



Weathering With You

Makoto Shinkai



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New York

Copyright

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Translation by Taylor Engel
Cover art by Makoto Shinkai

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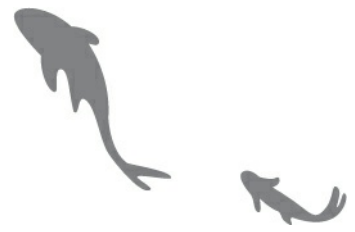
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PROLOGUE

The Story I Heard from You

Beneath a rainy March sky, the long whistle signals that the ferry is leaving port.

As the ship's enormous hull plows through the seawater, the heavy vibrations travel through my seat to the rest of me.

My ticket is for the second-class cabin, the one closest to the bottom of the ship. The voyage to Tokyo will take more than ten hours, and we'll be arriving at night. This is the second time in my life that I've made this very trip, on this ferry. I stand up, heading for the stairs to the deck terrace.

The first time was two and a half years ago. After what happened while I was in the city, rumors about me had started circulating at school: *They say he's got a record* and *I hear he's still wanted by the cops*. Being the subject of gossip didn't bother me (in fact, I'd be more surprised if I wasn't), but I hadn't told anyone on the island about what had happened in Tokyo that summer. I'd said a few things here and there, but I hadn't told a soul—not my parents, not my friends, not the police—about the really important stuff. Now I'm headed for Tokyo again, with everything that happened that summer inside me.

Now that I'm eighteen, I'm going to settle there for good.

And I'm going to see her again.

Those thoughts always create heat behind my ribs. My cheeks are flushing, little by little. I want to be out in the sea wind as soon as possible, and I start climbing the stairs faster.

Up on the deck terrace, the cold air strikes me full in the face, bringing rain with it. I draw a deep breath, trying to drink it all in. The wind is still chilly, but it's filled with the promise of spring. I've finally graduated from high school—and the reality of it belatedly strikes home, like a notification coming in late. I rest my elbows on the deck railing, gazing at the receding island, then shift my focus to the windswept sky. Countless raindrops dance

through the air for as far as I can see, way off into the distance.

Just then—I shudder, breaking out in goose bumps all over.

It's happening again. I squeeze my eyes shut involuntarily. As I stand there, stock-still, the rain hits my face, and the sound of it echoes in my ears. For the past two and a half years, the rain has been a constant presence. It's like a pulse that never stops, no matter how long you hold your breath. Like the light seeping through your eyelids, no matter how tightly you squeeze them shut. Like a heart that never falls truly silent, no matter how you try to calm it.

Exhaling slowly, I open my eyes.

Rain.

The black surface of the ocean undulates as if it's taking a breath, sucking the rain down into its bottomless depths. It's as though the sky and sea are conspiring together to raise the level of the ocean, for the sake of some practical joke. I'm getting scared. A shiver wells up from deep inside me. I feel like I'm going to be ripped apart and scattered.

I squeeze the railing. Breathe deeply through my nose. And, as always, I remember her. Her wide eyes, her vibrant expression, the energetic and dynamic tone of her voice, the long hair she wore in twin ponytails. And I think, *It's all right*. She's here. She's alive, in Tokyo. As long as she's here, I have a firm link to this world.

“—*So don't cry, Hodaka.*”

That was what she said that night, in the hotel we'd fled to in Ikebukuro. The sound of the rain on the roof was like a distant drum. The scent of the same shampoo I'd used; her gentle, all-forgiving voice; her skin, gleaming pale in the darkness—they're all so vivid that suddenly, I forget I'm not still there. Maybe we're actually in that hotel right now, and I've only imagined my future self on a ferry, like a spell of *déjà vu*. Maybe yesterday's graduation ceremony and the ferry are all illusions, and the real me is still in bed at that hotel. When I wake up in the morning, the rain will have stopped, she'll be next to me, the world will be as it always was, and the ordinary daily routine will start up again.

The whistle blows sharply.

No, that's not true. I focus on the texture of the iron railing, and the smell of the tide, and the vague silhouette of the island that has almost vanished over the horizon. It's not true; this isn't that night. That happened a long time ago. This me, the one rocking on the ferry, is the real one. *I'll think about it, really think about it, and remember it all from the very beginning*, I think as I glare at the rain. Before I see her again, I have to understand what happened to us. Or even if I can't understand it, I at least have to think it through.

What did happen to us? What did we choose? And what should I say to her?

It all started— Yeah, it was probably that day.

The day she first saw it. What happened that day, what she told me about, was the beginning of everything.

* * *

Apparently, her mother hadn't opened her eyes in months.

The small hospital room was filled with the rhythmic beeping of vital sign monitors, the *whoosh* of a ventilator at work, and the persistent sound of rain drumming on the window—along with that hushed atmosphere peculiar to hospital rooms that have been occupied for a long time, cut off from the rest of the world.

She sat on a stool beside the bed, squeezing her mother's painfully bony hand. She watched the oxygen mask turn pale and foggy at regular intervals, then looked at her mother's eyelashes, which were always lowered now. Beneath the crushing weight of her anxiety, she prayed constantly. *Let Mom wake up. Let a powerful gust of wind blow in like a hero coming to save the day, blast away the melancholy and the worry and the rain clouds and all the other dark, heavy things, and let our family walk with smiles under sunny skies again, all three of us.*

Her hair stirred softly, and she heard the faint sound of water dripping close to her ear.

She raised her head. She'd thought the window was closed all the way, but the curtain was swaying slightly. The sky beyond the windowpane drew her eyes upward; the sun had broken through. The rain was still falling in earnest, but a thin ray of light was reaching down through a small gap in the

clouds, illuminating a point on the ground. She strained her eyes to see better. Among the buildings covering the earth as far as she could see, the roof of one lone building shone, all by itself, like an actor in the spotlight.

The next thing she knew, as if someone had called to her, she was dashing out of the hospital room.

The mixed-use building was abandoned. The structures around it were shiny and brand-new, but this particular one was brown and decrepit, as if time had left it behind. All sorts of rusty, faded signs were stuck here and there around the building: BILLIARDS and HARDWARE STORE and EEL and MAH-JONGG. She looked up through her vinyl umbrella; the sunlight was definitely highlighting this one. When she peeked around its side, she found a small parking lot and a set of corroded, dilapidated emergency stairs leading up to the roof.

It's like a puddle of light.

Once she'd climbed to the top of the stairs, she was captivated for a few moments by what she saw.

The roof, which was surrounded by a railing, was just about half the size of a twenty-five-meter pool. The floor tiles were cracked and falling to pieces, and the whole surface was covered in green weeds. At the very back, a small torii gate stood quietly, cradled in thick foliage and perfectly highlighted by the ray from the gap in the clouds. In the sun's spotlight, the vermilion of the gate sparkled with little droplets. It was the only bright spot in a world hazy with rain.

Slowly, she crossed the roof toward the torii. The rain had soaked the summer weeds, and every time she stepped on them, she heard a soft crunching sound and felt a pleasant springiness beneath her feet. Beyond the curtain of rain was a forest of skyscrapers, pale and misty. The twittering of songbirds filled the air; there must have been a nest somewhere nearby. The distant rumbling of the Yamanote Line mingled with it faintly, like a noise filtering through from another world.

She set her umbrella on the ground, and the chill of the rain stroked her smooth cheeks. On the other side of the torii was a small stone shrine, with small purple flowers growing thickly around it. Nearly buried in the flowers were two Obon decorations that someone must have placed there: a horse

made of a cucumber and an ox made of eggplant, with thin bamboo-strip legs. Almost unconsciously, she put her hands together. Then she made her fervent wish: *Let the rain stop*. She slowly closed her eyes, then walked through the torii gate. *Let Mom wake up and let us walk under clear skies together*.

As soon as she passed under the gate, the air changed.

The sound of the rain suddenly cut out.

When she opened her eyes—there was blue sky all around her.

She was floating high, high above the earth, in the midst of a powerful wind. No—she was falling. Wind coiled around her, moaning lower and deeper than she'd ever heard it. With every exhalation, her breath turned white and froze, sparkling in the deep blue. Even so, she felt no fear. It was an odd sensation, like a waking dream.

When she looked down at her feet, she saw a multitude of cumulonimbus clouds formed like enormous heads of cauliflower. Each of them must have been miles wide, forming a magnificent sky forest.

Suddenly, she realized that the color of one cloud was changing. On the flat top created by the atmospheric boundary, patches of green were beginning to appear. She stared.

It was almost like a grassland. On the top of the cloud, invisible to anyone on the surface of the earth, rustling greenery was appearing and vanishing. Around it, she noticed swarms of some small creature.

“...Fish?”

The swarms indeed resembled schools of fish, undulating in a leisurely way, sketching geometric spirals. As she fell, she watched them intently. Uncountable numbers of them were swimming over the cloud-top plain...

Suddenly, something brushed her fingertips. Startled, she looked at her hand. She was right; they were fish. Their transparent little bodies slipped through her fingers and hair like wind given weight. Some had long fins trailing behind them, others were as round as jellyfish, and still others were thin, like killifish. The sun streamed through all their many shapes, making them shine like prisms. Before she knew it, she was surrounded.

The endless blue, the white clouds, the rustling greenery, the fish shining in all the colors of the rainbow—she was in a strange, beautiful sky world, one she'd never heard of or imagined. Before long, the rain clouds blanketing the world below her unraveled and melted away, and the never-ending streets

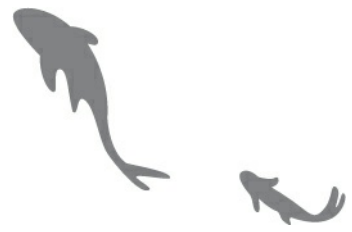
of Tokyo appeared. Every single building, every single car, every single pane of glass shone proudly in the sunlight. The town seemed to have been reborn, washed by the rain, and she slowly rode the wind down into it. Gradually, curiously, she could feel herself becoming one with everything. She simply knew, in a sensation more fundamental than words, that she was a part of this world. She was wind and water, blue and white, mind and wish. A peculiar happiness and keen sorrow spread all through her. Then, slowly, as if she were sinking deep into her futon, her awareness dimmed and faded...

* * *

“That view I saw back then might all have been a dream,” she’d once told me, “but—”

It wasn’t a dream, though. We know that now. Later on, we both saw the same sight together. A sky world known to none but us.

For better or worse, during that summer I spent with her, in the sky over Tokyo, we changed the shape of the world forever.



CHAPTER ONE

The Boy Who Left the Island

For starters, I figured I'd ask around online.

I opened Yahoo! Answers on my smartphone, glanced around—just in case—then typed in my question.

I'm a guy in my first year of high school. I'm looking for a part-time job that pays well in Tokyo. Are there any places that will hire you even if you don't have a student ID?

Hmm, would that work? The Internet could be harsh, and I got the feeling I was going to get myself trolled hard. Still, a search could only get you so far, and I had no one else to ask. Just as I was about to hit the POST button, a shipboard announcement began.

“Extremely heavy rain is predicted over the ocean. If you are out on deck, for your own safety, please go indoors. I repeat, extremely heavy rain is predicted...”

“Yessss,” I muttered under my breath. Right now, I just might get the deck all to myself. I'd been getting sick of sitting in the second-class cabin, which was a literal pain in the butt, and I wanted to go out on deck before the other passengers came back and watch the rain start coming down. I stuck my smartphone into the pocket of my jeans, then headed for the stairs at a run.

This Tokyo-bound ferry had five floors, and my cheap second-class ticket got me a spot in a room on the lowest level, where the noise of the engine was especially loud and everybody had to sleep sprawled together on the tatami flooring. Shooting a glance at the comfortable-looking first-class cabins out of the corner of my eye, I climbed up two floors' worth of the interior stairwell, then exited into a corridor that ran around the ship's outer wall. A crowd of people was just coming back in from the deck, or so I assumed.

“Rain again, they said.”

“Just when it finally cleared up...”

“Summers are nuts lately. It’s always raining.”

“Even out on the island, the typhoons were almost constant.”

Everyone was complaining. Ducking my head and saying “Excuse me,” I made my way upstream through the crowd in the narrow corridor.

When I climbed the last flight of stairs and poked my head out onto the deck terrace, a powerful wind hit me in the face. The wide deck was already deserted, shining in the sunlight. Right in the center, a white-painted pole stood like a signpost pointing at the sky. My anticipation building, I walked across the empty deck and looked up. Gray clouds were closing in, burying the blue. —*Plish*. A raindrop struck my forehead.

“...Here it comes!” I yelled before I could stop myself.

All at once, countless raindrops fell from the sky and into my eyes, and right after that, big drops crashed down with a thundering roar. The sunlit world from just a moment ago was rapidly colored over in the monochrome of an india ink painting.

“Whoooooa!”

The rain drowned out my yell so thoroughly even I didn’t hear it. I was enjoying this more every second. My hair and clothes were getting heavy and sodden, and even my lungs were filling up with moisture. I broke into a run and jumped as hard as I could, as if the sky were a soccer ball and I was trying to head it into the net. I spread my arms and spun to create an eddy. I opened my mouth wide and drank the rain. As I ran around like a lunatic, I poured out my soul and shouted out all the words I had bottled up inside. They were all washed away by the rain, unseen and unheard. A hot mass welled up in my chest. Half a day after I’d stealthily slipped away from the island, I was finally experiencing a sense of genuine liberation. I looked up into the rain, panting.

What was above my head wasn’t rain so much as a great mass of water.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. A whole flood was plummeting from the sky, as if an enormous pool had been flipped upside down. *It’s coiling—almost like a dragon*, I thought, just as a violent impact threw me to the deck. It felt like I was right under a waterfall as the heavy deluge pummeled my back.

The ferry groaned, rolling dramatically. *Oh, crap!* By the time the thought hit me, I was already sliding toward the water, and the angle of the deck was

only getting sharper. I reached out, trying to grab something, but there was nothing to grab. *I can't; I'm gonna fall*— Just then, someone caught my wrist, and I lurched to a stop. The ferry slowly began to right itself.

“Th...” I came back to my senses. “Thank you...”

It had been a close call, straight out of an action movie. I raised my eyes past my wrist to the one holding it and saw a man: tall, lanky, stubbly, and middle-aged. Smiling faintly, he let go of my hand. His shirt was bright red in the sunlight peeking out again.

“That was some serious rain,” he muttered, apparently not caring much either way.

It really had been astounding. I’d never seen such an incredible downpour before.

Several rays of light were slanting in through the clouds now.

I’d heard this tune before. It was classic, and I was pretty sure it was the background music for some old retro game. You controlled a penguin and tried to catch fish as you slid across the ice. Oh yeah, and sometimes seals would stick their heads up through holes in the ice to get in the penguin’s way. If you timed your jumps wrong, the penguin would stumble—

“Y’know, this is pretty tasty stuff.”

I raised my head. The middle-aged guy who sat across the table from me was cheerfully working his way through a set meal with chicken Nanban. He was wearing a tight-fitting flashy red shirt, and he had a thin face and narrow, drooping eyes with monolids. His untended stubble and casual curly hair marked him as an obvious free spirit, exactly as I’d envisioned a (slightly sketchy) Tokyo adult to be. The man was shoveling food into his big mouth, slurping pork miso soup, and picking up pieces of chicken with his disposable chopsticks. My eyes were drawn to the thick chunks of fried meat slathered in tartar sauce.

“Kid, you seriously don’t want any?”

“No. I’m not hungry,” I answered, forcing a smile, just as my stomach growled audibly. I turned red, but...

“Oh yeah? I do feel kind of bad, letting you handle the bill,” the man said, even though the way he was stuffing his face with the chicken indicated

otherwise.

We were sitting across from each other in the ferry's restaurant. The guy in the red shirt was eating a deluxe lunch, while I'd been concentrating on the restaurant's background music in an attempt to take my mind off my empty stomach. I'd offered to buy him a meal as thanks for saving me, but this whole time I'd been thinking that picking the most expensive item on the menu (1,200 yen) had been uncalled for. Weren't adults supposed to be a little more discreet in situations like this? I'd decided to allow myself a maximum of five hundred yen a day for food, and thanks to this, I was badly in the red on the very first day. But even as the thoughts ran through my head, I tried to respond politely.

"No, no, no need to feel bad! You really saved my butt out there, and—"

"Yeah, no kidding." Red Shirt practically talked over me, pointing his chopsticks at me. "That really could have gotten nasty back there, kid... Oh."

