"Good evening!"

A wave of voices answered.

"GOOD EVENING!!"

The MC smiled.

"Tonight..."

"We are not just watching."

"We are going to... enter another world."

The stage lights dimmed slightly.

Only the Parthenon remained bright.

"Before you—"

"The palace of the gods."

The cheering swelled.

"And tonight..."

"We will build it... together."

He raised a hand.

"Welcome to..."

" **STAGE OF TIME!!** "

—
The lights went out.

Pitch black.

Silence.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three—

BOOM!!!

An explosion of sound.

The lights flashed on all at once.

The music hit instantly.

Drums.

Guitars.

Ethnic-infused synths.

A singer emerged from behind a pillar.

White robes.

Walking slowly.

Their voice began to ring out.

♪

"On this land we stand,

without a name... without meaning... without significance..."

"Small steps among the gods,

Searching for meaning... searching for purpose..."



The crowd swayed with the music.

The lights pulsed to the rhythm.



"If this light... this soul...

Will fade in the end..."

"Will anything remain...

Or will it vanish without a trace..."



The stoa glowed brighter.

The singer walked forward.

Approaching the audience.

A hand raised high.

The vocals swelled.

—

High in the sky—

CRACK!!!

The first firework exploded.

Gold.

Falling like rain.

Followed by red.

Blue.

White.

The sky was filled with light.

Cheers erupted.

Several minutes passed.

The music slowly faded.

The MC stepped back up.

"Incredible!"

"But before we continue..."

"There is someone who deserves our appreciation."

The lights shifted.

Growing more focused.

"This entire stage..."

"The entire design..."

"All of the preparations..."

"None of this would be possible without this one person."

The crowd began to quiet down.

Waiting.

"The stage designer and head of the preparation team..."

"...Itsuki!"

—

The spotlight swept across the stage.

Empty.

A few seconds passed.

Silence.

The MC smiled awkwardly.

"...Itsuki?"

—

—

[**The Man Missing from the Stage**]

The spotlight continued to sweep across the stage.

Right.

Left.

Behind the pillars.

Empty.

The MC chuckled.

"...It seems he is still in the back."

The audience began to whisper.

A few laughed.

Some whistled.

"Alright, let's give him a brief moment..."

The lights dimmed slightly.

Soft background music began to play.

—

Backstage—

The sounds of the concert could still be heard.

But distant.

Like another world.

On top of a mat—

Itsuki.

Still in the exact same position.

One arm draped over his eyes.

Breathing slowly.

Fast asleep.

Around him—

A few people were already awake.

Others were still sitting around.

Someone glanced toward the stage.

"...Eh."

"Isn't that your name they're calling?"

No response.

"Oi."

He patted Itsuki's leg.

No movement.

"Oi, wake up."

Still nothing.

"Is this guy dead?"

A few people chuckled.

"Sleeping like a rock..."

—

Outside the field—

Near the backstage area.

A black car pulled up.

The door opened.

A woman stepped out.

Long hair.

Impeccably dressed.

A familiar face.

Several staff members immediately turned their heads.

"...Is that—"

The woman walked briskly.

Her steps carried no hesitation.

In the distance—

The MC's voice could still be heard.

"...Itsuki, if you can hear us..."

"...we are waiting for you on stage."

The woman stopped.

Turning slightly toward the sound.

"...Itsuki? He's here?"

She murmured softly.

She changed direction.

Toward the resting area.

On the mat.

And—

Itsuki.

Still asleep.

—

The woman stood in front of him.

Silent.

Watching for a few seconds.

"...Seriously? He's sleeping at a time like this?"

Someone nearby let out a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, pretty much."

The woman let out a short sigh.

Then—

Tap.

She nudged Itsuki's leg with her foot.

Not too hard.

Itsuki stirred slightly.

His brows furrowed.

His eyes opened halfway.

A blank stare.

—

"...What."

The woman stared at him flatly.

"They're calling you."

"...Hm."

Itsuki closed his eyes again.

"...Calling me?"

He opened his eyes.

Sat up slowly.

Messy hair.

Face still entirely blank.

"Where."

The woman pointed toward the stage.

"...Over there."

In the distance—

"...Itsuki?"

The MC's voice was starting to sound much more awkward.

The audience was growing restless again.

Itsuki stood up.

Yawned slightly.

Looked toward the stage.

"...Oh."

—

He started walking.

Unhurried.

Down the corridor.

Stepping onto the stage from the side.

The spotlight caught him immediately.

Thousands of eyes watched.

Silence.

For a moment.

The MC smiled in relief.

"Ah! Finally!"

"Here he is—Itsuki!"

No music.

No special effects.

Just a guy...

With a sleepy face.

Standing in the middle of a magnificent stage.

—

—

[**A Single Sentence Delivered**]

The spotlight shone down.

Right on his face.

Itsuki stood there.

Squinting slightly.

The light was too bright.

The voices of thousands of people...

Like crashing waves.

Rising and falling.

The MC approached.

Handed him a microphone.

"Please, perhaps a few words..."

Itsuki stared at the mic.

...

Silent.

He took it.

Raised it slightly.

He didn't speak right away.

Took a slow breath.

"...Good evening."

His voice was flat.

Not loud.

But clearly audible.

The audience fell silent.

Waiting.

No follow-up came.

The MC turned his head slightly.

Confused.

Itsuki looked straight ahead.

Not looking at anyone in particular.

As if staring into the void.

Then—

"...Yuna."

His tone remained the same.

Flat.

"Don't forget to eat dinner."

Silence.

...

...