Red Shirt stared into space, mulling something over with a rather complicated look on his face. Slowly, he broke into a broad grin.

"Hey, come to think of it, that's the first time I've ever saved somebody's life!"

"...Oh." I had a bad feeling about this.

"And did I see beer on the menu here, too?"

"...Shall I go buy you one?"

Giving up on everything, I got to my feet.

The black-tailed gulls were all mewling at once, circling comfortably at a distance so close I might have touched them if I reached out. I watched them absently from the ferry's corridor deck while I nibbled at the Calorie-Mate nutrition bar I was having for dinner, making it last.

"I can't believe I got an adult sponging off me..."

Draft beer had been a jaw-dropping 980 yen. *Give me a break already*, I thought. That's so overpriced it's unreal. I'd left home only that day, and I'd already used up four days' worth of my food budget on some old guy I didn't even know. "Tokyo is terrifying," I muttered, and I meant it. I stuffed the empty CalorieMate wrapper into my pocket and pulled out my smartphone, opened Yahoo! Answers again, and posted the question I'd entered earlier. I was going to need that part-time job, no matter what. *C'mon, Best Answer.*

Plip. A raindrop landed on my phone's screen. When I looked up, scattered rain was falling again. Beyond it was Tokyo, where the nighttime lights were beginning to come on. The Rainbow Bridge was colorfully illuminated and slowly coming closer, like the opening title of a game. In that moment, my frustration with the strange man and my money worries vanished without a trace. I was finally here.

I shivered with excitement. I'd made it. Starting tonight, I was going to live in that city of light. I could hardly wait one more second for the life that awaited me there, and my heart was beating faster and faster.

"—There you are, kid."

Suddenly, I heard an easygoing voice, and my elation wilted like a balloon losing air. When I looked back, Red Shirt had just stepped out into the corridor. Rolling his head lazily, he took in the city lights. "Almost there. Finally," he said. "Hey, you're from the island, right? Whatcha got goin' on in Tokyo?" he asked, walking up next to me.

I gulped, but I had an answer ready. "Uh, I'm visiting relatives."

"On a weekday? What about school?"

"Oh! Um, uh, my school starts its summer vacation early..."

"Oh yeah?"

Why was he smirking? Red Shirt peered into my face rudely, as if he'd found an unusual insect, and I averted my eyes.

"Well, look, if you run into trouble in the city..." He held a small piece of paper out to me. A business card. On reflex, I took it. "Get in touch. Anytime."

K&A Planning (Ltd.) CEO Keisuke Suga, it said. As I gazed at the line of characters, I silently answered, *No way in hell.*

* * *

Over the next few days, I don't know how many times I whispered to myself that Tokyo was terrifying—people *tsking* at me, making me break out in a cold sweat and turn red with shame.

The city was vast and complicated and perplexing and callous. I got lost at the train station; I took the wrong train; I bumped into people no matter where I walked; nobody answered when I asked for directions; other people

accosted me as they tried to recruit me for I don't even know what; I was too scared to go into shops that weren't convenience stores; I was shocked to see a grade-schooler in a school uniform transferring trains all alone. And every time I remembered how overwhelmed I was, I wanted to cry.

I had a vague idea that Shinjuku was the center of Tokyo, so that was where I went to look for a job. When I finally got there, a guerilla rainstorm left me drenched. I worked up the courage to go into a manga café because I wanted to take a shower, but the clerk *tsked* at me and told me not to get the floor wet. Still, I decided to live out of that café to start with.

I tried searching for part-time jobs on a PC in a cubicle that reeked of something rotting, but there weren't any help wanted ads that said "No ID required." Most of the answers on my Yahoo! post—my last resort—were things like "*This is an insult to jobs*" and "*I think we have a runaway lol lol lol lol*" and "*That's a violation of the Labor Standards Act. Die.*"

Among the jeers, I did find some actual information: "*You don't need ID to work as an errand boy in a sex shop.*" So I desperately hunted up several of those and scheduled interviews, but when I actually went in, a relatively young but rough-looking guy just yelled at me—"Like hell! Why would we hire anybody without ID?! Whaddaya think we are around here, punk?"—and I ran back to the café, almost in tears. Actually, I was so scared that I did cry a little.

And before I knew it, five days had gone by.

This isn't gonna work. I can't get by like this. In my cramped cubicle at the manga café, I checked the notebook I was using as an account book. The cost to stay overnight at this place was two thousand yen a day, and what with travel and food expenses, I'd already used up more than twenty thousand since leaving the island. A week ago, my running-away fund of fifty thousand yen had seemed almost infinite to me; now I was furious with my past self for being so shortsighted.

"Okay, only one way to handle this!" I said aloud, flipping the notebook shut. My back was against the wall. I began picking up my scattered belongings from around the cubicle and shoving them into my backpack. I was moving out of this manga café; I had to save money. Until I found part-time work, I wouldn't spend the night indoors. It was summer, and sleeping outside for two or three nights should be doable. I hurried out of the café before my resolve weakened. Behind me, the TV on the café's wall

dispassionately warned, *“The number of localized downpours has already surpassed last year’s historic high by a wide margin, and they are predicted to become even more frequent in July. When you go out, whether it’s to the mountains, the beach, or even just in urban areas, take sufficient care—”*

I needed a place where I could shelter from the rain and hopefully spend the night. There were summerhouses in parks and spaces under railroad overpasses, but other people had invariably gotten to them first. I’d been wandering the streets for more than two hours, wearing the heavy backpack, which had everything I owned in it, under my raincoat. It was after nine at night, and the comfortable department stores, bookstores, and CD shops where I could have hung out for a while were already closed. If I sat down by the wall at a train station or an electronics retail store, security guards immediately shooed me away. That left me with no options except finding a place to stay on the street, and there just didn’t seem to be anywhere available; on the other hand, going too far from the station made me uncomfortable, so in the end, I just kept going around and around the same area.

As a result, this was the fourth time I’d passed through the gaudy lights of the gate to Kabuki-cho. I was getting seriously tired from all this walking, and my feet were numb. I was sweating, which made it muggy and super-gross under the raincoat. I was starving.

“Excuse me.” Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around to see a police officer standing there. “You were walking around here earlier, too, weren’t you?”

“Huh...?”

“What are you doing here at this hour? Are you in high school?”

I turned pale.

“Hey, wait!”

I heard a yell behind me. My feet had broken into a run before I could think. I sprinted through the crowd, without looking back. Every time I bumped into somebody, they swore at me. “That hurt, dammit!”

“Go to hell!”

“Stop it right there! Damn kid!” I ran past the side of a huge movie theater, heading for a place with fewer streetlights almost on instinct.

Gradually, the voices faded into the distance.

Clink. The faint sound of an empty can rolling along the ground reached me where I sat huddled up, and I lifted my head to see a pair of round green eyes shining in the gloom. They belonged to a kitten, a skinny one with shabby-looking fur. We were in a spot a good ways back from the main street, by a string of connected buildings with low eaves. Several eateries stood in a row, their lights extinguished. There were no doors on their entryways, and I was sitting inside one of the cramped entrances. At some point, I'd drifted off to sleep.

"C'mere, kitty," I whispered, and it responded with a scratchy mew. It felt like my first decent conversation with somebody in ages, and that alone was enough to make the inside of my nose prickle. I took my last CalorieMate out of my pocket, broke it in two, and held one half out to my new friend. The kitten stuck its nose forward, sniffing at it. When I put the food on the ground, the little cat looked at me steadily for a moment, almost as if it was saying thank you, then started to wolf it down. It was pitch-black, like a cutout of night itself, except for the white around its feet and nose, which reminded me of socks and a mask. As I gazed at the kitten, I put the rest of the CalorieMate in my mouth and slowly chewed.

"...Tokyo is terrifying."

The kitten was focused on its meal and didn't answer.

"I don't want to go home, though... No matter what."

I buried my face in my knees again. I could hear the tiny sounds of the kitten eating, the pattern of the rain hitting the asphalt, and a distant ambulance siren, all mingled together. The pain in my feet from all the walking I'd done finally melted sweetly away, and I dozed off again.

"Eek! Somebody's there!"

"Huh, for real? Whoa, you're right!"

"Agh, what's with this kid? I think he's asleep!"

...A dream? No, it's not; somebody's right in front of me—

"Hey, you!"

A deep voice sounded over my head, and my eyes snapped open. A blond man in a suit with a pierced ear was glaring coldly down at me. The entrance was now brightly lit, and the man was accompanied by two girls in clothes

that revealed most of their backs and shoulders. The kitten was gone.

“You got business here?”

“E-excuse me!”

I leaped to my feet and ducked my head. Just as I passed by him, I lost my balance. He’d kicked my ankle with his toes. I made an impulsive grab at the trash can by the vending machine and ended up taking it down to the wet asphalt with me. The lid came off, sending empty cans clattering all over the road.

“Hey, are you okay?!” one of the women asked, but the blond man with the earring put an arm around her shoulders.

“Forget him. As I was saying, you’ll make a killing working at our place. Come in and let me explain, all right?”

With that, the blond ushered the two girls into the building and disappeared after them. He didn’t even glance at me.

“The hell? Outta the way, kid!”

Openly clicking their tongues in irritation, a couple walked past me where I sat in the street, kicking empty cans aside.

“I’m sorry...!”

Hastily, I put the trash bin back in place, then crawled around on the wet ground, desperately picking up the scattered contents. The garbage was more than just cans; there were empty bento boxes and food waste in there, too. The passersby weren’t shy about letting me know I was in their way. I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible, but I had to clean up before I could, and I grabbed frantically at limp, soggy fried chicken and half-eaten rice balls with my bare hands. Tears welled in my eyes and ran down my face alongside the raindrops.

There was a distinctly heavy paper bag in among the garbage. It was about the size of a hardcover book, and it had packing tape wound around and around it.

Ka-tunk.

As I was peeling off the fabric packing tape, the wet paper bag ripped, and its contents fell to the floor of the restaurant. After the heavy metallic clunk, I hastily reached down toward my feet.

“Huh?!”

The thing looked like a gun. Flustered, I grabbed it and shoved it into my backpack. The ominous chill of the metal lingered on my hand as I scanned the area.

I was in a late-night McDonald's, sandwiched between a private railway station and a pachinko parlor. This place was familiar; it was close to the manga café where I'd been staying, and I'd already been there several times. The trains had stopped running for the night, and there weren't many people in the restaurant. Most of them were silently focused on their smartphones, and the only ones talking were a pair of women. "I just keep falling for him harder and harder, but I'm the only one... He mostly ignores my messages..." The women's conversation came to me in very serious whispers. Nobody was looking my way.

I exhaled in relief. "It's gotta be a toy," I said aloud, trying to convince myself.

After I'd cleaned up the empty cans, I'd washed my hands thoroughly in a public restroom, then remembered this place and came here. They probably wouldn't let me stay until morning on one order of potage, but I wanted to be somewhere that felt safe until I'd recovered enough to walk around outside, at least.

Pulling myself together, I sat back down in my chair. I rummaged through the pocket of my jeans, then set a crumpled slip of paper on the table.

K&A Planning (Ltd.) CEO Keisuke Suga

The business card I'd gotten from Red Shirt on the ferry had an address written on it in tiny letters. Tokyo, Shinjuku Ward, Yamabuki-cho. *Shinjuku Ward?* I punched the address into Google Maps. It was twenty-one minutes from here by city bus. Closer than I'd expected.

Wrapping my hands around the paper cup of soup, I slowly sipped the last mouthful. Outside the window was a bright, enormous outdoor TV, blurred by the rain. The bustle of Kabuki-cho came to me faintly through the window glass, like sound leaking from headphones. *If I go to this address..., I thought. What are the possibilities? CEO means "company president," doesn't it? Would he point me toward a job? But if he's the kinda guy who'd sponge a meal off a high schooler, his company probably isn't on the up and up. And— Hang on. If he's got his own company, he probably has enough money to get by. And he made me pay 2,180 yen for his food!* It was too late to get mad over this, but I did anyway. So I'd been picking up the tab for a

company president? The set meal had been a thank-you, so that was unavoidable, but wasn't the 980-yen beer a little much? Shouldn't I explain the situation and get him to pay me back for that, at least? It wouldn't be the classiest thing I'd ever done, but sometimes you have to sacrifice a little to keep from losing a lot. Once he knew about the mess I was in, even a cheapskate like him might be surprisingly quick to give my money back.

But... I slumped over the table.

That would be *really* pathetic. Besides, he actually had saved me, and I'd offered to pay for that beer myself. Had I come all the way to Tokyo just to be selfish and petty? I had no money or goal and nowhere to stay, and my stomach was so empty it hurt. What in the world was I doing here? What had I expected to find in the city?

I remembered that day. I was pedaling as hard as I could, trying to cancel out the pain from where he had hit me. It had been raining on the island then, too. Thick rain clouds were rolling across the sky, but several rays of light had lanced down through gaps in the cloud cover. I was chasing that light. I wanted to catch it, to get inside it, and I biked down the coastal road for all I was worth. For just a moment, I thought I had it! ...But I was at the edge of a seaside cliff, and the sunlight flowed away, far out to sea.

Someday, I'll go into that light, I decided back then.

A faint wind blew across me, gently ruffling my hair. It wasn't from the restaurant air conditioner. It was a real wind, the sort that carried the scent of grass from a distant sky... But inside? I lifted my head from the table.

A Big Mac box was sitting right in front of me.

Startled, I looked over my shoulder.

A girl was standing there, dressed in a McDonald's uniform: a deep-blue shirt, a black apron, and a gray newsboy cap on her delicate pair of ponytails. I figured we were probably about the same age. She had big eyes with large pupils, and she seemed mad about something as she looked down at me.

"Um, I didn't..." I protested, meaning *I didn't order this*.

"That's for you. Don't tell," she said, her voice as delicate as the scent of a small flower.

"Huh? But why...?"

"You've had that for dinner three days in a row," she said pointedly, with a glance at my soup, then trotted away.

"Uh, wait..." I began, but the way she spun around was like a gentle hand

over my mouth. The tight line of her lips suddenly softened, and she gave a brief chuckle. The colors around me brightened, as though the sun had broken through the clouds—or that was what it felt like to me anyway. Without a word, the girl turned her back again and ran quickly down the stairs.

“...”

I think I sat there, dazed, for a full ten seconds before I came to myself with a jolt. The Big Mac box sat on the table like a special present. Lifting the lid, I was greeted by the savory aroma of meat and the soft swell of a thick bun. When I picked it up, it was heavy. Glistening cheese and lettuce peeked out from between the beef patties.

In all the sixteen years I’d been alive, that was, without a doubt, the most delicious dinner I’d ever had.

* * *

“Shoot, we’re almost at the bus stop! Listen, when can we hang out again?”

“Let’s see. What about the day after tomorrow? I have practice, but I’ll be free in the afternoon.”

“Yay! I found a café with good reviews on Tabelog I’d like to go to. Maybe I’ll make reservations!”

It was afternoon, and I’d been listening to that sickeningly sweet conversation on the bus for a while. The voices were coming from the back seat. I’d been staring out the window; I felt a little awkward about looking back at them. As I watched the water droplets flowing backward in complicated patterns, I was oddly impressed: *So couples actually do have conversations like that.* I’d never truly understood the demand for foodie apps before, but apparently Tabelog really was a thing for city dwellers. I didn’t know you could make reservations at cafés, either... My eyes went to my smartphone. My blue dot was slowly getting closer to the red flag icon at my destination. In ten minutes, I’d be there. I was getting a little nervous.

Ding-dooong. An electronic chime sounded, and the monitor beside the driver’s seat displayed the words *Stop Requested*. “Okay, Nagi, see you later!” someone chirped. When I saw the short-haired girl who was getting off the bus, I did a double-take—she was wearing a school backpack that had

Traffic Safety written on it. She was still in grade school. *What, seriously? Tokyo is full of surprises. Grade-schoolers read Tabelog?*

“Ooh, lucky me!” A long-haired girl, also in elementary school, boarded the bus and took the first girl’s place. “I thought I might get to see you, Nagi!” she said, running happily toward the back seat.

My eyes followed her involuntarily. “What the—?!”

The kid sitting on that back seat with his legs crossed (in shorts) couldn’t have been more than ten or so. “Hi, Kana,” he said, giving the girl an elegant wave. He took her backpack with a smile, like a gentleman escorting a lady. He had a silky short bob, sharp eyes, and childlike but symmetrical features; he seemed rather princely. Did this kid have a girlfriend for every bus stop? The bus set off again, and I tore my eyes away from them. Behind me, I could hear them flirting.

“Hmm? Kana, did you curl your hair?”

“Oh, you can tell? Yes, just a little. Nobody else noticed it today, but of course you would, Nagi! So? What do you think? Does it look good?”

“Yeah! It’s looks great—kinda grown-up, like a middle schooler.”

The girl gave a little chuckle. It was embarrassing just hearing how happy she was, and I started to feel excruciatingly awkward. This kid was in grade school, but he probably had multiple girlfriends, and on top of that, those girls were making reservations at Tabelog cafés. The guys who get all the girls start so young. Is this what they call cultural capital?

“Tokyo is seriously something else,” I muttered as I got off the bus at my stop. I opened my umbrella and, squinting at Google Maps, made my way through a blue-collar shopping district. When I turned right, as Google instructed, the atmosphere of the street abruptly changed. Several small printing companies sat in a row on the hill road, and the faint smell of ink mingled with the rain.

“...This is the place, right?”

The address on the business card turned out to belong to a small, run-down building that looked like a shop. A patently old-fashioned awning sign jutted out from the front; the word SNACK was written on it in letters that had all but disappeared, indicating this was one of those low-key hostess bars. I checked the address on the card against Google Maps one more time. This

was it. When I took a closer look at the awning, I realized the name of the shop was covered by packing tape in several places. The fabric of the awning, the letters, and the packing tape were all equally worn out, so I hadn't noticed on that first casual once-over, but this place wasn't a snack bar anymore. A rusty plate that said K&A PLANNING (LTD.) was secured to a fence by the road's shoulder, and beside the company name, there was an arrow pointing down. I realized the building had a semibasement, where a narrow set of concrete stairs led down to a door.

Apparently, this place actually was a company, but I hesitated, unsure what to do. The building was as sketchy as they come, and it really didn't look like there was any money around here. "CEO," my butt. Even so, I didn't have anywhere else to try. I steeled myself, folded my umbrella, and started down the narrow stairs. They weren't even three feet wide.

Click.

I was sure I'd pressed the doorbell, but I couldn't hear anything.

I put my ear against the door, then tried the doorbell again. Silence. Was it broken? I knocked. No response.

Just to see, I tried the doorknob, and the door swung open easily.

"Excuse me! I'm Morishima; I called you earlier!"

I peeked in. When I'd called the number on the business card a few hours ago, Red Shirt himself had told me he'd be waiting, and to come on over. Nervously, I stepped inside. There was a small bar counter just inside the door, but it was surrounded by jumbled piles of books and papers and cardboard boxes, while the floor was strewn with sake bottles and take-out flyers and clothes. It was impossible to tell whether the place was a shop or a home or an office. It was as if the room itself were saying, *Meh, it's not like it really matters.*

"Mr. Suga, are you here?"

I took a few more steps and spotted a sofa beyond a bead curtain near the back of the room. There was a lump on it, curled up in a blanket.

"Mr. Suga?"

Long, white, bare legs hung off the end of the sofa. As I got closer, I saw toenails painted a shiny sky blue, feet in chunky high-heeled sandals, and a face that belonged to a young woman. Her long, smooth hair hung over it like a veil, and I could hear her breathing softly, sound asleep.

“Mr....Suga...?”

I already knew she wasn't who I was looking for, but for whatever reason, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her denim shorts were very, very short. I could see her eyelashes through her hair, and they were so incredibly long, she could have stepped out of a manga. She was wearing a purple camisole, and her bust rose and fell gently with each breath. Slowly, I crouched down until her chest was at eye level.

“...Nah, that's not okay. Not for anybody.”

Coming to my senses, I looked away—

“Oh, g'morning.”

—just as someone suddenly spoke to me.

“Waaaaugh!” I yelled, straightening up involuntarily. The woman's eyes had blinked open.

“Uh, um, sorry, I'm—!”

“Yeah, I heard from Kei,” the woman replied nonchalantly, sitting up. “He said a new assistant was on his way over.”

“Huh? No, I haven't—”

“I'm Natsumi; nice to meet you. Aaaah, finally, I won't get stuck with the odd jobs anymore!”

The woman stretched comfortably. Looking at her again, I realized she was gorgeous. She was pale and slim and smooth and sharp and trim and stunning, like somebody from TV or a movie.

“Sooo...” The woman who'd introduced herself as Natsumi had her back to me as she spoke.

Behind the bar counter, there was a living room almost 180 square feet in area that was apparently serving as the company's office. I sat on a chair, staring at Natsumi's shoulder blades as she fixed us drinks in the small kitchen.

“Yes?”

“I wanna ask...”

“Uh-huh.”

“You were looking at my chest back there, weren't you?”

“No I wasn't!” My voice cracked.

Cheerfully humming a little tune, Natsumi set an iced coffee in front of

me. “What’s your name, kid?” She sat down across from me. Her voice was light and musical.

“Hodaka Morishima.”

“Hodaka?”

“Um, it’s written with the characters for *sail*, like on a ship, and *high*...”

“Oh yeah? Wow, that’s a terrific name.”

My heart skipped a beat. That might have been the first time in my life that anybody had called me terrific. “Do you work in the office here, Ms. Natsumi?”

“Oh, are you asking about my relationship with Kei?”

I remembered that Mr. Suga’s first name was Keisuke. “Um, yes.”

“Ha-ha! You’re hilarious!”

Huh? Had I said something weird? After Natsumi laughed for a while, her eyes suddenly squinched up in a smile. She peered at me from the shadows beneath her eyelashes.

“It’s exactly what you think it is,” Natsumi said in a husky, sexy voice, sticking her pinky straight up.

“Huh?!” I stared at her, stunned.

...*For real?* I accidentally let bitter iced coffee dribble out of the corner of my mouth. I’d never seen a mistress before...

Just then, we heard the door open.

“Hey, you’re here,” said a laid-back voice. I turned around to see Red Shirt—Mr. Suga—padding over to us, a plastic shopping bag dangling from one hand. “It’s been a while, kid... Hmm? Did you lose some weight?” He tossed a can to me. I caught it and realized it was beer. For a moment, I was confused, wondering why the heck he gave this to me, and Natsumi promptly plucked it out of my hand.

“Uh, excuse me? Have you been playing pachinko?” Natsumi asked, popping open the pull tab in near-perfect unison with Mr. Suga, and the two of them started chugging down the contents as if this was normal for them. *What’s going on? You’re telling me these people start drinking at lunchtime?*

Mr. Suga dropped down heavily onto the low sofa beside the table. “So, kid, you’re looking for a job, right?” He seemed awfully happy. Pulling a magazine out of the pile below the sofa, he held it up for me to see. “This is what the company’s working on right now: a commission to write articles for a magazine with a long and influential history!”

The cover of the magazine, which had *Mu* written on it, held an illustration of a pyramid, a planet, and an enormous, eerie eye. I flipped through the pages, as he clearly wanted me to do: “Contact Finally Made! A Resident of the Year 2062,” “All-Out Special Feature: Guerilla Rainstorms Caused by Weather Weapon!,” “State Secrets Obtained: Tokyo Protected by Hoard of Human Sacrifices.” They were all like this and full of attitude: *We’re discussing online joke articles, but we’re taking them about fifty times more seriously. Got a problem with that?*

“The next job is about urban legends.” Mr. Suga seemed to be smiling faintly. “Meet with some people, interview them about what they saw or went through, then turn it into an article. Boom, done.”

“Huh...”

“Easy enough, right?”

“Um... Huh? Wait, you mean *I’m* doing this?!”

“Topic-wise, anything goes. Like people getting spirited away or prophecies or shadowy human-trafficking rings. You kids are into that stuff, right?”

With that, Mr. Suga took out his smartphone. There was a long list of articles on it: “Fish from the Sky,” “The Tokugawa Clan and Virtual Currency,” “Trump Is an AI,” “CD Found on Surface of Mars,” “Activate Chakras with Smartphones,” “Elevator to the Hidden World,” et cetera, et cetera...

“What about this one? It’s close to home,” he said, pointing to an item on the list. “The fabled ‘one hundred percent sunshine girl.’ According to the Internet, anyway.”

“S-sunshine girl?”

“I’m a sunshine girl!” Natsumi raised her hand cheerfully.

Mr. Suga ignored her. “It’s been raining all the time lately. On TV, they were saying we’ve got a new record for the number of rainy days in a row. I’m guessing the demand is probably there, yeah?”

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“What’s with you? Not much of a go-getter, are you?” Mr. Suga said with mild dismay.

“It just so happens that we’ve scheduled an interview for this afternoon, so this is perfect,” Natsumi said. “Go get that story.”

“Huh? Me? Right now?!”

Natsumi clapped her hands. “It’s like test-driving the job before you join up!” she said excitedly.

“You mean he’s an intern,” Mr. Suga corrected.

“Sounds like fun, don’t you think?! I’ll come with!”

“No, please, wait just a minute; this is totally out of the blue, and I really can’t—”

* * *

“Of course sun women exist.”

The subject we were interviewing was so clear about it that the alternative almost didn’t seem possible.

“I knew it!”

Natsumi leaned forward, her voice bubbling with excitement. The petite woman who sat in front of us had bobbed hair, and it was hard to tell whether she was young or old. The fairly large, colorful accessories she wore from head to toe made her look like some unusual type of animal.

“Rain women exist as well. Sun women are possessed by nature spirits aligned with the god Inari, while rain women are possessed by spirits aligned with the dragon god.”

“Um...what?”

And now I had no idea what we were talking about. Next to me, I could sense Natsumi’s growing enthusiasm. The subject of our interview— Well, this was a fortune-teller’s shop in a mixed-use building, so I think she was the fortune-teller who worked there and not one of these “sun women” herself. Anyway, she went on, as smoothly as if she were reading from an invisible piece of paper.

“Those aligned with the dragon god are distinguished, first and foremost, by drinking beverages in large quantities. They unconsciously try to find water, you see. Typical behavior for a dragon.”

Beverages?

“Dragon-god types are strong-willed and excel in competition, but they tend to be careless and perfunctory about their responsibilities.”

Now we were talking about personalities? This was really straying from the intent of the interview, I felt, and I was about to interrupt, when—

“Hmm? Kinda sounds like me...” Natsumi murmured gravely, and I glanced over at her.

“Inari types are diligent and readily succeed in business, but they are also rather timid and poorly suited to leadership positions. For some reason, many of them are extremely attractive, both men and women.”

“Now, *that’s* me!” She sounded like a child whose question had received a satisfactory answer.

“Because the weather is currently out of balance, it is easier for sun and rain women to be born now. The homeostasis of Gaia, so to speak.”

“I see!”

“But they must beware...!” Suddenly, the fortune-teller lowered her voice, leaned forward, and looked at each of us in turn. “The act of influencing nature inevitably carries a heavy price. Do you know what it is, young lady?”

“No,” Natsumi said, gulping.

The fortune-teller’s voice dropped even lower. “They say if you overuse weather-type abilities, you’ll be spirited away and become one with Gaia! That is why debt, personal bankruptcy, and disappearances are unusually common among sun and rain women!”

“Wow...” Natsumi’s eyebrows came together. “I’ll be careful!”

As we were leaving, Natsumi bought something from the fortune-teller for a lifelong boost to her financial luck.

“—So? How was it?”

Instead of sighing, I took out my earphones and looked up from the screen of the MacBook. Mr. Suga was standing over me, backlit by the office’s fluorescent lights.

“...This fortune-teller, who sounded like a Vocaloid, went on and on about a bunch of stuff straight out of a light novel. Something about people disappearing if they use too much power.”

I’d been in the middle of typing up a manuscript for the fortune-teller’s story based on my notes and the recording I’d made.

“So it really was one of those, huh?” Mr. Suga was grinning.

What, he knew all along? I thought with some frustration. “The weather’s got nothing to do with dragon-god types and Inari types and Gaia and

personalities and good-looking people, does it? It's just nature doing its thing; fronts and pressure changes and whatever. Sun women and rain women are just patterns people see where they want to see them, right? They can't actually exist, no way!" I'd googled plenty of sound arguments online.

"All right, look," Mr. Suga said, suddenly bristling. "We know all that; we're providing fun. The readers know, too. Don't act like entertaining the masses is beneath you."

I swallowed what I'd been about to say. Mr. Suga peered at the screen of the MacBook, reading the draft I was working on.

Is that what this is? I was actually a little impressed. *"We know all that. Don't act like entertaining the masses is beneath you."*

"This all you've got? Damn, taking your sweet time."

Mr. Suga lifted his head, and I reflexively ducked mine in apology. "I'm sorry."

"...Your copy's not bad, though."

The muttered compliment was like a piece of candy, and I was the little kid excited to get it. I'd enjoyed writing fiction ever since middle school (although I'd never told anybody, and I hadn't actually completed a single novel yet), and I liked to think I was pretty good at it. That said—when I was with this guy, my feelings went up and down like a rollercoaster.

"Okay, kid, you're hired!"

"Huh... What?! Wait just a minute, I never said I'd do it—"

I hadn't heard anything about hiring requirements, wages, or even exactly what I'd be doing yet. True, I was looking for a job, but this shady place wasn't—

"You can live here at the office."

"Huh?"

"Meals included."

"...I-I'll do it! Please let me do it!" I leaned forward involuntarily. It was like finding a grab bag stuffed exclusively with things I wanted, and I suddenly didn't want to give it to anybody else.

Mr. Suga happily thumped me on the back. "Oh yeah? Good to hear! So, what was your name again?"

"Huh?" My enthusiasm cooled down fast. *Whoa, hang on, you're hiring a guy when you don't even remember his name?*

"Ha, you're hilarious, Kei!" Natsumi glanced at us from the kitchen with

a laugh. “It’s Hodaka,” she said, bringing food over.

“Oh, I’ll help!” I said.

There was a heaping platter of fried chicken, accompanied by a generous amount of slivered green-onion tips and grated daikon. A salad with tomato and avocado and onions. Hand-rolled sushi with beef and celery and tuna sticking out of it.

And then I was starving.

“Here,” Mr. Suga said, handing me another beer, and by then I knew not to say anything and just switch it for a can of cola. “Okay, in celebration of our new hire, Hodaka—!”

Mr. Suga and Natsumi popped their pull tabs in unison, and I hastily opened my cola.

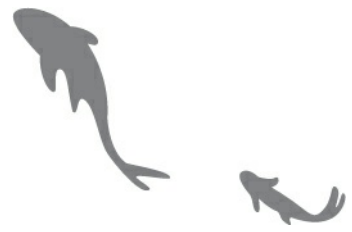
“Cheers!”

Clink, clink, clink. The three cans connected with one another.

As I chewed my fried chicken, I realized it had been a pretty long time since I’d eaten dinner with anybody else, even though I wanted to roll my eyes at how pushy they were. Between that and how tasty the chicken was, I teared up a little.

Mr. Suga and Natsumi both chugged beer after beer with incredible gusto, and of course, it wasn’t long before they were smashed. They were having a great time swapping online gossip and griping about their editors and making me tell them about my own life. It was a strange sensation, like having someone constantly tickling a part of me that wasn’t ticklish—like a gentle hand scratching the back of my head, for example. It wasn’t unpleasant at all. I had a strange feeling that for the rest of my life, even in the distant future when I was old enough to have grandkids, the memory of this rainy night would come back to me when I least expected it.

That was how my new days in Tokyo began.



CHAPTER TWO

Adults

That poor boy was like a lost puppy.

He was wearing a white T-shirt, rolled-up jeans, and sneakers, and his pitch-black bangs hung over his eyes a little, as if he'd let them grow about a month too long. His skin had a healthy tan and a glow that seemed to come from the inside, although I can tell you he'd never touched a skin care product in his life, whitening or otherwise. His large eyes shone, full of curiosity.

That summer was one of the lowest points of my life, and I was just drifting around aimlessly. It was summer vacation during my fourth year in college. My classmates had unofficial offers from multiple companies, but I hadn't even started looking. My parents lived in the city, and I wasn't hurting for living expenses, yet I reported in for my part-time job every day. Not because I loved my work there; I intentionally spent every day dillydallying as a kind of protest against something. If I had to put it into words, the *something* was probably "my parents" or "society" or "expectations" or "duty." Even though I knew it was a childish way to rebel, I just couldn't bring myself to start job hunting. *I've got time*, I told myself. It was still early. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to submit to anything yet.