The MC blinked.

The audience...

Didn't immediately understand.

A few let out small laughs.

Others were confused.

Itsuki lowered the mic.

Handed it back.

Turned around.

And walked off the stage.

Without waiting for anything else.

—

In a small apartment.

The lights were on.

The TV was on.

The sound of the concert filled the room.

Yuna sat at the table.

A spoon in her hand.

A bowl in front of her.

Her eyes were glued to the screen.

The massive stage was visible.

The lights.

The massive crowd.

And—

Itsuki.

Yuna froze slightly.

Her spoon stopped mid-air.

"...Papa?"

She leaned closer to the TV.

As if to make sure.

And then, the voice rang out.

"...Yuna."

Her breath hitched.

"Don't forget to eat dinner."

Silence fell over the room.

A stark contrast to the loud cheering on the TV.

Yuna stared at the screen.

Unblinking.

Then, slowly—

She sat back down.

And ate.

Quietly.

—

Back on stage.

The MC was still a bit bewildered.

"...Well... that was... very personal."

A few people in the audience laughed.

The atmosphere thawed.

"Alright! Let's continue with the main event of the evening!"

The lighting changed.

More dramatic.

The music swelled.

From behind the pillars—

Someone walked out.

Calm steps.

Graceful.

The spotlight immediately followed her.

Sayaka.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Louder than before.

She stopped in the middle of the stage.

Gazing at the sea of people before her.

Then—

She closed her eyes for a moment.

The music began.

Soft.

Melancholic.



"Amidst the crumbling pillars of time,

I stand alone..."

"Searching for something once lost...

In the world... In memories... In the journey..."



The night breeze drifted slowly.

Swaying her hair slightly.



"If fate is an absolute certainty,

Then let me fight it..."

"Even if sacrifices are required,

I will still fight..."



The lights swept across the grand pillars.

Like a path leading home.



"And if you hear this... God.

Let me fight... Let me change your fate..."

"I am still... Here... calling your name... Waiting for you..."



—

Backstage—

Itsuki sat back down on the mat.

Silent.

Someone walked over carrying food boxes.

"Time to eat! Grub's here!"

Everyone immediately got up.

"Whoa, finally..."

The boxes were distributed.

One.

Two.

Three.

Until they were all gone.

Someone looked at their hands.

"...Eh?"

Everyone was holding one.

Itsuki looked at his own hands.

Empty.

"...Mine?" Itsuki asked.

Someone kept chewing.

"Ah... turns out we're short."

The others laughed.

"Sorry 'bout that, Boss."

Itsuki remained silent.

Took a breath.

"...Never mind."

He lay down.

Closed his eyes for a moment.

Someone approached.

"Itsuki, you're being called."

"...Again?"

"Yeah."

"To the actress room."

Itsuki stood up.

Walked.

Down the white corridor.

The door opened.

—

Inside—

Sayaka.

Sitting.

With food in front of her.

She turned her head.

"...I've been waiting for you."

Itsuki stood at the door.

"..."

Sayaka pulled out a chair slightly.

"Sit."

He sat down.

The food was pushed toward him.

"Eat with me."

Itsuki didn't say much.

Just started eating right away.

Sayaka watched him.

"...How is Yuna doing?"

His spoon paused for a second.

"...She's fine."

"Has she recovered?"

"Yes."

"How did you know? That she was sick."

"Seiji told me."

Sayaka looked down slightly.

"...Thank goodness she's doing well."

They resumed eating.

"Why did you give Yuna to me?"

"Why? It's obvious. Because it's you. I wouldn't entrust Yuna to anyone else. Except you."

"That's not what I meant."

"Alright, I understand..."

Sayaka let out a soft sigh.

"It's all because of work."

"That makes it perfectly clear."

Itsuki went back to eating.

From outside—

"Sayaka-san, two minutes!"

She stood up.

Picked up her water.

Took a sip.

Set it back down.

Looked at Itsuki.

"...Take care of her. I'm leaving her entirely in your hands."

Itsuki didn't answer.

Just kept eating.

Sayaka turned around.

Left the room.

The door closed.

—

Chapter 98: A Morning Too Heavy

—

Morning.

The sun had just risen.

A thin light swept across the streets.

It wasn't bright.

But it was enough to wash away the remains of the night.

—

I walked.

Slowly.

My footsteps felt heavy.

Every step seemed to add to the weight.

My muscles ached.

My whole body.

Like I had just been battered by something.

—

My eyes...

were heavy.

So heavy.

The cold coffee in my hand was half empty.

It had no effect.

It tasted... just like plain water.

I bit the plastic straw.

Took a slow sip.

—

A cigarette in my left hand.

I took a drag.

The smoke went in.

Came out.

Tasteless.

—

The sidewalks were starting to get crowded.

People passing by.

Motorcycles.

Cars.

The sounds of morning were coming to life.

The air shifted.

From cold...

to warm.

Birds began to chirp.

Faintly.

—

In the distance.

My head felt a little heavy.

My vision wavered.

Clear one second.

Blurry the next.

Microsleep.

—

I knew the feeling.

A few seconds lost.

Then back.

Over and over.

And in between it all—

—

"...Papa..."

I stopped.

Looked around.

Right.

Left.

Behind me.

No one was there.

I gave a faint smile.

"...Haha..."

Smack.

My hand slapped my left cheek.

Smack.

The right.

It stung a little.

Good.

I was still conscious.

"I shouldn't be hallucinating..."

—

The pedestrian light turned green.

I started walking again.

—

The apartment stairs.

A narrow hallway.