—So basically, I was sulking because I didn't want to grow up. Pretty pathetic, I know. I could tell I was almost at my wit's end over how hopeless I was, and that was when the boy showed up. He was totally innocent and defenseless, and it was almost ridiculous how easily he was impressed by everything we said, everything that happened to him, everything he saw.

He was kinda in the way, but he was interesting, and I took a little pride in helping him, as if I'd suddenly been assigned a younger member of a school club to mentor. Even now, as I listened to him excitedly calling me from the back of my motorbike ("Ms. Natsumi, Ms. Natsumi!") I felt an odd sense of nostalgia—and the exhilarating rush of a new beginning. For the first time in

a long while, the rainy wind whipping by my motorbike felt good.

* * *

“Ms. Natsumi, hey! That place looked like Versailles!” I shouted without thinking.

Out of the corner of my eye, I’d spotted an enormous European-style mansion, surrounded by a green lawn.

As Natsumi steered the motorbike, she laughed. “God, you’re hilarious, Hodaka! That’s the State Guest House; this area is Akasaka imperial property.”

I turned red.

“You’re always having a good time, aren’t you?”

I gazed at the back of Natsumi’s raincoat, glad she couldn’t see my flushed face. We were headed to the next interview site on her motorbike. Rain-soaked scenery flashed past and flowed away behind us. I still had no idea what part of Tokyo I was in, but no matter where I went or how much I saw, I never got tired of the view. A park like a forest, shining buildings reflecting the sky, old-fashioned shopping streets full of people, a stadium with a shape straight out of science fiction, churches and torii gates in unexpected places, clusters of high-rise apartment buildings that put thousands of rooms in one view—it felt like a box garden crammed with all kinds of different places, and even now, the fact that the rain was falling on me here, in this city, felt unreal.

The company was a small editing agency run by Mr. Suga.

The first part of the job I’d been told to do consisted of general chores. The office was also where Mr. Suga lived, so I woke up every morning at seven and fixed breakfast. I’d never cooked before, so I really had no idea what I was doing at first, but fortunately, Mr. Suga wasn’t exactly nitpicky about chores. He ate everything I brought him—from my clumsy fried eggs and miso soup to the instant miso soup and side dishes I bought at convenience stores—unenthusiastically but indiscriminately, and without comment.

Then came cleaning and tidying up. I cleared away the cups and glasses

and empty cans Mr. Suga left everywhere, washed the dishes, and sorted the garbage and took it out. I picked up the socks and T-shirts he stripped off and left lying around like a little kid, tossed them in the laundry, and scrubbed the bathroom and shower.

After that, I finally got to the tasks that felt like an actual job. I sorted the postcards and envelopes crammed into the mailbox, wrote invoices to send to publishers, and took the receipts out of the empty box where they'd been tossed and pasted them into a notebook, sorted by date. The task that took the most time was transcribing interviews. I typed up the audio I'd recorded on my smartphone or IC recorder as text files. That text would be used as a resource when Mr. Suga or Natsumi (or, rarely, I) drafted articles.

Before long, Natsumi arrived at the office on her pink Honda Cub. She was a part-timer, not a full staff member, but she was the one in charge of the company's accounting.

"Uh, excuse me? I know I told you liquor costs are social expenses!" Natsumi scolded, checking over the account book.

"What, that's all you got still?" Mr. Suga told me off, peering in at the computer screen.

"You know you've got to buy these things on sale." Natsumi gave me a hard time when she saw my supermarket receipt.

"I've told you before, take out all the throat-clearing! What's the point of writing down every single hem and haw?!" Mr. Suga yelled at me when he read my copy.

"Is he still out of the office? Yesterday, you told me he would be back 'by tomorrow,' remember?"

I apologized to an editor who'd called with a deadline reminder.

"Kid, if you don't chill soda water, you wreck it!" Mr. Suga criticized my highball while he was busy pretending not to be home.

Every day, I felt like I was being swept along by an unfamiliar muddy torrent, and I spent those days working desperately, startled every time I came up against my own ignorance and incompetence. Still—and I thought this was really strange, myself—despite the constant criticism, the work wasn't painful at all. As a matter of fact, the more they yelled at me, the more thrilled and happier I was. Why? Was I that type of person? Just last month, being bossed around and pinned down had been more than I could take, and yet... What was it about me that had changed over these two weeks?

“These people say they’re looking for a sunshine girl!”

“They’re what?! That’s hilarious!”

The trio of high school girls shouted with laughter. They were so loud that I looked around on reflex.

We’d come to a family restaurant across from a big department store, and the place was bustling with people, even though it was noon on a weekday. Natsumi had made an appointment with these girls online, and they were sitting in the booth with their feet up, hugging their knees, even though they were wearing short school uniform skirts. It was the first time I’d been this close to girls my age in quite a while, and their strong personalities were sort of overwhelming. Their compensation for telling us about the rumors was access to the drink bar and one dessert of their choice, per person.

“My little sister says her friend’s boyfriend’s friend’s classmate is, like, legit a sunshine girl! ...Huh? Her age? I dunno, same age as my sister? Middle school? Anyway, she’s incredible. Like, we’re not talking about the weather just clearing up sometimes when she comes around or anything. She’s on a whole different level! She just has to pray, like you’d do to your shrine at home, and say she wants sun on this or that day. Like, if you’ve got a date coming up or whatever, and you want the weather to be nice no matter what—”

I took notes as if my life depended on it. I was remembering what Mr. Suga had told me: Don’t just rely on recordings. Stay with the flow and take notes.

“Okay, moving on: We’ve got an appointment at Waseda in thirty minutes!” Natsumi called, and I ran after her like a junior member of her club.

“As I told you in my e-mail...” Just outside a lab, a serious-looking man with thin glasses droned at us as if this was the biggest waste of his time. “I agreed to this because the introduction came from Mr. Sekiguchi, but we’re an extremely respectable laboratory; we even work with the Meteorological Agency. Ah, I’m not saying your magazine isn’t respectable, but—”

Twenty minutes later, the once-reluctant man was leaning forward, speaking with such intensity that spit was flying from his lips.

“Just then, the videosonde from the observation balloon I’d been

monitoring picked up some truly bizarre readings! You could never see it from the earth, but deep in a cumulonimbus cloud, there were groups of minute objects, moving like living creatures! I mean, I don't know what they actually were, of course; they may just have been static. However— Well, I generally try not to say this too openly, but I wouldn't be surprised to find ecosystems we still don't know about in the sky. The sky is far deeper than the ocean, after all. As a matter of fact, similar stories invariably come up when I attend drinking parties with the older researchers. For example—”

“I told you—it's too wordy. Be more direct. You've got too many roundabout metaphors in there,” Mr. Suga scolded as he read the printout.

“Uh, excuse me?! Preliminary meetings go under ‘meeting expenses,’ remember?!” Natsumi wasn't happy when she saw the account books.

“Look, I've told you before: Coherence is the name of the game! The introduction and conclusion have nothing to do with each other. Get rid of this whole paragraph and rewrite it!” Mr. Suga yelled at me, looking at the computer.

We hadn't gotten back from the interviews until evening, and it was already late at night, but we were still writing copy for “Latest Edition: Urban Legends of Tokyo,” a thirty-page special feature article.

“Oh, but this paragraph's not bad. Try bumping it up to the top of the page and using it as a hook.”

“Yessir!”

“Hodaka, would you make us some coffee?”

“Yes'm!”

“Not the instant kind. Grind some beans.”

“Yes'm!”

“Hodaka, I'm getting hungry.”

“Yessir!”

“Me too. In fact, scratch the coffee; I'd rather have noodles.”

“Yes'm!”

“Udon for me. *Sara* udon-style—no soup.”

“Yessir!”

“Actually, make that grilled udon.”

“Yessir!”

I put an iPad with the Cookpad recipe site open beside the sink, then awkwardly sliced onions and chopped carrots. There was no pork, so I added tuna instead, stir-fried the udon noodles with the powdered sauce, and sprinkled bonito flakes over the top.

By the time I carried in the grilled udon, the other two were slumped over the desk, fast asleep. The manuscript was due tomorrow, and it wasn't done yet. *I have to wake them up*, I thought, but I still stood there for a little while, gazing at their faces. Mr. Suga's skin was dry, and his stubble had a few white hairs here and there. Natsumi's skin and hair were both smooth, and when I got closer, she smelled so wonderful it made my chest feel tight. *They're both really...cool*, I thought. *Come to think of it, cutting onions really does make you cry*. It was only just now hitting me that even this was a new experience for me. And all at once, some of the dots connected.

I see. That's why everyone tells us practically anything during interviews. The high school girls and the university researcher and that fortune-teller all talked the way they did because they were talking to Natsumi. She doesn't reject anybody, she doesn't act different depending on who she's talking to, and she's so attentive and curious when she listens; that's why everybody's so quick to tell her things, even if those things seem completely nuts.

Ah, so that's why... I'd figured out something else, too: the reason all the scoldings didn't hurt the slightest bit. It wasn't that I'd changed; it was because the scoldings were coming from these two. Neither Mr. Suga nor Natsumi cared that I was a runaway. They were relying on me as naturally as if I was a normal member of their staff. Each rebuke was their way of telling me *You can do a little better than this*. It was like an injection; only the initial sting hurt, and it was making me stronger.

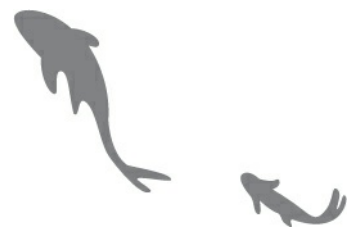
I felt refreshed, as if I'd finally managed to strip off tight, heavy clothes, and I shook Mr. Suga's shoulder, telling him he had to wake up or he'd catch a cold.

* * *

I thought I understood, if only vaguely, why Kei had picked him up. Back then, I think both Kei and I were probably looking for some sort of push. Something like a faint breeze that would carry us to a new destination.

Something like a traffic light changing color—a slight opportunity.

“Come on, Ms. Natsumi, you wake up, too,” he said as he shook my shoulder, and hearing his voice, I somehow knew that it wouldn’t be much longer. By the time this summer ended, my long moratorium would be over, too.



CHAPTER THREE

A Reunion, a Rooftop, and a Shining City

“Oh, there it is.”

I took a small box off the chaotic shelves of Don Quijote. The red package was printed with a picture of a gold dragon zooming up into the sky and the words *Dynamic Middle Age! Pit Viper Drink*.

“Why would he be drinking this stuff...?”

Natsumi’s face surfaced in my mind like a manga speech balloon, and I blushed, shaking my head to clear it. I put other stuff from the note—*Maca Clincher* and *Turtle for Tomorrow* and *Ginseng Mega MAX*—into the shopping basket, got a receipt the way Mr. Suga had told me to (because he was stingy), paid, and left the store. He was shameless enough to ask other people to pick this stuff up for him, and yet he wanted something from his youth back badly enough to actually use it? *Maybe aging hurts more than I thought*. I remembered the gray in Mr. Suga’s hair. What was he, forty-two? I didn’t have enough of a feel for adults’ ages to know what stage of life that put him in yet.

I’d finished my errand, but instead of heading back to the bus stop, I ducked into an alley in Kabuki-cho. It was so narrow that I had to close my umbrella to walk down it; exterior equipment and electric meters and drainpipes clung to the walls on both sides like some kind of vegetation. I couldn’t sense anyone else around, but the ground was littered with cigarette butts, and the walls and distribution boards were covered thickly with stickers and graffiti.

“Hey, there you are!”

A skinny kitten came walking toward me, mewing scratchily.

“Rain! How’ve you been?”

I took a CalorieMate out of my pocket, crouched down, and held it out. Rain took it with his front paws as dexterously as if they were hands. “Good job!” I said as he turned away and wolfed it down. Every time I came to

Shinjuku to shop or do interviews, I stopped by to see Rain. Before I knew it, over a month had passed since the night I'd first met him, and Rain was no longer the size of a half-pint plastic bottle. July would be over soon. As always, it was a summer of never-ending rain.

"C'mon, it'll be fine! It's hardly even a job!"

When I stepped out of the alley and opened my umbrella, I heard a guy's voice. The group went right past me: a girl in a sleeveless shirt who was walking quickly, eyes lowered, and two big men who seemed to be covering her back.

"Just give it a try. We can pay you starting today. We're right over there, see?"

The guy had blond hair and a voice with a note of cold laughter behind it. The girl wore her hair in two ponytails, and she had big eyes with large pupils. I recognized both of them.

A little beyond the row of hotels in the back alley, there was a string of connected buildings with low eaves. It was the place where I'd fallen asleep a month ago. The girl with the ponytails, the blond guy with the piercing, and his buddy were talking about something in front of the establishment. The girl looked bewildered, and the men seemed to be trying to talk her into something. I'd followed them in spite of myself, and I was watching the scene play out from the shadows.

What should I do?

Should I talk to them? Should I help her?

I remembered that day at McDonald's. "*You've had that for dinner three days in a row.*" Back then, her voice and her smile had seemed to be scolding me, encouraging me.

"But—"

Maybe she was fine. Maybe they all knew one another. Maybe they were only talking about work.

"Huh? Wait...!"

Suddenly, I heard the girl's muted shriek. The blond guy with the piercing had an arm around her shoulders and was trying to walk her into the shop by force.

I threw my umbrella down, and before I even had time to think, I was

running.

“Whoa, what the hell?!”

I shoved my way in between the blond guy and the girl. “C’mon!”

“Huh?!”

I grabbed her hand and took off without looking back.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, where do you think you’re going, loser?!”

I heard the guys yelling behind us as I ran for all I was worth through the unfamiliar streets.

“Listen,” the girl said, sounding confused, “wait just a...!”

“It’s fine; just run!”

I was too focused to offer any reassurances like *I’ll explain later* or *Don’t worry; you can trust me*. My hair and T-shirt were getting heavier with rain. I’d thought we were out of the hotel street, but the next thing I knew, we were running down a different street of hotels.

“Waugh!”

One of the two guys burst out of the alley right in front of us. *Crap, they’re going to box us in*— And an instant later, somebody grabbed the collar of my shirt from behind and hauled me back.

“You little punk!”

I fell faceup onto the wet asphalt, and the blond guy straddled me. Once he’d caught his breath, he smacked my cheeks lightly.

“Yo, yo, yo, yo, hey, kid—” His voice was low and full of laughter. He raised his right hand. “What the hell are you trying to pull, huh?!” This time, he slapped my cheek with everything he had.

Desperately choking down the pain and fear, I shouted back at him. “She didn’t want to go with you!”

“...Huh?” he said in disbelief. “Hey, dumbass, we’d already talked it over with her and worked everything out. Right?”

Startled, I looked at the girl. The other guy was standing right next to her. She looked down uncomfortably.

“...!”

No way. My mind went blank. Then what I’d just done was—

“Huh? Hey, aren’t you the kid from back then? The one who was sleeping in front of our door?”

It seemed kind of late to be bringing this up now, but the blond guy smiled knowingly.

“What, is this payback?!”

My cheekbone thudded. This time, he’d punched me. The pain burst deep behind my eyes, and my whole body started to go numb as the taste of iron spread through my mouth.

“Please, no, stop it—” I could hear the girl’s tearful screams.

You’re pathetic—the feeling spread through me from head to toe, followed by fury. The fingers of my right hand found the toy gun I’d stuck in my waistband as a sort of protective amulet.

“Dammit...!” My voice was shaking. “Get off me!!” Impulsively, I pulled the gun out and pointed it at the blond guy.

The men were startled for a moment, but then they looked at each other and laughed. “Huh? What’s that, a toy? This kid really is a moron.”

As I glared desperately at the blond, a large raindrop hit my eye. I don’t know when the shower started. The water blurred my vision. My heart was jumping around in a wild rhythm. The guys’ laughter seemed distant, melting into the rain.

Bang!

I’d pulled the trigger. A heavy roar thundered into my ears, followed by the *ping* of a cartridge hitting the ground. The smell of gunpowder drifted into my nose.

Behind the blond guy, a streetlamp had shattered.

The gun was real.

All of us stared at the muzzle of the weapon in wide-eyed shock.

The girl was the first one to pull herself together. “Get up!” she said, grabbing my hand. The blond guy was sitting on his rear, his mouth hanging open, and I scrambled out from under him. We made a break for it.

Our ragged breathing echoed off the concrete walls.

There was a deep puddle on the floor at our feet, and the rain blowing in through the broken windows was sending rings of ripples through it.

The girl had pulled me into an abandoned building near Yoyogi Station, just across the tracks from Shinjuku. In the midst of the busy traffic, the mixed-use building stood alone, brown and decrepit. Almost none of the noise from the street reached us inside; only the faint sound of the Yamanote

Line came to us, as if from another world. The room we were in might have been some sort of restaurant, once upon a time; rusted stools and tables and dishes and cookware were scattered among the weeds.

After we'd spent a little while getting our breathing and our heart rates back to normal, the girl broke the silence.

"...What kind of stunt was that?! Were you trying to thank me for the hamburger?"

Her voice echoed in the gloom, tinged with fear and anger. She was glaring at me. I couldn't find the words to answer, and she pressed me harder.

"What was that gun? Who are you?!"

"That was... I found it. I thought it was a toy—"

Unbelievable, her expression seemed to say.

I tried again, desperately. "I was just carrying it around to, like, help me feel safer. I was only trying to scare him; I never thought it would actually—"

"What are you talking about?! Pointing one of those at somebody and firing— You could have killed him!"

I gulped.

"I don't believe this. You're disgusting. You're horrible!" she fumed, striding toward the exit. Her wet footsteps echoed roughly off the walls and ceiling, and then she was gone.

I just stared after her, stunned. Every receding footfall was a reminder of the reality of what I'd done. She was right. Carrying this thing around as a protective charm, I'd started to feel tough; I'd made a misguided attempt at playing hero, had pointed it at someone and pulled the trigger—and I could have killed him.

Almost on reflex, I threw the gun away. I didn't want to have it another second. It struck the wall with a clatter, and I sank to my knees, unable to stand any longer. I squeezed my eyes shut. This escape to Tokyo, and the few thoughtless weeks I'd spent just having fun, were all starting to feel like a ridiculous mistake. The pain in my cheek returned as if it had just remembered to, throbbing stronger and stronger with each heartbeat. I couldn't think about anything anymore, and I just stayed huddled where I was.

After a little while, I heard footsteps again.

When I lifted my head, the girl was standing in front of me. Both of her hands were shoved into the pockets of her parka, and her eyes were lowered

glumly. I started talking before I could stop myself.

“Why—?”

“...I got fired from my job.”

“Huh? Was it because I—?” *Took that hamburger*, I thought.

“It wasn’t your fault or anything.” The girl’s voice suddenly grew smaller, as if she was making excuses. “But that’s what happened, so I needed a job that would pay.”

“I’m so sorry! I...”

Words failed me again. Of course, everybody has their own reasons, and yet... The backs of my eyes grew hot, and I hurried to fight the sensation. I looked down, squeezing my eyes tight.

“Heh-heh.” Startled, I raised my head. The girl was peering at my face, and her round eyes had squinched up into friendly crescents.

“Hey, does it hurt?” She touched my bruised cheek with her fingertips.

“Huh? Oh— No, not that much...!”

The girl laughed again. “You’re a runaway, aren’t you?”

“Huh?!?”

“It’s pretty obvious. Did you come far?”

“Um, yeah, well...” As I tried to answer, her smile turned mischievous.

“Hey, you came all the way to Tokyo, but it’s been raining the whole time, hasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“Come here a second!”

She took my hand as naturally as a small child.

After climbing up the rusty iron emergency stairs, we came out onto the roof of the building.

The floor tiles were cracked and covered with green weeds, and a fine, misty rain was falling down over everything. In the distance were the gray silhouettes of various high-rise buildings whose names I didn’t yet know.

“Watch. The sun’s going to come back now.”

“Huh?” I glanced at the sky and saw gray clouds and the same rain as ever. When I turned back to the girl, her hands were clasped and her eyes were closed, as if in prayer. “Um, what do you mean...?” I started to say, then broke off.

She was glowing faintly. No, that wasn't it; a pale light was shining on her. The wind had begun to blow, softly lifting her twin ponytails. The light was getting brighter and brighter, and the girl's skin and hair shone golden. *It can't be*— I looked up at the sky.

“Whoa...!”

Above us, the clouds had split to reveal dazzling sunlight. The sparkling raindrops grew fewer and farther between, and the rain slowly stopped, as though someone had turned off a faucet. The next thing I knew, the world around us had been repainted in vivid color. Blue window glass, pure-white walls, signs in red and yellow and blue, silver rails, and colorful cars like scattered candies—Tokyo was overflowing with different hues. A vibrant green scent had filled the air.

“A sunshine girl...?” The word slipped stupidly from my mouth before I could stop it, and the girl laughed.

“I'm Hina. Who are you?”

“...Hodaka.”

“How old are you?”

“Huh...? Sixteen.”

“Hmm.” The girl cocked her head, looking up at me through her lashes. Another brilliant smile. “So you're younger than me.”

“What?”

“You see, I'll be, um...eighteen next month!”

“Huh?! You totally don't look like it!” I replied, more honestly than I meant to.

She looked young, so I'd figured she was my age at the oldest, maybe a year or two younger.

She smiled proudly this time. All her smiles reminded me a little of sunshine.

“Respect your elders!”

“Huh?! ”

“Heh-heh!”

She lifted her face to the sky, enjoying this moment, and reached up, stretching her arm out overhead. Her palm cast a dark shadow across her face.

“It's nice to meet you, Hodaka,” Hina said, meeting my eyes with a brilliant smile, and I knew something was about to begin. She held her right

hand out to me. When I shook it, her palm held the warmth of the sun.



CHAPTER FOUR

A 100% Sunshine Girl

Eyewitness Account A— K_ko (age 26), housewife, resident of Koutou Ward, Tokyo

It really isn't a big deal—certainly not enough to go out of your way to tell people about.

My son is still only four, and I'm sure he sometimes has trouble telling the difference between fantasy and reality. But—yes. I saw them, too. Or I felt like I did.

Yes, of course. I'll start at the beginning, then.

—The weather that day? Rainy, obviously. I mean, it's been raining for ages, hasn't it?

The bad weather started long before this summer, but that day, it was especially nasty with all that wind and lightning. We're on the thirty-eighth floor—yes, our building's a high-rise—and the view is amazing in a storm. The rain clouds rushing at the windows look like CG straight out of a movie, and you can see lightning strike the building.

Because of the weather, preschool was closed, and my son was home. I was cooking, I think— Oh, what were we making? I'm pretty sure it was *bagna càuda*. No, not at all, it's surprisingly simple! It goes well with wine, and it's a hit with both men and women. Yes, that's right. When us moms have our get-togethers, we take turns providing the food. If it's too plain, everyone gets bored, and if it's too fancy, people think you're trying to say something, so *bagna càuda* is perfect. If you've got one nice centerpiece dish, then the whole thing is appealing even if the rest is only pasta or bread or Ritz crackers. Those of us in the mothers' group tend to be rather conscious of one another that way.

(Thirty minutes of talk about the mothers' group follows.)

Phew. So, what was it we were talking about? —Oh yes, of course! When the fish fell from the sky.

I was in the middle of cooking, and my son started calling to me. “Mommy, fish!”

I was focused on the food and not really paying attention, so I just said, “Ooh, neat.” He always figures out I’m busy and gives up when I do that.

But that day, he tugged at my clothes. “Mommy, come here, there’s fish outside.” But of course that’s impossible, you know? We were on the thirty-eighth floor.

Still, he’s almost never this pushy, so I went over to the window with him. “Where are the fish?” I asked, and he pointed at the narrow concrete ledge just outside the window. I looked closer, but all I saw was the rain splashing up.

But my son kept asking. “Did you see them?”

“Huh?” I said.

“Look closer,” he said. “At the raindrops.”

And I got this chill—I was a little scared, but I stared at the spray from the rain until I felt like I was falling into it. And then—I saw little fish, like killifish, in among the raindrops! Gave me goose bumps all over.

...No, they weren’t actually fish; they were just rain. Just clear water shaped like tiny fish. But the way they hit the wall and jumped, it was like they were alive. That window is fixed, though, so I couldn’t open it, and when I watched them closely, they started to look like plain old raindrops. My son noticed, too. “Huh?” he said. “They went bye-bye...”

That’s right; that’s why I said earlier that I only *felt* like I’d seen them, before. It truly doesn’t feel important enough to tell people about. My husband didn’t believe us at all. “That’s *gestaltzerfall*,” he said. “Sometimes words stop looking like words to me, too.” He sounded so proud of himself, even though this was something completely different. It’s a bit of a relief to have been able to talk to you about it.

...Would you like to come over and have a girls’ night in with us sometime?

Eyewitness Account B— Y_jiro (age 13), middle schooler, resident of Taitou Ward, Tokyo

You sure you want to hear about it? I mean, obviously I don’t mind telling you; I’d been wanting to tell somebody anyway. The thing is, I’m not all that

sure it really happened, and neither is he. Nobody else saw it, and the only thing I know for certain is that we both got soaked.

That day, club had just ended, and I was getting ready to head home. Yeah, it's summer vacation, but we still have club... Huh? What...? Uh, it doesn't really matter which club, does it? ...I mean, it's the shogi club, but... Pfft, no way, girls don't care at all if you do shogi in real life... You think? Uh, well, that's kinda nice to hear.

Anyway, I was in club, and my friend came into the room all excited. He was like, "Come look! I found something really cool!" He's one of the more chill people in our class, so I was like, *Huh, this is surprising*. If *he* was saying it was cool, it probably was. I followed him, and we opened our umbrellas and ran along the railway tracks.

"So what's really cool?" I asked him, but he said he couldn't explain it, and I'd have to see it to understand. We went into an alley that was only wide enough for one car. There were buildings under construction on either side, covered with sound reduction sheets, but nobody was around at all.

"See? Right there!" My friend pointed up through the power lines at the clouds between the buildings.

"Huh? C'mon, there's nothing there."

"No, there is! Look closer!"

He was so intense about it, I figured I might as well. So I started staring at the sky, and then something seemed...off. After a little bit, I realized what it was. I could hear the rain, but there wasn't any falling on us. It was like there was an invisible roof or something over the spot where we were. That was when I saw something moving, flickering in the sky—these little ring-shaped ripples. Ripples were appearing in the sky, then vanishing, as if we were looking up at the surface of a pool on a rainy day.

"What is that...?!"

I backed up a few steps, but I couldn't take my eyes off it. As I did, the sky warped. *It's water*, I thought. It was like...some huge thing made out of water was stuck between the buildings.

"A fish?" my friend muttered next to me, and I thought so, too. It was shaped kinda like a dolphin or a whale. And the next instant, the water fish suddenly collapsed and fell on us.

We were like, "Waugh!"

It was a quick, heavy downpour, like a guerilla rainstorm times ten, or like

we got teleported under a waterfall. By the time the water stopped, we were both drenched, and the ribs of our umbrellas were bent like they'd been hit by a big gust of wind. Whatever it was between the buildings was gone without a trace except for a faint mist around us.

—So, well, in the end, it kinda just feels like we ran into some crazy rain, and that was it. There's no proof anywhere, and I haven't told anybody. I tried to make it sound like a joke in that little blurb I wrote online. Your DM kinda surprised me.

...Um, do you work on TV, miss? Huh? You don't? Well, it's just, you're really pretty and all... Hey, y'know, I just realized, I don't think I've ever talked with a girl this long before.

* * *

Sunshine for you.

I wrote the words in large letters in my notebook, drew a square frame below them, and wrote in *5,000 yen*. After giving it a little thought, I erased the 5, put in a 4, then erased that.

“Would that be too expensive...?”

Hmm. What should I do? An old-fashioned CRT TV sat on the bar counter, and for the past little while, a weather announcer had been speaking on the fuzzy screen.

“We’ve already recorded more than two months of rainy days in a row, and the forecast for the next month shows that heavy rains will continue. The Meteorological Agency has published a statement warning that this is an extremely anomalous situation and has called for utmost caution regarding landslides—”

“Say, Hodaka!” someone called cheerily, and I looked up from the notebook.

Natsumi was sitting with her feet up on the sofa, hugging her knees, busy with a tablet.

“This is really kind of amazing!”

A roadside drainage ditch was studded with little milky-white somethings, about the size and shape of largish young sardines.

The next photo was of a parking lot somewhere. Here, they were around the tires of the cars.

After that was a photo a mother had taken of her daughter. The white things were scattered over the paving stones, and pigeons were pecking at them. The little girl was looking down at them from under an umbrella.

“They do look a little like fish, maybe, but...” I zoomed in on the photo. “...These things fell out of the sky, with the rain?” All the photos that had been posted to social media had captions to that effect. “But they’re just photos, and there’s no proof, right?”

“If you touch them, they disappear. Look.”

Natsumi replayed a video someone had uploaded. It showed a lump a couple of inches long, with a surface like dried jelly. The finger of the person taking the movie entered the screen, then touched the lump, gingerly—and with a faint *plash*, the thing turned into water and flowed away.

“Whoa!” I yelped.

Natsumi continued excitedly. “You remember what that guy from the university said when we interviewed him earlier? The world of the sky is far deeper and stranger than the ocean. Humans have only seen a tiny bit of it directly, and a single cumulus cloud is its own kind of ‘world.’ A cloud several miles in size holds enough water to fill a lake and countless organisms inside it. There’s plenty of sunlight and water and organic stuff in a huge space where nobody messes with it. Down in the ocean where the light doesn’t reach, there are all kinds of unique creatures, so it wouldn’t be weird at all to find new, undiscovered ecosystems in the sky. He said it made no sense to assume the sky and the biological world are totally separate!” Natsumi went on and on in a rush, and I was startled by both her memory and her enthusiasm. “So there really must be something in the sky!”

“And it’s these fish?”

“Maybe! Well? Isn’t that amazing?!”

“Then—” In spite of myself, I started thinking hard. *Then—* “If we made an article about that, we could make some real money! The urban legends feature is over, but if we do a feature on cryptids soon, we could—”

“Huh?” Natsumi’s voice was icy.

“Huh?” I broke off.

“What do you mean, ‘We could make money’? The important thing is whether people think it’s interesting, right?”

“Huh...”

“Kid, you’re sounding more and more like Kei.”

“Huh?”

“I bet you’re gonna grow up to be so boring.”

“Huh?!”

Natsumi got up from the sofa, briskly tying her long hair back with an elastic. “Better not talk like that around the sunshine girl you finally managed to find, or she might not like you so much anymore. You’ve got a date today, right?”

“Huh? No, it’s not a date or anything; it’s more like I’m making sure... Or apologizing, or...making a suggestion...”

As I faltered, Natsumi pulled on a black suit jacket, so that she looked (unusually for her) like a sharp working adult. She always wore casual clothes that exposed a lot of arm and leg, so she seemed almost like a different person now.

“Huh? What’s the occasion, Ms. Natsumi?”

“I’m going job hunting.”

“Huh?! *Job hunting?*! “—Wait, what about the office?!”

“This is just a temp thing until I find something better,” she replied, and I could tell that wasn’t the whole story. She fluttered a hand at me and left the office.

I stared at the door she’d disappeared through, stunned, suddenly feeling left behind. *No, she has to be joking, right?* I thought hastily.

“Wait, I’ve gotta go, too!” I said aloud to erase the slight unease I felt, then got up from the sofa.

Believe it or not, the girl didn’t have a smartphone or a cell phone.

As a result, she’d given me only a small handwritten note. Checking the directions she’d carefully printed by hand, I got off at Tabata Station. When I climbed the stairs at the end of the platform, as the instructions had told me to, I found a small unmanned ticket gate with a row of just three turnstiles. I’d had the idea that all ticket gates on the Yamanote Line were as spacious as tennis courts and as crowded as a party, and the hush at this one startled me.

I went through the gate, opened my umbrella, and started walking over the wet black asphalt. A narrow hill road stretched straight ahead, and although I walked for about five minutes, the only people I passed were two elderly women. On my right was a row of lush green cherry trees, and on the left, a vast landscape below me. Several rails ran in rows; beyond them were the elevated Shinkansen tracks, and beyond those, rain-wet buildings seemed to go on forever. The view was gray, but today, I could see subtle hints of color. Ever since that day when I'd seen the sunshine girl—when I'd seen the true Tokyo shining vivid in the sunlight—all the colors I saw seemed slightly more saturated. It felt as if my eyes were new somehow, or as if someone had secretly upgraded the display.

Her apartment building turned out to be pretty old, with ivy climbing all over it. According to the note, Hina's room was the last one on the second floor. At the top of the iron stairs, I could see a distant elevated Shinkansen track. A green train was sliding along it with a soft *hiss*.