Dull walls.

My footsteps echoed faintly.

I reached the door.

I stopped.

Stared at the number.

208.

I blinked.

203.

208.

203.

My hand reached out to touch the numbers.

Feeling them.

Cold.

Real.

"...203."

I let out a sigh.

Took out my keys.

Click.

—

The door opened.

Pitter-patter.

The sound of small footsteps.

Fast.

Running.

I took off my shoes.

"Papa... welcome home."

I lifted my head slightly.

Stood up straight again.

Looked ahead.

Yuna.

—

Already in her school uniform.

Neat.

She was still wearing an apron.

A spatula in her hand.

Like... a little housewife.

—

"Wh... wh..."

She stopped.

Her mouth opened slightly.

Hesitant.

Holding back her words.

—

I walked inside.

"Papa, do you want to eat first?"

"Or take a bath? I can get it ready..."

I chuckled.

Softly.

"Haha... who do you think you are?"

"My mom?"

"I don't want either right now."

"Papa!"

—

An angry tone.

But her face...

was bright.

Radiant.

I dropped my bag just like that.

—

Saw the laid-out futon.

"...Finally."

My knees gave out.

Thump.

They hit the floor.

And then—

Thud.

My body collapsed onto the futon.

"Papa! That's my futon!"

—

Her voice was quick.

Protesting.

"Your futon is over there..."

"...it's still folded..."

I took a deep breath.

My face buried in the futon.

Warm.

Soft.

"Your futon... my futon..."

"My futon... your futon..."

"...it's all the same..."

—

A burning smell.

Yuna froze.

Her eyes went wide.

"...Ah!"

She ran to the kitchen.

Lifted the frying pan.

Quickly scooped up the egg.

Moved it to a plate.

Cut it in half.

—

Unevenly.

One piece was bigger.

She stared at it for a moment.

Then slid the bigger one over.

"...This one is for Papa."

The smaller one.

"...This is me."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

She brought the plate over.

Rice.

Soy sauce.

Placed them on the table.

Then she approached the futon.

Sat down beside me.

Shook my shoulder slightly.

—

"Papa..."

"...wake up..."

I didn't respond.

She shook me harder.

"Papa... wake up..."

Still nothing.

—

She leaned close to my ear.

Very close.

"Papa..."

"Wake up..."

My hand moved instantly.

Covering my ear.

Rubbing it.

"Yuna, stop."

"It tickles..."

"I'll eat... I'll eat later..."

"Fine..."

She stood up.

Went back to the table.

Began eating by herself.

—

The wall clock.

She looked at it.

Her eyes widened a fraction.

Her movements sped up.

Bite.

Swallow.

Another bite.

Done.

—

She stood up.

Cleared the table quickly.

Grabbed her bag.

Returned to my side.

"Papa?"

"Are you asleep?"

"...Hm..."

Not completely.

"What is it..."

"Allowance?"

My hand moved.

Slowly.

Heavily.

Reaching for my pocket.

It didn't make it.

It dropped.

—

"...Take it yourself..."

Yuna stayed quiet for a moment.

Looking at my hand.

The veins were clearly visible.

Tense.

She gently lifted my hand.

Inspected it.

Then let it go.

Thump.

"Papa has run out of mana..."

—

She reached into my pocket.

Took out my wallet.

Opened it.

Took a few coins.

Not many.

Put the wallet back.

—

"I'm taking this, okay...?"

"Hm."

She stood up.

Put on her backpack.

Stared at me for a moment.

Silent.

Then—

She lifted my hand.

Pressed her forehead against the back of it.

Just for a second.

She let it go.

—

Walked to the door.

Creak...

The door opened.

She stepped out.

Click.

The door closed.

—

—

- Aimless -

I couldn't sleep.

Even though my body had already given up.

Weak.

Heavy.

Like it was being dragged down.

—

I stayed on the futon.

Facedown.

My face buried in it.

Breathing was stifled.

A little suffocating.

But I didn't move.

I didn't want to see anything.

Didn't want to see the light.

...

Actually...

What was I doing...

Why was I working this hard...

Why didn't I just stop...

—

Even though—

I had savings.

Enough to live on for a few years.

Nothing luxurious.

But enough.

—

For what...

...

To live.

Living required money.

Money came from working.

Simple.

Too simple.

...

Dreams.

People always say that.

To achieve a dream—

It takes time.

Energy.

Money.

And luck.

—

What was my dream...

I stayed silent.

Trying to find it.

Nothing immediately came to mind.

—

A stable life.

Financial security.

Health.

Those weren't dreams.

That was... the bare minimum.

—

A woman.

I let out a small sigh.

Intimate needs...

But that wasn't it either.

—

Making games.

Writing a story.

Making a movie.

Drawing.

Traveling.

Robots.

A house.

A car.

All of that flashed through my mind.

One by one.

No...

Those weren't dreams.

They were just...

—

Curiosity.

A desire to try.

A desire to possess.

—

If I attained all of that—

then what?

Silence.

Nothing followed.

It was meaningless...

Except...

—

Just to pass the time.

To fill a life.

So it wouldn't be empty.

—

Why were people willing to do anything.

For the sake of something.

For a feeling.

For an achievement.

Even though...

The price was high.

Too high.

—

What did I want...

Wealth?

Not really.

Popularity?

Didn't care.

Control?

I stayed silent a little longer.

I wanted...

I stopped.

Searching for the right word.

Freedom.

—

But...

That was impossible.

No one is truly free.

I took a deep breath.

Still buried in the futon.

The air felt warm.

Stuffy.