In front of the door, I took a deep breath, then knocked.

"Wait—" All of a sudden, I realized something important. "Is this...?"

Rain pattered lazily against the thin roof of the shared corridor.

"Is this my first time going to a girl's house?!"

Click. Just then, the door opened, and Hina poked her head out.

"Hi, Hodaka."

"Huh, whuh, agh!"

"I bet you had trouble finding the place, didn't you?"

"N-no, uh, here! It's not much, but—!"

Hastily, I held out a plastic bag with both hands.

"Wow, that was nice of you! Thanks!"

Hina took it, smiling, then opened the door wider to invite me in. I awkwardly took off my shoes in the smallest entryway I'd ever seen.

The apartment was overflowing with color.

There was a little kitchen just beyond the entryway, with a living room about 140 square feet or so beyond it, and one more room beyond that. It was a cozy little floor plan, meant for a family. Each room was partitioned off by multicolored quilt curtains and decorated with small pictures and animal

figurines, and colorful fabric hung in the windows as well. There was a round wooden window in the living room, with strings of transparent glass beads hanging in it like a sort of suncatcher. I sat huddled up at the low tea table in the living room.

“Hodaka, have you had lunch already?” Hina called to me, clattering around in the kitchen.

“Not yet...,” I said, then immediately realized she might be planning to feed me and yelled, “Oh! But don’t worry about it.”

Hina giggled and told me, “It’s fine—just sit. Mind if I use these, Hodaka?”

When I looked, she was holding the potato chips and chicken ramen I’d bought for her. At a convenience store on the way here, I’d stressed and stressed about what to buy; I’d finally asked on Yahoo! Answers and bought what the first answer said. Now that I thought about it, potato chips aside, I didn’t know why they suggested chicken ramen.

“Huh? Of course, if you’ve got a way to use them!”

“Thanks!”

Use them? ...In cooking?

It seemed like a kind of embarrassing question, so for the moment, to help myself calm down, I looked around the room again. The suncatcher in the window swayed in the breeze, reflecting the weak light it had gathered from the rainy sky and casting a faint pattern. The sliding doors over the closet had been removed, and the shelves inside were being used as a built-in bookshelf. She had everything: picture books and educational magazines, light novels and comics, and even thick hardcovers. A small electric sewing machine sat in the corner of the living room, and I thought, *I bet most of the decorations in here are handmade*. Strangely, even though the tiny space was bursting with things, it didn’t seem cluttered at all. The place was full of delight, as if the room enjoyed being itself.

“...Hina, do you live by yourself?”

“With my little brother. Things happened.”

“Huh...”

Things. I couldn’t bring myself to ask further, but the thought that they might not have parents flickered through my mind. She was cheerfully snipping leaves that looked like sprouts with kitchen shears. *Is that a kitchen garden?* I thought. She really was a do-it-yourself type.

As Hina bustled around, I watched her stealthily out of the corner of my eye. She was wearing a pale-yellow sleeveless pullover and sky-blue shorts. Her hair hung softly over her shoulders—in twin ponytails, like always. Now that I was paying attention, she was surprisingly thin. Natsumi wore sleeveless tops and shorts all the time, too, but that was completely different.

“What about you, Hodaka? Why did you run away?”

“Um...” The unexpected question left me at a loss. “Well, I just sort of...” I hastily groped around for a reason, tried to put it into words, but the only ones I found were simple and dumb. “It was suffocating... The place where I lived, and my parents. And I’d kinda dreamed of coming to Tokyo...”

As soon as I said it aloud, I was embarrassed by how ridiculously childish it sounded.

“No real reason,” I added hurriedly.

“I see.”

Hina’s brief reply wasn’t affirmation or denial. She just said it with a smile. She broke an egg, separating the yolk and the white into different dishes with a practiced hand, then scrambled them briskly. She poured a quick drizzle of oil into a hot frying pan, and the scent of sesame oil and ginger soon followed. Taking cold rice out of the fridge, she dumped it into the pan and began to stir-fry it, creating a delicious-sounding sizzle. Still plying it with the wooden spoon, Hina asked me another question.

“You don’t need to go back?”

“...I don’t want to.” There was no other way to put it, so I just said what I was feeling.

“I see.”

Hina opened the bag of potato chips, crunched them up with her hands, then mixed them into the contents of the frying pan.

“Thanks for waiting!” Hina called in a singsong voice, carrying the food over on a tray.

“Whoa!” I yelped. On top of each heaping helping of fried rice with potato chips, there was a glossy raw egg with a circle of little leaves around it. The salad on the big platter had large chunks of broken chicken ramen noodles in it.

“It’s called—um, bean-sprout potato-chip fried rice with sesame oil,

aaand super-crunchy chicken salad!”

“Wooooow...!”

I was impressed; she’d come up with something original just like that. I was starving now.

Abruptly clapping her hands in realization, Hina stood up. “Oh! The onions!”

From the kitchen, she brought a glass with a thick tassel of green onions growing in it. She snipped away at them with the shears, letting the bits fall into the Chinese soup she had also made. The chunks of fluffy white fish floating in it were joined by flecks of bright green.

“—So, how have things been since you came to Tokyo?” Hina asked suddenly.

“Huh? Oh...” Again, I said what I was feeling. “Well, it’s...easier to breathe now.”

Hina looked at me and beamed. “I see! That’s kinda nice to hear. Okay, let’s eat for real this time!”

We folded our hands and spoke in unison: “Thanks for the food.”

I used my spoon to break the egg yolk, then shoveled a big spoonful of rice and bean sprouts and potato chips into my mouth.

After I’d cleaned my plate, I realized the record for “best thing I’d ever eaten” had been broken twice this month, and thanks to the same girl both times.

“Hodaka, are you serious about this?”

Hina was looking dubiously at my notebook. I’d written *Sunshine for you* in big letters and made notes on design suggestions, how to submit a request, and a rate schedule below it.

This was a blueprint for my idea: the “Sunshine Girl Business” website. After we’d finished eating, I’d set the iPad I’d brought from the office on the table, and now pencils, erasers, label tags, and other writing materials were scattered around it. The iPad screen displayed a mock-up I’d created in an app.

“Well, you are a real sunshine girl, right, Hina?” I asked, just to be sure.

“Yes.”

“You can make it sunny just by praying to the sky.”

“Yes.” She nodded, as if that was nothing.

“Then—”

“No, listen!” she interrupted. “What if we do this and the sun doesn’t come out?”

“You can’t do it?” I challenged.

“I can so!”

“Then let’s do it! You need a job, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...I’m not so sure about taking money for this...,” Hina mumbled, picking at a mini shortcake from the convenience store. I watched her out of the corner of my eye.

“And anyway...,” I began. She looked so young; I really would never have guessed she was older than me. Her neck was thin, her arms were delicate, her body was fragile, her hips were weak, and her legs had nothing on Natsumi’s. “You don’t look like you could make it working in a nightclub, Hina.”

“Huh?” Hina’s hand stopped picking at the cake.

“Hmm?”

“Hodaka...” She slowly drew away from me.

“What?”

“What exactly are you looking at?!”

“I’m not looking at anything!” I answered on reflex, starting to sweat.

“Hrm...” Hina glared at me suspiciously. *Crud. She knows.* I’d heard about how girls always know when a guy is watching—that was true? Should I apologize?

“I’m sorry...”

My voice was small, and this time, Hina gave a musical laugh. I couldn’t tell if she’d actually been mad at all or if she’d been teasing me; the emotions I saw on her face were constantly changing, like some sort of puzzle I was struggling to decipher. She was like a blast from a rainbow-colored storm.

“Huh? Hey, don’t you think five thousand yen is too much?” Hina said, holding the iPad.

“Huh? You think so, too?” I selected the text and reentered the numbers. “You want to make it about three thousand?”

“Hmm... On the other hand, I have to make a living from it...”

Hina typed in 3,500, and I cut in.

“Wait, but if it’s too cheap, it’ll look fake... What if we went crazy and

made it a thing for rich people? Fifty thousand yen per request!”

“I’d hate it! No way!”

As we argued about this and that, we got more and more into making the site.

“Actually, maybe we should only make people pay if it works,” I suggested.

“True. And use discretionary pricing.”

“What about making the first time free and trying for word-of-mouth advertising?”

“That could work. No, but again, I’ve gotta make a living...”

“The site’s a little plain. Maybe it needs a picture or something.”

“Oh, I’ll draw one!”

“Huh? What is this? ...A hippo?”

“...Uh, it’s a frog.”

“Huh? For real?”

Before I knew it, it was dark outside. Through the window, I could see the lights of a distant Shinkansen.

“—It’s done!”

We yelled in unison. The finished website had a big picture of a sun and the words *Sunshine for you!* in colorful characters. A pink frog in a yellow raincoat said *100% Sunshine Girl!* in a speech balloon. Beside it was a cart icon that showed a 3,400-yen price, tax included, and a request form with fields for *Desired date and time*, *Desired location for sun*, *E-mail address*, and *Reason you want sun*.

Hovering my finger over the app’s PUBLISH icon, I told her, “Okay, I’m uploading it. Ready?”

Just then, there was a *click* as the door to the apartment opened.

“I’m hooome. Hey, Sis, sardines were cheap today, so I... Hmm? Who’re you?”

The boy standing there frowning at me was a grade-schooler wearing a school backpack and carrying a supermarket bag.

“Huh...?” I said in spite of myself. “Oh, hey, you’re the—”

He had a silky short bob, sharp eyes, and childlike but symmetrical features—this was the kid with all the girlfriends on the bus that time.

“Huh? Hey, what’s going on? Do you two know each other?” Hina asked.

“I saw him on the bus a while back—”

“Hmm.” Hina placed herself between us, taking charge, and briskly introduced us to each other, complete with gestures.

“Hodaka, this is my little brother, Nagi. Nagi, this is Hodaka. He’s my business partner!”

“Huh?” Nagi looked even more perplexed, and just then—

Ting-a-ling. The iPad chimed. I glanced at the screen, then did a double-take. “Oh, crap, we actually got a request!”

“What?! You already uploaded it?!”

“Well, I mean— Whoa, and it’s for tomorrow!”

“Huh? Wait, hang on a second, we’re actually doing this?!”

The TV happened to be in the middle of the weather forecast, and the woman on the screen was smoothly announcing tomorrow’s predictions.

“We’ll be seeing rain over a wide area again tomorrow.”

“But it’ll be raining!” Hina shrieked.

“Well, yeah! Otherwise, there’s no point!” I yelled back.

“Agh, what do I do?! I’m getting nervous... Hey, what kind of request is it? It’s a little one, right? From a kid or something?”

“Um...it says they want you to make it sunny for a flea market.”

“Oh my god, it’s *serious!*”

We flailed around, getting more and more frantic.

Nagi just put the groceries into the fridge, watching us out of the corner of his eye.

“What now? What now? What now?” Hina was saying to me. I had to do something before she burst into tears, and I desperately forced myself to act.

“Hina, it’ll be fine—I’ll help out!”

“How?!”

“Don’t worry; just leave it to me!”

Okay! I resolved. *I’ll be working super-late tonight.*

* * *

The next morning was rainy, of course.

“Hina, use this!” I held a yellow umbrella out to her as she stepped into the corridor from her apartment.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Open it!”

With a rustle, Hina opened the umbrella, and sunshine talisman dolls tumbled out. Each of the umbrella’s eight ribs had a pair of them tied to it. This was my sunshine girl umbrella with a total of sixteen sunshine dolls. One of my best works, if I did say so myself.

“—Sorry, I don’t need this.” Hina shut the umbrella with a click.

“Huh?!”

Ouch! *No, wait!*

“Hey, hold on! I’ve got something else for you!”

I pointed to the stairs.

Clack, clack, clack. Footsteps were coming closer.

A character suit of an enormous sunshine doll, about four and a half feet tall, stepped into view. Another one of my best works, if I did say so myself.

“—Sorry, I don’t need that, either.”

“Huh?!”

“Screw you, Hodaka!” Nagi yanked the head off the costume and yelled at me, his face bright red.

The flea market was in Odaiba, along a gorgeous promenade that ran between the Fuji TV building and the Hilton hotel. You could shoot a TV drama here.

Rows of tents had been set up, and a few shoppers with umbrellas were circulating among them. The three of us stood on an observation platform that projected out into Tokyo Bay, desperately praying to the sky. Of course, calling down fair weather was Hina’s job, but in an attempt to provide a little support, I was spinning the sunshine doll umbrella, and Nagi (in addition to being a very good sport) was in the costume, running circles around Hina.

So we had a high school girl calling herself a sunshine girl, a high school guy waving an umbrella with sixteen sunshine dolls hanging from it, and a grade school boy running around in a white character costume in some strange approximation of a dance. Our ceremony probably came across as really sketchy.

I heard a whispered conversation from the tent of the flea market’s sponsor, who was also our client. “Who invited that crew?”

“Oh, well, it was just superstition. I thought we might get lucky...”

“Hey, kids!” an older guy shouted at us. “That’s about enough, all right?”

“Just a little longer!” I called back, but my anxiety and worry grew. “Hina, you want some water?”

“Sis, have some candy!”

We were starting to get stressed out, but Hina ignored us and prayed desperately, her hands clasped and sweat running down her face. And then it happened.

“You’re kidding! It cleared up!”

Hearing a voice from the sponsor’s tent, I looked up at the sky. A small gasp left my mouth.

The thick clouds had parted, and the bright sun was shining through. Up until a little bit ago, it had been almost chilly for July, but now the temperature was rising rapidly. The gray ocean turned a vivid blue, the Rainbow Bridge shone white, and every single car that drove across it gleamed happily.

“How was that?”

Hina was out of breath after running over to the sponsor’s tent, but she sounded triumphant.

“Boy, was that a shock!”

“You kids are incredible. You actually are a real live sunshine girl!”

The people walking along the promenade closed their umbrellas and looked up at the sky, savoring the first sunburst in a long time.

“Pretty impressive, even if it was just a coincidence!” proclaimed the old guy, who I assumed was in charge.

“It wasn’t a coincidence!” the giant sunshine doll protested, and I restrained him, smiling.

“Here, will twenty thousand yen do?” the old guy said, putting the money in Hina’s hand.

“Huh?! That’s too much!”

“Consider it a bonus, young lady, for being so darn cute!”

“That’s sexual harassment, Boss. I mean, yeah, she is cute, but still.”

“No, but if you look at sales when it’s rainy versus when it’s sunny, it’s like night and day. Twenty thousand is almost peanuts.”

“I had some serious doubts at first, but these kids are really amazing.”

“That sunshine doll is adorable. Did you make it yourself?”

Everyone was praising us, praising Hina. It was hard to say whether they actually believed in the Sunshine Girl, but I could tell they were all really happy.

We walked through the bustling flea market, stopping in front of the Yurikamome station. We looked at one another. The nervousness we'd felt when we were here that morning already seemed like something from the distant past, and we couldn't hide the joy welling up from deep inside us.

"We did it!!"

The three of us jumped into the air, exchanging high fives. We laughed together with total abandon. The passersby were side-eyeing us, wondering what was going on, but the sunburst had put smiles on their faces, too.

"That was fantastic, Sis!"

"Yes, I think I can do this!"

"Okay, let's get some money with the weather!"

"Yeah!"

The three of us punched the air.

...And that was how our "sunshine business" began.



CHAPTER FIVE

Weather and People and Happiness

Client A— T_o (age 31), bridegroom, Tokyo IT company employee

When I first heard about it, I thought it was dumb, too. Of course I did.

That said—well, women really tend to go for that stuff, you know? Fortunes and lucky items and feng shui and power spots, stuff like that? When we were picking out our new home, my girlfriend at the time wanted to get a reading for our house's aspect; there's a lucky tree in our bedroom, she buys lucky rake talismans, and she visits every shrine we come across. It's not a huge deal, though, so I don't really mind; it's actually kinda reassuring.

So I thought, *Hey, as long as it made her feel better*, and sent in a request. The price was affordable, and I like tossing a little money at online crowdfunding projects. I was paying for the experience, and plus, I didn't have much to lose.

Also, to be honest, I wanted to see my future wife in her white wedding dress under a blue sky, you know?

Client B— A_ka (age 15), Metropolitan S. High School first-year, Astronomy Club member

It's been raining all summer this year.

On TV, they're always talking about how it's not normal, what with global warming and climate change and temperatures getting extreme, but it's sorta like all this is becoming the new normal. My parents say that spring and fall have disappeared, that we used to get four really distinct seasons long ago. Yeah, I think it's a major problem.