—

Love...

The word appeared out of nowhere.

I frowned slightly.

I wanted to feel it...

People say—

Love can change a person.

Give them a reason.

Give them direction.

—

Maybe...

If I had that...

I wouldn't feel so empty like this.

I could feel truly alive.

—

Work.

Eat.

Sleep.

Work.

Eat.

Sleep.

—

On repeat.

Without end.

—

Light began to seep in.

From the gap in the window.

Thin.

Warm.

Touching my back.

Creeping up slowly.

To my neck.

To my face.

Warm.

Different from the cold of last night.

—

It felt...

Like something soothing.

Without reason.

My consciousness began to blur.

Slowly.

—

And finally—

It faded away.

...

.....

...

Click.

Creak...

The sound of the door opening.

My consciousness returned instantly.

My eyes snapped open.

Like something being forcefully dragged out of the dark.

My body moved on its own.

A sudden urge.

I got up.

Both hands pressing against the futon.

Knees bracing.

One final push.

I stood up.

My head spun slightly.

My vision hadn't stabilized.

But I kept walking anyway.

Straight to the door.

To check immediately.

—

There.

Yuna.

Taking off her shoes.

Her movements were slow.

Neat, as always.

The shoes arranged side by side.

The toes pointing outward.

Her hand brushed a little dust off the shelf.

Then she turned.

Saw me.

"I'm home..."

A brief pause.

"What is it, Papa?"

—

"...It's nothing."

It was just Yuna.

My shoulders dropped a fraction.

The tension that had just spiked... vanished just like that.

I turned around.

My footsteps felt heavy again.

Back to the futon.

I let myself fall.

Thud.

—

Yuna came in.

Closed the door.

Click.

She walked inside.

Small steps.

Stopped.

Looked toward the table.

—

There.

A plate.

With the egg on it.

Still whole.

Untouched.

The oil had started to congeal around the edges.

"Why didn't you eat, Papa?"

—

I rolled over.

Stared at the ceiling.

Blankly.

"I didn't feel like it yet."

Grumble...

A quiet sound.

From my stomach.

"What was that?"

"That was my stomach asking."

"That's the same thing."

—

Yuna set her bag down.

The straps dropped softly.

Then she walked to the bathroom.

To change clothes.

I sat up.

Slowly.

Like there was a weight on my shoulders.

My hand reached into my pocket.

Took out my pack of cigarettes.

I opened it.

—

Empty.

I stared at it for a few seconds.

Yuna came out.

Her clothes already changed.

Her footsteps light.

"Yuna."

"Yes?"

"Please get Papa a cigarette."

...Hm.

Why did I say that.

Papa.

—

Yuna walked to the drawer.

Pulled it.

Creak...

It opened.

—

Inside.

A carton of cigarettes.

A few lighters.

Band-aids.

Pens.

Her hand reached in.

Almost grabbing one.

She stopped.

Her eyes looked inside.

Then... slowly...

Her hand retreated.

She pushed the drawer back.

Closed it.

"Papa has to eat first."

—

Hearing that.

I stood up.

Walked toward her.

Then stopped in front of her.

She stood there.

Blocking the drawer.

A small body.

But she refused to budge.

—

"Move."

"Papa has to eat first."

I looked into her eyes.

She stared back.

No hesitation.

Unwavering.

—

...What a pain.

I turned around.

Returned to the table.

Sat down.

My hand moved.

Reaching for the plate.

Another hand appeared first.

From the side.

Offering a spoon.

—

I turned my head.

Looked at the spoon.

Then at her face.

Without a word.

I took it.

Started eating.

—

The egg was cold.

The texture had changed.

A bit hard around the edges.

—

Yuna walked to the kitchen.

"Papa."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to make something to eat... do you want me to make you coffee too?"

"Up to you."

She took an apron.

Put it on.

Tied the strings behind her back.

Grabbed the small step stool.

Pulled it over.

Climbed up.

—

The stool wobbled a little.

The legs were uneven.

Her hand reached for the frying pan.

Clang—!

Clatter—!!

Crash—

A pan.

A pot.

Fell to the floor.

The sound of metal crashing against the tiles.

—

I turned to look.

The floor was a mess.

Yuna stepped down slowly.

Her feet touched the floor carefully.

Her eyes darted toward me.

Just a fraction.

I went back to eating.

No comment.

—

Yuna turned back around.

Took some water.

Poured it into the pot.

Turned on the stove.

A small flame flared to life.

She grabbed a coffee sachet.

Looked at it.

"Papa, there's only one coffee left."

"I'll buy more later."

She poured the coffee into a mug.

Set it on a saucer.

—

The water started to hiss.

Boiling.

Yuna poured it.

Slowly.

Steam rose.

The spoon spun.

Stirring.

She stepped down from the stool.

Lifted the mug.

With both hands.

Carefully.

Walked toward me.

Slowly.

I finished eating.

—

Thud.

Yuna tripped on the carpet.

Her body pitched forward.

The mug slipped from her hands.

Crash!!

It shattered.

The coffee spilled.

Spread across the floor.

"Aaaaa!!!"

She burst into tears.

—

I stood up.

Fast.

Looked at the floor.

Shattered glass.

Looked at Yuna.

Her shirt was wet.

Brown.

I stepped forward.

Scooped her up.

Straight to the bathroom.

—

Splash!!

I doused her with water.

Splash!!

Splash!!

Her hair was soaked.

Her shirt clung to her.

She was still crying.

But it was starting to break into hiccups.

"Hic... hic... hic..."

—

I grabbed her shirt.

Pulled the tee over her head.

She didn't resist.

Splash!!

I checked her skin.

Up close.

—

Not red.

No blisters.

"Stop crying."

"...hic... hic..."

"Does anything hurt?"

Yuna shook her head.

Slowly.

"Then take a bath."

"Soak in the tub if you have to."

Splash!!

One more time.

—

I stood up.

Walked out.

The sound of splashing water echoed behind me.

Yuna wasn't crying anymore.

Water trickled out of the bathroom.

Trailing along the floor.

—

There was another color in it.

Red.

Faint.

I sat down on the futon.

Grabbed a cigarette.

Lit it.

A small flame.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

—

Then I looked at the sole of my foot.

There was a small gash.

Blood was slowly seeping out.

—

I pressed on it.

Fresh blood welled up.

I grabbed a band-aid.

Covered it up.

Chapter 99: Be Quiet, and Listen to Me

[Be Quiet, and Listen to Me]

—

I got back up.

Took the empty cigarette pack.

Placed it on the floor.

One by one, I put the glass shards inside.

A small sound.

Clink... clink...

Done.

—

Yuna came out of the bathroom.

A towel wrapped around her body.

Her hair still wet.

Water droplets falling to the floor.

"Papa..."

"What?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Quiet."

Yuna fell silent.

She looked down.

Her small shoulders slumped.

She walked away.

Into the small room.

To change clothes.

—

I grabbed a rag.

Wiped up the spilled coffee.

Slowly.

Following the line of liquid that had already started to dry.

Done.

I folded the carpet.

Lifted it up.

Tossed it into the shower room.

Splash.

Splash.

Splash.

Water hit it.

The brown stain faded.

I wrung it out.

Threw it into the dryer.

The machine spun.

...

Done.

I hung it up to dry.

—

Back to the futon.

I lay down.

Facedown.

Yuna came over.

Her steps were slow.

She sat beside me.

Her hand touched the sole of my foot.

Looking at the band-aid.

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

"Quiet, Yuna."

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

On repeat.

Not stopping.

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

—

I sat up.

Fast.

Stared at her.

My eyes were heavy.

Half-closed.

But sharp.

"Stop it."

"I don't like hearing it."

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

My hand moved.

Quickly.

Covering her mouth.

"I told you to stop."

Yuna's eyes widened.

Scared.

Tears welled up.

But they didn't fall.

I pulled my hand away.

Lay back down.

Grabbed a pillow.

Covered my face.

—

...

Not long after.

"Why is Papa so different today..."

A small voice.

Faint.

"I'm in a bad mood."

My voice was muffled behind the pillow.

"Why..."

"I'm just tired."

Silence.

"Is Papa tired of Yuna..."

...

"Does Papa not want Yuna here anymore..."

What?...

—

I threw the pillow.

Thud!

It hit the TV.

I immediately sat up.

"Quiet."

"And listen to me."

Yuna instantly looked down.

Her shoulders dropped.

Tears fell slowly.

—

"I never said that."

"Don't you ever think like that again."

I took a deep breath.

Exhaled slowly.

"I can't say that I love you."

"I also can't say that I hate you."

Pause.

"What's clear is..."

"I don't want you to leave."

"This house would just get lonely again."

....

....

"You said I'm different today..."

"This is me when I'm a mess."

—

"You want to know why?"

Yuna nodded.

Slowly.

"Logically speaking..."

"When your body is exhausted..."

"Physically... mentally... emotionally..."

"It affects your mood."

"And a bad mood..."

"Ruins every reaction."

"Everything that happens... feels wrong."

"Do you understand?"

...

...

She shook her head slowly.

I stared at her for a moment.

"You'll figure it out eventually."

—

"Now don't bother me."

"I want to rest."

I lay back down.

"Am I bothering you..."

I opened my eyes a fraction.

"Why are you still thinking like that."

"Papa just said..."

"What I meant was..."

"Let me rest."

"Now... get my pillow."

Yuna stood up.

Picked it up.

Handed it to me.

"Papa is tired."

"Yeah."

"I'll give you a massage."

"Look at your hands."

Yuna looked down at both of her hands.

Small.

"I can do it."

"Try massaging my hand, then."

—

Yuna stepped closer.

Pressed down.

Gently.

I felt absolutely nothing.

"Papa's hands are hard..."

"I told you."

"If you want to do it..."

"Just step on my back."

"How do I do that..."

—
I rolled over.

To the edge of the futon.

Near the wall.

Facedown.

"Climb on."

"Walk on me."

"It's the same thing."

Yuna climbed up.

Carefully.

Her weight was barely noticeable.

"Now..."

"Walk from the bottom... to the top..."

"Then back down again..."

"Turn around... keep going."

Yuna tried it.

One step.

Two steps.

"Is this too heavy for you, Papa?"

"Heavy?"

"Until you're all grown up..."

"It won't be too heavy for me..."

"As long as you don't get fat."

—

Yuna let out a small laugh.

She didn't look gloomy anymore.

Her feet walked.

Slowly.

Back.

Shoulders.

A little pressure on the neck.

Down.

Thighs.

Back of the knees.

—

"Ack—"

"Not there."

"Why, Papa..."

"That part might be tired too..."

She stepped on it again.

"Ack. Step off."

"That hurts."

"Oh... you should've said so."

Her steps moved.

Calves.

Down to the soles of my feet.

She stopped.

Looked at the band-aid.

She stepped over it.

—

"Why did you skip it."

"Go back down."

"But it still hurts..."

"Just do it."

Yuna stepped on it.