But I've got an even bigger problem.

I'm in love with an older boy at my school! Is he gonna fall for me?!

Of all the clubs I could have joined, I chose the Astronomy Club just because he was in it! And the observation camp for the Perseid meteor

shower is my last chance! If it rains, they're gonna cancel!

It rained on the Star Festival earlier, too, and Orihime and Hikoboshi didn't get to see each other, remember? It's just too sad. I'm begging you, please make it a clear night so I can wish on a star!

Client C— K_mi (age 27), part-timer and cosplayer

I swear, the pub I work at is a total sweatshop. What do you call it —“exploitation camouflaged as motivation”? They try to pretend happiness at work has something to do with self-actualization. It's ridiculous and unfair.

At my other part-time job, the customers are just a pain. When you work customer support, you get calls from lonely people who just want someone to talk to, and from people who want to complain or sermonize and push someone else around. After all, it's not like we can fight back.

The thing is, though, I work multiple jobs like those because I really enjoy my cosplay.

I have friends who've always cosplayed with me, way back since Mixi was the social media site of choice. We use our part-time jobs to get money and time, then sink it all into our hobby. We buy the materials, then sew our costumes by hand. Our goal this summer is the Comiket convention.

So I want it to be sunny.

You can cosplay in the rain, too, but the weather can really affect your mood, you know? For me, it doesn't just change my mood; it changes how I physically feel. I can even get headaches and breakouts depending on the weather.

For the summer Comiket, I want to be there under a blue sky, smiling and surrounded by lots of people.

Client D— K_tarou (age 52), private shop manager and horse-racing fan

For me, it's just a hobby, sure, but my recovery rate is 97 percent, and my average is about 75 percent. Maybe I don't look it, but I'm pretty good with the ponies. In moderation, of course, so the wife doesn't chew me out.

Horse racing is a complicated logic game. It's not about luck, like the lottery. You gotta think about the horse's pedigree and how he's feeling that day, his compatibility with the jockey, the balance of the race, how you read

the past data, what criteria you think is most important and how you bet... It's a real mind bender, but there's definitely a way to win. If your predictions get more precise, you get that much better at it. The abstract numbers and the concrete details are all interconnected.

And, see, my favorite horse doesn't do so good when it's raining.

Client E— N_na (age 4), Minato Ward preschool student

I want to run outside on Sports Day.



Testimonial A

Three kids showed up on the day; one of them was about ten years old, still in grade school.

I was so startled, I almost asked them if they were familiar with the Labor Standards Act. Apparently the girl was in college, though, and her answers were very professional. They were all very polite, including the high school boy and the grade-schooler. I don't know, they were just really pleasant kids.

—Yes, the weather cleared right up. It was so bright. We had a rooftop wedding in Omotesando, and you could see rain still coming down over by the Hills. Yes, the rain only stopped around us. The view was even more beautiful than it would have been on a truly sunny day. The drops inside that curtain of rain were sparkling in the sunlight. It only stopped for about an hour, but it was a fantastic experience.

I'm not sure how to put it, but everything is brighter under blue skies, even smiles. When I saw my bride in her wedding dress, it hit me, really hit me, that I was going to be sharing the rest of my life with this beautiful woman.

She said 3,400 yen was too cheap, and I'm pretty sure she paid them fifty thousand. We were so happy that we took a souvenir photo with the sunshine doll kid.

Testimonial B

On the night of the camp, we watched the meteor shower from the roof of

the school. “If you couldn’t see the stars from Earth...,” my upperclassman began. “If humans hadn’t known about stars, I bet neither Newtonian physics nor the theory of relativity would have been discovered. Humans would have kept on assuming we were the center of the world. We would have stayed arrogant and ignorant. And—”

“And...?” I saw his eyes. They were shining behind his glasses, like the main character in a manga.

“And I think we might never have known how lonely we were.”

Eeeeeeeeeee, how dreamy! I almost screamed. He’s so sensitive!! Isn’t he wonderful? Sunshine Girl, 3,400 yen is far too little to pay for this. 10/10, would recommend!

Testimonial C

The sun shone so bright, the triangular roof on the Big Sight—the one that looks like a transforming robot—was almost blinding. Honestly, it was insanely hot for the first time in forever. I googled ways to keep from sweating, but nothing useful turned up. It was super-fun, though. My friend and I did a first-gen cosplay. Yes, *Pretty Cure*. White and Black. With all the light glinting off the cameras around us, it felt like we were onstage for something really special.

Y’know how the sun is a source of energy? Well, I could really feel it. It was like I was photosynthesizing or something; I just felt stronger, more alive. Sunshine Girl’s asking price was nowhere near enough, so I also gave her a rare book that I’d lined up early in the morning to buy. I’d like to cosplay with her someday. She’s delicate but has these big, determined eyes, and her skin is so fair; I’m sure she’d look good in anything.

Testimonial D

It had been raining since morning, so of course, they were treating her as a long shot. But then the Sunshine Girl came, the sun came out over the racetrack right before the race—and she won! First place! I dunno how many years it’s been since I got that excited. It was my first ever thousandfold payout. They give you sixty days to cash those tickets, so I haven’t taken mine in yet; it’s displayed on our Shinto altar at home.

All this made me think of something, about probability and statistics and

such.

Have you heard about how human emotions affect random number generators?

Random number generators are machines that spit out either a one or a zero based on quantum theory. The probability's always one in two. But when there are huge disasters or other big events that shake up a lot of people, for that one instant, they say the probability changes dramatically. They've witnessed the phenomenon in action lots of times, all over the world.

So I had a thought. Human wishes and prayers might actually have the power to change the world for real. Maybe there's more to our brains than just what's in our skulls. In some way, they may be connected to the whole world. Like how smartphones are connected to the cloud, even though you can't see it. I mean, I was over the moon when he got across the finish line first, and I have a hard time believing all that excitement stayed inside my head.

And so, well—I wonder if that girl's power picks up thoughts from others and deliver them to the world.

Of course, if I'd given her only 3,400 yen for that, the gods would've come to collect my debt. It's not good to give kids too much money, but I did pay her quite a bit. Huh? Ah, well, I can't tell you exactly how much.

Testimonial E

I got to race outside. It was fun.

Miss Sunshine Girl said I didn't need to give her money, but I paid her fifty yen.

* * *

At seven in the morning, I woke up.

I cleared away the snacks and empty cans Mr. Suga and Natsumi had left lying around the night before when they were drinking, then gave the bathroom a quick cleaning. While I was grilling the cut of salmon I'd bought on sale, I chopped an onion, then simmered it in a broth I'd made earlier. I put some green spring onions from the kitchen garden in the pot, added tofu and miso, and then—while I waited for it to come to a boil—sliced okra and

mixed it with natto.

Just like yesterday, as if the earth had stopped spinning and the seasons had frozen in their tracks, a humid rain was falling. I ate breakfast alone, gazing out the window. After that, I spent most of the morning organizing receipts and invoices, then cutting out magazine articles we'd worked on and filing them.

When it was past noon, I set Mr. Suga's breakfast out on the table; he'd be waking up soon. I left a note saying *There's miso soup in the pot*, called "I'll be back" toward his room, and left the office.

Nagi and I got off the train at the National Stadium station.

Both the grounds of the station and the area outside were teeming with people, many of them wearing *yukata*. They were walking along the side of the Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium, slowly making their way to the outer shrine gardens, umbrellas in hand.

"I've never actually seen this before! I'm totally looking forward to it!"

"But if this rain keeps up, won't they postpone?"

"They said they'd make the announcement after noon."

"It's already after noon."

"After I changed clothes and came all the way out here, too..."

"No, it's still too soon to give up!"

Everybody was talking to somebody else. Police officers with red light-up batons were standing here and there, and the voice of DJ Cop directing traffic came to us on the wind. The words ON TERROR ALERT ran across an electronic bulletin board on a police vehicle.

Before long, an enormous white dome-shaped building came into view, and I couldn't stop myself from reacting. "Whoa, it's the Olympic stadium!"

"Exactly what a country hick would say, Hodaka," Nagi teased. "All right, I'm meeting up with my girlfriend. Tell Sis good luck from me."

After I said good-bye to Nagi, I headed for Roppongi Hills.

"On the Internet, we saw people saying the one hundred percent Sunshine Girl is really something. And word of mouth backs it up," said a man in a sharp-looking suit. He had a staff ID and a security pass hanging around his neck. He seemed to find the whole thing amusing.

“I’m not sure how I feel about depending on a sunshine girl for an event this big...”

I was remembering the way the venue had looked when I’d seen it earlier, and now I was getting uneasy about how enormous this was. We were currently in a shiny elevator with a wood-paneled interior and highly polished metal ceiling and floor, like something you’d find in a palace. The floor number display smoothly ticked up: forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight. Our well-dressed client was polite, even with a kid like me.

“No, no, we aren’t pinning the success or failure of the event on the Sunshine Girl. There’s absolutely no need for you to feel pressured.” The man smiled gently. “The rain is an annual issue for us. As a matter of fact, it isn’t unusual for us to postpone due to rain. That’s just how it goes sometimes. The thing is, this year is rather, erm...”

He smiled with chagrin and shook his head wearily.

“Even if we postpone the event, they’re forecasting rain all the way to the end of the month. At that point, you’re kinda willing to try anything, you know, from good luck charms to throwing ourselves on the mercy of the gods.” He didn’t appear to be too down as he explained.

What he said reminded me that everyone really is the same. In Tokyo this year, all sorts of people wanted a break from the endless rain for their own personal reasons, meaning our “sunshine business” had grown more popular than we’d ever imagined. The 100% Sunshine Girl was becoming a bit of a legend online. All Hina could summon were short sunbursts over a limited range, but that only made her seem more mystical. People accepted the Sunshine Girl with surprising ease, as if she were a relatively special amulet or an especially effective sunshine doll. It was a little mysterious to me.

A soft chime sounded in the elevator, announcing our arrival, and I felt us smoothly decelerating. Suddenly getting nervous, I looked at the back of Hina’s *yukata* in front of me. Her slim figure was beautifully wrapped in a bright sunflower pattern. Her hair was done up, emphasizing the white, delicate nape of her neck. As if she could feel me watching her, she looked back and smiled reassuringly.

The Roppongi Hills rooftop sky deck reminded me of a ship in the blustering wind and rain.

There was an enormous heliport in its center, and a lot of antennas like masts. Red lights at the tips of several of them blinked slowly, like sacred torches. Down below, the ground was covered in a thin mist, and the buildings jutting up out of it looked like ancient pillars rising from the sea. Night hadn't fallen, and yet scattered lights were visible all across the city.

Hina walked due west across that vast roof, toward where the evening sun should have been. She moved like an undefeated athlete, and we stayed near the door to the roof, watching her. Before long, she reached the western edge, clasped her hands just like always, and closed her eyes. That was how she delivered our wishes—everyone's wishes—to the sky.

* * *

Drawing a deep breath to fill my lungs with fresh air, I slowly fold my hands. Close my eyes. The rain and wind strike my skin, tugging at my hair. The sensation tells me I am cut off from the world.

Inside my head, I begin slowly counting: *One, two, three, four*. It brings my brain into focus while everything else falls away, and then I scatter the numbers all through my body. I imagine them mixing with my hot, bright-red blood, flowing from my head to the rest of me. My thoughts blur into my emotions until I can think with my toes and feel with my head.

Gradually, curiously, I can feel myself becoming one with everything. My boundaries are dissolving into the world. I am the wind and the water; the rain is thought and mind. I am prayer and echo; I am the air whistling around me. A peculiar happiness and keen sorrow spread through me.

Slowly, voices begin to reach me as something more basic than words, a vibration in the air. Human wishes, I would guess. They have heat. They have rhythm. They have meaning. They hold a power that can change the world.

* * *

The sky beyond Hina began to glow orange, outlining her hair and *yukata* in gold.

The clouds had split, and the setting sun had broken through.

Whoa... The adults in suits marveled. I stared, too. No matter how many

times I saw this, it always felt as though I was witnessing something very sacred—as if I’d accidentally made eye contact with a god. I was trembling, just a little.

The sunset dyed us all red. Like candles burning low, buildings all across Tokyo shone bright in the last rays of the sun until it slowly sank behind a distant ridgeline.

Before I knew it, news helicopters had appeared in the sky. The wind carried the announcement from the outer gardens to us.

“The Jingu Gaien fireworks display will go on as planned, beginning at seven PM—”

Then magnificent fireworks began.

The cloudy sky lit up more brilliantly than a clear one would have. The fireworks flickered, colorful smoke rose, and thousands of windowpanes sparkled and shone. The wind carried the cheers of the crowd to us.

We’d been given special permission to stay up on top of the Roppongi Hills building to watch the fireworks. The rain-washed air was just a little cool and familiar; out of nowhere, I had a strong sense of déjà vu, as if I’d been here before with the scent of gunpowder in my nose, a long time ago. Either that, or I might smell it again, here beside Hina, in the distant future. Before I knew it, I was wishing for that with an intensity that startled even me.

“I like—”

“Huh?!” My head snapped over toward her.

Hina’s eyes were fixed not on me, but on the fireworks. “—this job. The Sunshine Girl job. It’s like I’ve finally discovered what my role is.” Hina turned smoothly, peering into my eyes. “Or it doesn’t not, not-not, not-not-not-not feel like that.”

“Huh?!” She was talking so fast, I’d started counting on my fingers before I could stop myself. “Doesn’t...not-not... Huh? Which is it?!”

Hina giggled with genuine pleasure. “So serious.” She was teasing me again. “Thank you, Hodaka.”

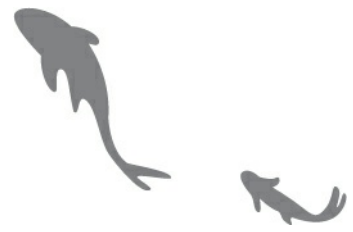
—*Boom!* A firework exploded above our heads, and Hina looked up again. A flower of light bigger than the rest scattered into flickering points of illumination.

“It’s so pretty,” she murmured, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her

profile.

Weather is such a strange thing, I thought. What's going on in the sky can affect people's emotions so deeply.

Hina can move their hearts so much.



CHAPTER SIX

The Other Shore of the Sky

“Oh, that project? Yes, we did get it.”

The editor was talking like this had nothing to do with him.

On the other end of the line, I heard a voice say, “*Come here a minute, Sakamoto.*”

“*Ah, excuse me, could you hold for a moment?*”

Sakamoto set the receiver down with an obnoxious *clunk*.

Scratch that one off the list, I thought, listening to the noise of the busy-sounding editorial department with one ear. I considered just hanging up, but obviously, I couldn’t do that. The office was silent except for the quiet sounds of rain and streaming radio. I was the only one here.

“The city center was miraculously blessed with a sunburst for the Jingu Gaien fireworks display yesterday. However, the rain is back for revenge in full force today. The current temperature in downtown Tokyo is seventy degrees, substantially lower than average. The chill makes it hard to believe it’s August. The record-breaking long rains and cool summer are causing the cost of produce to skyrocket. The price of a pound of lettuce is nearly three times what it was last year—”

As I hit the CLOSE button to turn the radio off, Sakamoto finally came back on the line.

“My apologies for the wait, Mr. Suga. Um, we were discussing the project you’d sent us, correct? Hmm, I’m terribly sorry, but we held a meeting, and we’ve decided not to pick it up...”

I drew an *X* over the project title with a red ballpoint pen. “On the Trail of the Rumored Sun Woman! The Abnormal Weather Is Gaia’s Will” had joined its fellow rejects, “The Golden Legend of Benten and the Dragon God That Sleeps in Kabuki-cho,” “In Search of the Elevator to the Hidden World,” and “Tokyo Tower Revealed to Be a Radio Tower to the Spirit World!” I’d pitched projects to several companies this week, and the only

winner was “Fortysomething Journalist Gives Interview Everything He’s Got! An All-Out Report on Potency Enhancers.”

“Is that right? No, yes, we’ll work hard on the next one, and I’ll be in touch.”

As badly as I wanted to slam down the receiver, I replaced it gently, then immediately *tsked* at it. I yanked open the drawer, rummaged around inside, and found a carton of cigarettes. I took one out, and I’d just stuck it in my mouth when I heard a bell jingle and a little *meew*.

Rain had hopped up on the desk. The kid Hodaka had picked up the kitten without asking and started keeping it at the office, and he’d put a little bell around its neck. It sniffed at the end of the cigarette, then meowed again. Its little eyes were like glass beads staring straight into me.