Lightly.

Hesitantly.

Then went back to walking normally.

Up to the shoulders again.

—

"Right there."

"A bit longer."

"This is where Papa is the most tired, right..."

The pressure increased.

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Yesterday I saw Papa on TV."

"And."

"Mm..."

"That's all."

"Didn't you see your mother too?"

"...I did."

"And."

—

"And what..."

"My mother's voice is really nice..."

"Papa met her yourself..."

"How was she?"

I stayed silent for a moment.

"Nothing special."

Yuna chuckled.

Her feet kept walking.

Slowly.

On my back.

The soreness faded, little by little.

My consciousness gradually...

Faded.

And disappeared.

—

Consciousness returned.

Slowly.

My eyes opened.

The ceiling.

It looked the same.

But the light was different.

Warmer.

Dimmer.

Afternoon.

—

My body felt light... a little.

Not as heavy as it was this afternoon.

I took a breath.

Deep.

Then exhaled slowly.

Both hands pressed against the futon.

I stretched my body.

Crack.

Crack.

The sound of joints popping.

My back felt taut.

Then released.

"...Hah..."

I got up.

Sat up.

—

Yuna.

At the table.

Sitting.

Her back straight.

An open book.

A pencil in hand.

She was reading.

Silently.

—

I recalled.

Earlier.

On my back.

Small footsteps.

A foot massage.

"...Yuna."

"Yes?"

She turned her head.

"Thank you."

Yuna blinked.

A little surprised.

"Your stepping actually felt pretty nice."

Yuna smiled faintly.

Not a wide smile.

But it was there.

"You're welcome, Papa."

"Next time Papa is tired again..."

"I'll massage you again."

"So the tiredness goes away."

—

"Are you doing homework?"

"No."

She looked at her book.

"I'm just studying."

"Exams start next week."

"Oh..."

—

My head was still a bit heavy.

I stood up.

Slow steps.

Toward the bathroom.

Cold water touched my face.

Splash.

Once.

Twice.

I wiped my face.

Stared into the mirror for a moment.

My eyes were still tired.

But more alive.

I walked out.

—

I turned on the TV.

Click.

Sound immediately filled the room.

Channels changing.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Stopped.

A familiar channel.

Anime.

—

I turned up the volume.

A little.

Yuna glanced over.

"Papa..."

"Hm?"

"I'm studying."

"Studying?"

I sat down.

Leaned back.

"Then just study."

"I just want to watch this."

The corner of my lips curved up a fraction.

On purpose.

I was teasing her.

—

Yuna didn't answer.

Her eyes returned to the book.

A few seconds.

Then...

She glanced again.

At the TV.

Back to the book.

Again.

Repeatedly.

I saw it.

She was genuinely distracted.

—

"Yuna."

"Yes, Papa?"

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

I stood straight up.

Grabbed my jacket.

"I'm going out for a bit."

"Want to come?"

"No."

Her answer was quick.

"Alright then."

I walked to the door.

Left the TV on.

I stepped out.

Click.

—

Inside.

Yuna sat.

Quiet.

Her eyes on the book.

Then...

To the TV.

She bit the end of her pencil.

"...I have to study..."

Her hand reached for the remote.

Click.

The TV turned off.

Silence returned.

She took a breath.

Looked down.

Went back to reading.

—

Sometime later.

Click.

The door opened.

I walked in.

"Yuna."

She turned her head.

"Look at this."

I lifted the plastic bag in my hand.

"What's that?"

"Sate."

"Sate?"

"Indonesian food."

Yuna tilted her head.

"What's Indonesia?"

"A country."

"Oh..."

—

I went to the kitchen.

Grabbed a plate.

Set it on the table.

Sat down.

"That's enough, you can study later."

"Let's eat."

My hand closed her book.

Slid it aside a little.

"But Papa..."

"Exams are next week..."

"And?"

"I want to get good grades."

I opened the sate wrapper.

The aroma immediately wafted out.

Sweet.

Smoky.

Slightly charred.

"Come on."

"Good grades won't fill your stomach."

"Eat first."

Yuna was quiet for a moment.

Then got up.

Approached.

Sat down.

—

I took some rice.

Served it onto the plate.

Took the sate.

Placed it on top.

"Is this spicy?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't like it."

"Oh..."

Yuna copied me.

Slowly.

—

She took a skewer.

First bite.

She stopped.

Chewed.

Her eyes widened a fraction.

"It's delicious..."

I nodded.

"It is."

We ate.

Slowly.

Without any unnecessary noise.

—

"Papa..."

"Hm."

"Are you not tired anymore?"

I stopped for a moment.

"Why do you ask?"

"You look like your usual self again."

"What is my usual self like?"

Yuna thought.

"Mm..."

"The same, I guess..."

"But..."

She searched for the right words.

"Just not like this afternoon."

I stared at her.

For a moment.

Then went back to eating.

I didn't explain.

There was no need.

But...

My hand moved a little.

Sliding one skewer of sate.

Toward Yuna.

Without a word.

And this time...

Yuna didn't say anything.

She just took it.

—

Chapter 100: The Fractured World

[A Moon Too Bright]

—

My steps were slow.

Heavy, but steady.

The cold asphalt reflected the light.

Not from the streetlamps.

From the moon.

I stopped.

Looked up.

The moon was... too big.

Too bright.

Its color wasn't the usual pale white.

It was more... dense.

Like something hovering far too close.

...

The night breeze blew softly.

But it wasn't cold.

Strange.

I started walking again.

Step by step.

The sidewalks were empty.

No sound of traffic.

No sound of people.

Only the sound of my own shoes.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

Like an echo.

—

I arrived in front of my apartment.

The building stood exactly as it always had.

But it felt... different.

I didn't know what had changed.

I went inside.

The stairs.

The hallway.

The door.

203.

I raised my hand.

Touched the doorknob.

It was cold.

Click.

The door opened.

Silence.

Not a single sound.

I stepped inside.

Took off my shoes.

My eyes immediately swept across the room.

Empty.

—

"Yuna..."

No answer.

I walked to the center of the room.

The table.

Empty.

The futon.

Neatly made.

No creases.

No trace.

"Yuna..."

Softer this time.

I opened the bathroom door.

Empty.

I opened the closet.

Empty.

—

I stood still in the middle of the room.

For a long time.

A very long time.

Why...

Is it empty?

My hand slowly rose to my head.

Pressing against my temples.

Thinking.

Yuna...

She should be here.

She was always here.

Or...

Was she never here at all?

—

I took a step back.

My eyes stared at the table.

No books.

No stationery.

None of the little traces of her life.

Had it...

All this time...

I furrowed my brow.

Trying to remember.

Yuna eating noodles.

Yuna studying.

Yuna calling my name.

Or was that...

Just...

I let out a small laugh.

Dry.

"Haha..."

The sound felt foreign to my own ears.

"Don't be ridiculous..."

I wiped my face.

If Yuna had never existed...

Why did I remember all of it so clearly?

—

And if she did exist...

Why wasn't there a single shred of proof?

I turned toward the TV.

The remote was on the table.

I turned the TV on.

Click.

The screen flared to life.

But it wasn't a normal broadcast.

Every channel was the same.

A red background.

Bold text.

The blare of a siren.

—

"NATIONAL EMERGENCY WARNING"

A woman's voice.

Flat.

Emotionless.

"World War III has begun."

My eyes froze.

"The territory of Japan has come under a large-scale military attack."

My hand slowly dropped.

"Citizens are advised to seek immediate shelter—"

—

BOOM!!!

The entire room violently shook.

The floor trembled.

The walls cracked.

The glass shattered.

I reflexively turned to the window.

Light.

White.

Too bright.

BOOM!!!

A second explosion.

Closer.

The building rocked.

"—immediate shelter—"

The TV cut out.

I didn't even have time to move.

The sky fell.

CRASH!!!

Everything shattered.

Dark.

Heavy.

Hot.

—

Something was pressing down on my shoulders.

Hard.

I couldn't breathe.

Dust filled my lungs.

I coughed.

"Kh...!"

I tried to move my hand.

I couldn't.

Heavy.

Too heavy.

I gathered my strength.

My whole body tensed.

—

Why am I still alive?

My hand shifted slightly.

Push.

It didn't move.

Push again.

A crack.

I stopped.

Realizing something.

Why am I... able to do this?

I took a breath.

Deep.

And pushed.

CRACK...!!!

—

The rubble... moved.

Slowly.

I got up.

Dust fell from my body.

Massive slabs of debris shifted.

I stood up.

Amidst the ruins.

A red sky.

Black smoke.

Fire everywhere.

The sound of crying.

One by one, I heard them.

Then more joined in.

Until it echoed everywhere.

—

I looked at my hands.

They were the same.

But...

Why was I still alive?

I looked straight ahead.

The air there... was vibrating.

Like a tear.

A crack appeared in midair.

And then—

It opened.

Pitch black inside.

Swirling.

—

The sound of small footsteps.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Someone... stepped out.

Small feet.

Shoes.

A cane.

I stared.

But before I could see their face—

SHHHRRRRRR—

A sound tore through the sky.

I looked up.

Fighter jets.

One.

Two.

Dozens of them.

Streaking past.

—

[The Fire That Swallowed the Sky]

—

And then—

BOOM!!!

The sky at the far edge... exploded.

A shockwave hit.

My chest vibrated.

Like being punched from the inside.

"Kh—!"

I was dragged half a step backward.

Dust flew.

The air turned hot.

Light.

White.

Blinding.

I couldn't see.

—

BOOM!!!

A second explosion.

Bigger.

Closer.

That heat...

Approached.

Slowly—

Then all at once.

My skin felt like it was burning.

The air was like fire.

—

"Mana Shield."

A small voice.

Beside me.

I turned my head.

The magical girl.

Her hand was raised.

Her wand pointed upward.

A circle of light appeared.

Thin.

Transparent.

In an instant—

We were enveloped.

A sphere of light.

—

The explosion arrived.

CRASH!!!

The shockwave slammed into the shield.

The world outside... burned.

Fire swept away everything.

Buildings.

Streets.

Even the air itself.

I could see it.

All of it... destroyed.

But in here—

Silence.

—

The dust slowly settled.

The light faded.

The outside came into view.

Flattened.

There was nothing left.

Only earth.

Blackened.

Scorched.

In the distance—

A mushroom cloud.

Tall.

Slowly expanding.

—

"Buff... physical defense."

That voice again.

"Buff... physical enhancement."

Her hand moved.

Small circles appeared.

And then—

Sank into my body.

From my chest.

Spreading.

To my shoulders.

To my hands.

To my legs.

The pressure—

The one crushing my chest earlier—

Vanished.

Light.

Too light.

I moved my hand.

Fast.

Faster than usual.

I clenched my fist.

It felt strong.

"This is..."

I looked at my body.

Unchanged.

But it felt... different.

—

Up in the sky—

A massive shadow.

I looked up.

Something was blocking out the sky.

Huge.

Impossibly huge.

A mothership.

Dark.

Massive.

Like a flying island.

Covering most of my field of vision.

I stood in silence.

Is this what they call it.

Modern warfare.

An era brimming with technology.

—

"Papa."

That voice...

I turned my head quickly.

The magical girl—

I stared at her face.

"...Yuna?"

She gave a small smile.

"Yes. It's me."

The world felt as though it had stopped.

"Where have you been...?"

"I just stepped out for a bit."

The crystal on her wand spun slowly.

"To get my gear."

"I don't understand."

"I'll explain later."

She looked up at the sky.

In a flash.

Her expression turned serious.

"For now, we stop this."

—

I followed her gaze.

The ship—

Opened at the bottom.

And things began to drop.

A tank.

Hanging from a parachute.

Then—

Two.

Then—

Dozens.

Hundreds.

Descending endlessly.

Heavy metal falling from the sky.

And—

Another figure.

Larger.

A mech.

Descending slowly.

The earth trembled as it touched the ground.

—

"Let's go."

Yuna floated.

Upward.

Soundlessly.

Gliding forward.

Fast.

"Yuna!"

I ran on reflex.

The first step—

Felt light.

The second step—

My body lifted off the ground.

"...?"

I stopped.

Looked down at my legs.

"What is this..."

I bent my knees.

Pressed down.

The ground cracked.

WHOOSH!!

I shot forward.

The air split apart.

I accelerated.

Every step—

Shattered the earth.

It was like... flying.

—

Up in the sky—

"Firebolt!!"

Yuna's voice.

A magic circle appeared.

Flames took shape.

BOOM!!!

A tank was destroyed.

Like paper.

I landed.

There was a tank right in front of me.

Its engine roared.

The barrel swiveled toward me.

"In that case..."

I lowered my stance slightly.

"...my turn."

WHOOSH!!

I didn't have time to stop.

I slammed right into it.

CRUNCH!!!

The metal crumpled.

My body pierced through it.

Shrapnel flew everywhere.

I came to a halt.

My chest felt tight.

For just a second.

I looked at my hands.

Not a single scratch.

"This body..."

"It's like steel."

I ran again.

WHOOSH!!

Another tank appeared ahead.

My leg thrust forward.

Piercing through.

CRUNCH!!!

Without slowing down.

—

Above—

Yuna kept attacking.

Fire fell like rain.

One by one, the tanks exploded.

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

I closed in on another.

Kicked.

SMASH!!!

The metal split apart.

A blast—

BOOM!!

Hit me square in the chest.

I stopped.

"...?"

No pain.

Just a slight pressure.

I turned toward the tank.

Walked over.

Lifted it.

Heavy.

But I could do it.

I threw it.

CRASH!!!

It smashed into another tank.

An explosion.

I kept moving.

Without stopping.

—

[No Need for Explanations]

—

I stopped.

My breaths were still heavy.

Dust still swirled in the air.

I looked around.

The tanks—

Motionless.

Their engines still roared.

But their treads had stopped.

Slowly...

The gun barrels rotated.

In unison.

I followed their aim.

All of them were pointing at—

"Yuna!!"

She looked back.

Up in midair.

She assessed the situation.

Yet her expression remained calm.

"I'm fine, Papa!"

She raised her hand.

"Mana Shield."

A circle of light appeared.

Instantly—

A transparent sphere enveloped her body.

The next second—

BOOM!!!

BOOM!!!

BOOM!!!

Dozens of shots were fired.

Converging on a single point.

Yuna.

There was no time to think.

My feet kicked off the ground.

CRACK!!

The earth shattered.

WHOOSH!!

My body shot forward.

—

The air split apart.

Time seemed to slow down.

The blinding light of the explosions drew closer.

I reached her.

My hands pushed against her.

Her small body was thrust upward.

Up.

Away.

And then—

BOOM!!!

Everything slammed into me.

Light.

Heat.

Pressure.

My chest felt like it was being crushed from all sides.

"Kh—!"

My breath caught.

My body lost all its strength.

Falling.

THUD!!

The ground slammed hard against my body.

The sky seemed to spin.

I lay there.

My vision blurred.

—

A shadow descended from above.

Fast.

"Papa!!"

She landed beside me.

Her hands lifted my head.

Gently.

Placing it on her lap.

"Why...?"

Her voice trembled.

"Why did you protect me...?"

I looked at her.

She was a blur.

But I knew it was her.

I gave a small smile.

"Why...?"

I raised my hand.

It felt heavy.

So heavy.

Touching her cheek.

Stroking her hair.

Gently.

—

"Isn't it obvious..."

My breathing was ragged.

"...because you..."

I paused for a moment.

"...are my daughter."

Her eyes widened.

Tears began to well up.

"But..."

Her voice cracked.

"I'm not your biological daughter..."

"I was the one who forced my way in..."

"I was the one who came to you..."

"I was the one who stayed..."

"...You never chose this, Papa."

I let out a small laugh.

Weak.

"Haha..."

"What difference..."

"...does that make..."

My hand was still on her cheek.

"The truth is..."

"I've already accepted you..."

"...as my daughter."

I took a breath.

"...and my friend."

Silence.

Only a distant sound—

From the machines of war.

"So...?"

"...what more do we need..."

Yuna bit her lip.

"Papa..."

My hand—

Went limp.

And fell.

Drained of strength.

But I could still speak.

Softly.

—

"...without you..."

"...that home..."

"...would be empty."

A heavy breath.

"...my life, too."

"...maybe... forever..."

—