“...What’s your problem?”

I started to feel like I was in trouble. Sighing, I snapped the unlit cigarette in two, then tossed it in the trash. I was actually in the middle of my umpteenth attempt at quitting, and this was reminding me of why. Since I was already on a roll, I picked up the receiver again, then punched in Mrs. Mamiya’s number. After several rings, I heard that stiff and proper voice. “*Yes? Mamiya speaking.*”

Just the sound of that elegant old lady’s voice made me feel like I was in trouble again. I straightened up from my slouch, squared my shoulders, pulled myself together, and spoke all in a rush.

“Mrs. Mamiya, this is Keisuke. I’m sorry to sound like I’m hurrying you, but about the meeting I requested earlier—”

“*This again?*” Mrs. Mamiya made no attempt to hide her feelings. “*I seem to recall refusing you already. I can’t let her go out on rainy days.*”

“Mrs. Mamiya, I’ve got the right to see her—”

“*As I said, what do you intend to do if I let the child go out in this awful weather and her asthma worsens? There’s rain in the forecast for next weekend as well, you know.*”

I choked back a sigh just before it got out. The lady was always like this.

“What if it clears up...?!”

“*Pardon?*”

“If it happens to clear up this weekend,” I said, looking at Rain, “will you let me see her?”

I’d been thinking about it for a while now, but it sounded crazy, even to

me.

“It doesn’t sound as though these long rains are expected to stop anytime soon.”

“Yes, so like I said, if it does clear up. I’ll bring the car right up to your condo and get her.”

“...If it happens, I’ll consider it.”

With that, Mrs. Mamiya hung up.

“Kei, you’re late! This is an important interview, all right?!”

Natsumi was awfully impatient as I climbed into the small Honda. We were about to head over to an interview she’d gotten for us. She was technically working as my assistant, but she’s always been a people person, and she was way more gung ho about interviews than I was.

I didn’t even feel like responding; I just settled silently into the passenger seat, putting my feet up on the dashboard with a *thunk*.

“Ooh, somebody’s in a bad mood. Did a pitch fall through? Hmm?”

Bingo, first try. Instead of answering, I just grumpily asked, “Where’s Hodaka?”

The wipers were energetically whisking rain off the windshield.

“He can’t come because he’s got another part-time job?”

I opened the location-sharing app on my smartphone. Sky-blue GPS icons showed our current locations. We were heading west on Shin-Mejiro-dori. Hodaka was east of the Sumida River—around Hikifune. *That’s Shitamachi. He’s got a job over there?*

“He’s been slacking off work lately, hasn’t he?”

“It’s not like it really matters. It’s been dead at the company anyway.”

Hands on the steering wheel, Natsumi went right for the jugular. Didn’t even blink.

She was right: K&A Planning had definitely been getting less work recently. On top of that, Natsumi had finally decided she wanted to start job hunting. Even now, she was wearing a neatly creased white dress shirt and tight skirt. She’s a total knockout, and everywhere she goes, she leaves the world a little brighter. If she started looking in earnest, I knew she’d get results pretty fast. Still, she just showed up on her own say-so, and now she

was leaving the exact same way. It kinda pissed me off.

“He picked up a cat, too. Didn’t ask, of course. For a freeloader, he’s got some balls.” My frustration with Natsumi was complicated, so I redirected it and vented about Hodaka instead.

After all, I was the one who’d told her over and over to “Hurry up and get a real job already.”

“He’s just like you, then,” Natsumi answered coolly.

“Huh?”

“Hodaka probably couldn’t just leave him. They were too similar.”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

Natsumi was still gripping the steering wheel and looking straight ahead. “Well, you know...,” she said. “I bet Hodaka saw himself in that stray cat Rain. That’s the same reason you picked up Hodaka, right, Kei?”

I didn’t know how to argue with that, so I swallowed my response and gazed crankily at the scenery. The wet, gray town flowed away behind us.

“By the way, how much are you paying him?” she asked suddenly. “Hodaka, I mean. Per month.”

I wordlessly put up three fingers.

“What, just thirty thousand?!” Natsumi sounded startled. “Wow, you’re cheap!”

Huh? “No...,” I mumbled, not sure whether I was about to land myself in hot water. “Three thousand...”

“What?!” Natsumi’s face tensed up as I watched. “Huuuuuuuuuh? Wait, are you serious? Three thousand yen a month?! You scrooge! Are you running a sweatshop?! You’re gonna get yourself sued by the Labor Standards Bureau; kids these days will sue over anything! Heck, maybe I’ll tip them off about you myself!”

Speeding up, Natsumi zipped past the cars ahead of us.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, I offered excuse after excuse. “Well, I mean, I give him money for food, and he doesn’t have to pay rent, and the company pays for his cell phone, and I let the cat stay... It’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Oh my god.”

Natsumi glared at me with utter disgust.

“No wonder he’s working other jobs...”

* * *

On the other side of a dense neighborhood of traditional, low-eaved houses, I could see the astonishingly huge silhouette of the Skytree. The clouds behind it had thinned, and the sun was peeking through.

“My, isn’t that something? It really did clear up.” Our client, Mrs. Fumi Tachibana, looked up at the sky beyond the eaves, full of wonder. “You children are incredible. It’s a real shame you’re quitting.”

Ms. Fumi was about my grandma’s age, and the way she spoke was brisk and lively, in true Shitamachi style. I was sitting beside her on the veranda. Hina was in the small garden, praying for sun, and Nagi was holding the sunshine doll umbrella over her.

I watched their backs as I answered. “She ended up on television at the fireworks display, and after that, we got flooded with requests.”

During the news coverage for the fireworks display, Hina had been shown as “the Sunshine Girl who’s all over the Internet!!” It was just a short clip of a girl in a *yukata* praying on a rooftop, filmed from the air, but the effect had been massive. The Sunshine Girl website had gotten bombarded with so many requests, it briefly crashed, and most of the vast number of requests that got through before the site went down had been some form of joke.

“We really couldn’t take them all, and once we finish up the requests we’d accepted before that point—yours today, Mrs. Tachibana, and one more next weekend—we decided to close up shop for a while. Besides, I think she’s a little tired...”

That was true. Hina was as energetic as ever, but lately, I’d started to see a very slight shadow in her expression.

“Oh, hey, you’ve got guests?”

I heard a voice, and when I turned around, a young man was walking out of the room that housed the family altar.

“Ah, Taki, you came?”

Ms. Fumi’s expression softened. The young man she’d called Taki looked kind; his hair was a bit lighter than average. *I wonder if he’s her grandson*, I thought.

“You’re lighting the welcoming fire today, aren’t you? I wanted to help out. Anyway, your guests are pretty young. Are you guys friends with my

grandma?” he asked us mildly.

The three of us told him hello, in unison.

“I wanted to at least make sure my husband had good weather on his *hatsubon*,” said Ms. Fumi.

“Huh? ...Oh, you’re right. It did stop raining, didn’t it? Grandpa was a sun man, after all.” Smiling, Taki dropped his sandals and stepped down into the garden. From the veranda, Ms. Fumi and I watched his back as he struck a match, then set fire to the hemp stalks.

“I thought it might be hard for him to come back home if it was raining.”

“Come back?” Nagi asked. He’d returned from the garden and started massaging Ms. Fumi’s shoulders for her before any of us noticed. This kid always hit it off really well with the clients.

“You see...” Ms. Fumi was smiling comfortably. “Obon is the day when people who’ve died come back home from the sky.”

“And *hatsubon* is the first Obon after the person has died, isn’t it?” That question came from Hina; she was standing next to the young man now.

“That’s right.”

“Then it’s our mother’s *hatsubon*, too.”

I knew it. Finally, I knew for sure. The hemp stalks began to burn, crackling, and white smoke rose smoothly. Ms. Fumi turned to Hina.

“Oh, your mother also passed away last year?”

“Yes.” Hina and Nagi nodded.

“Well, then,” Ms. Fumi said kindly. “You two step over the welcoming fire before you go, too. I’m sure your mother will protect you.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The smoke from the welcoming fire rose into the blue sky showing through the hole in the clouds.

“He’ll ride that smoke down from the other shore.”

“The other shore?”

“The world beyond. It’s always been a different world up there, beyond the sky.”

Hina was shading her eyes with her hand, gazing at the world above. Out of nowhere, I wondered what it looked like through a sun girl’s eyes.

* * *

A dragon was flying majestically through the sky, riding the wind, while an enormous whale poked its head out of the clouds. Around it, like fish on the tide, countless tiny sky fish danced.

“They say the priestess of weather saw this.”

The voice, so hoarse it was barely there, belonged to the shrine’s priest. As Natsumi filmed him with her smartphone, she made an impressed noise.

“It’s a fascinating picture. Fish flying in the sky! And a dragon, too! And another dragon above the mountain—that’s Mount Fuji, isn’t it? The sky is full of living things...”

“That’s really something,” I said.

She was right; the ceiling painting at this shrine wasn’t your average clouds-and-dragon picture. It was a painting of a dragon, but the dragon didn’t seem to be the theme. A mountain range was drawn all around its circular perimeter, and what with the billowing clouds and the fish, it seemed to show a whole world. The touch was far more delicate than an india ink painting, closer to a traditional Japanese Yamato-e painting. This place was apparently a shrine that worshipped the weather, which was unusual even for Japan. I was a little impressed with Natsumi for finding an interview subject like this guy.

“Isn’t it? Isn’t it just?” the priest said happily. There was a kid in gym clothes who looked as if he’d just come from club standing next to him; he was messing with his smartphone, not interested in us. He might have been the priest’s grandkid, there to look after him.

“The priestess of weather you mentioned, was she one of those? Something like a shaman?”

I’d directed my question at the priest, but there was no answer—or so I thought, but then:

“Huh?! What was that?” the priest shouted back at me, and for a second, I thought he was angry.

The priest looked just about as worn and scratchy as his voice sounded, and apparently, he was hard of hearing as well. Made me wonder just how old he was.

“Was she something like a shaman?” Natsumi relayed my question in a loud voice.

A beat later, the priest nodded emphatically. “Yes, the priestess’s role is healing the weather,” he said.

“I smell BS...,” I muttered in spite of myself. It would’ve made a great article for an occult magazine, but the sun woman project had already been eighty-sixed. I hadn’t managed to tell Natsumi about that yet.

As for her, she was asking the priest questions with keen interest. “By *healing*, do you mean correcting the abnormal phenomena we’ve been getting this year?”

“...Huh? ‘Abnormal phenomena,’ my eye!”

The abrupt shout made us flinch, but the priest didn’t pay any attention. He was just getting more and more worked up.

“Everyone is so quick to call something the ‘first in recorded history.’ It’s hogwash. All this panic is just disgraceful. ‘Recorded’? ‘First in history’? Well, how long have they been recording these things? A century at best. When do you suppose this picture was drawn? Eight hundred years ago!”

“Eight hundred?!” Natsumi yelped.

My eyes also widened. If he was for real, then this was from the Kamakura period. It just might be the oldest dragon-and-cloud painting in Japan.

The priest was having a coughing fit. “Hey, Grandpa, take it easy,” his grandkid said, rubbing his back.

“At its core, the weather is the mood of heaven,” the priest began again, when he finally got his coughing under control. “Heaven doesn’t care about what’s convenient for humans, and you can’t measure whether it’s regular or irregular. Humans are only allowed to live here temporarily; we just hold on to our place between the damp, thrashing heavens and the earth and try to keep from getting shaken off. Everyone used to know it well, long ago.”

The priest’s voice seemed to echo to us from the depths of the earth. As I listened to him, I was remembering a Gyoki-style map of Japan I’d seen somewhere, way back when. It was an ancient map of Japan said to have been drawn by a single monk, before this island nation had ever been surveyed. All around an island that looked like a melted rock—something you really couldn’t have recognized as Honshu even if someone told you what it was—he’d drawn an enormous creature that looked like a dragon or a snake. That visual had made a strange sort of sense—we’re riding on the back of a dragon.

The priest’s voice resounded clearly in the main shrine building, amid the sound of rain outside.

“Even so, there is a tiny little thread that connects humans with heaven. That’s the priestess of weather. She’s a special individual who can take the people’s fervent wishes and deliver them to the sky. Long ago, there was someone like that in every country, every village.”

When she heard that, Natsumi looked at me, her eyes full of excitement. “Kei, isn’t that the Sunshine Girl?!”

True—for idle gossip, it wasn’t half-bad. An article that combined believable tradition with awareness of current issues would go over well with both editors and readers.

As I thought to myself, the kid escort commented, “Hey, are you guys sure you wanna get stories from my grandpa? He’s pretty old, and so I’d take the stuff he says with a grain of salt!”

“No, this is great. They’re valuable stories, and it’s a huge help!” Natsumi said, just as the priest conked the kid’s head with his fist. *He’s in better shape than I figured*, I thought with some relief.

“Of course, everything has a price.”

There was sadness in the priest’s voice now, and we all looked at him again.

“Weather priestesses have a sorrowful destiny—”

* * *

“One, two, three!”

Nagi and Hina hopped over the small welcoming fire.

“You’re next, ma’am!” Nagi said.

“Oh, don’t bother about me,” Ms. Fumi said with a thin smile, but Hina pulled at her hands.

“Let’s go together.”

“Thanks for making friends with my grandma,” Taki said, setting a plate piled high with watermelon on the veranda. He sat down beside me.

“No, we’re here for a job, sort of...” I felt rather small and ashamed. When we heard laughter from the garden and looked over, we saw that the three of them had jumped over the welcoming fire together.

“They look like they’re having fun,” Taki said, smiling. “How old are you guys?” he asked me.

“Um, Nagi’s ten, and I’m sixteen. She’s— Oh!” Suddenly, I remembered what Hina had said earlier. “I’m pretty sure she’s turning eighteen soon.”

The calendar in Hina’s apartment had had *Birthday* written on August 22 in Nagi’s handwriting.

“A birthday! You’ll have to give her a present, then.”

Taki sounded amused by something, and my heart skipped a beat.

A birthday present for a girl?! I got the feeling that was way out of my depth, but it would be really cool to make Hina happy. *What should I do...?* Before I realized, I was deep in thought.

“The watermelon’s ready, you three!” Taki called to Nagi and the others in the garden.

“Yaaay!” they called back, jumping around.

In the distance, thunder rumbled softly. The next thing I knew, the sky had clouded over again, and scattered raindrops had started to fall. Laughing, Hina, Nagi, and Ms. Fumi ran back to the veranda.

* * *

Even now, I remember feeling weirdly uneasy over what the priest had said as I drove back from the interview that day.

At the time, I’d just thought it was one of your average old stories. In fact, I still don’t believe in weather priestesses or sunshine girls. There’s gotta be plenty of other, rational explanations for the things that happened after that.

As a matter of fact, those anxieties might have had another, more practical cause. Like the fact that I was behind on rent payments for the office. Or our steadily dwindling number of jobs. Or my consistently crappy relationship with Mrs. Mamiya.

Then there was the runaway minor I’d been keeping at the office for over a month. And all the crazy stuff he’d started doing the moment I turned my back.

But it’s funny—no matter how much I think about it, I always come back to the same thing. Even if I could’ve given my past self some advice, even if I could have lived my whole life over again a few times—I bet from the moment I ran into Hodaka, I’d make the same choices every damn time.

And that’s still true. I can’t tell you why, but I can tell you I’m certain.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Discovery

I'm a sixteen-year-old high school guy. What's a good birthday present for a woman who's turning eighteen?

I hit the POST button, and after a short pause, a few immediate answers came in. You can always count on Yahoo! Answers.

(Answer 1) Just push her down

(Answer 2) cash. five figures at least.

(Answer 3) an apartment

(Answer 4) If you have to ask the Internet, you're already flunking this.

Hmm...

No Best Answers here. If I had to pick one, it would be number four. Actually, I was starting to notice there were no answers to life on the Internet. As I was worrying about what to do, I heard a bunch of girls cheering, and I looked up from my smartphone.

Nagi had scored a goal.

We were at a futsal court under an elevated railroad track, and Nagi was in the middle of a practice match.

"Nice shot, Nagi!"

"Nagi always gets the goal!"

Nagi's teammates hurried up to him, and he high-fived each of them as he ran past. What an upbeat, popular guy. Lately, I'd had nothing but respect for this ten-year-old dynamo who didn't play favorites. I'd come here because I wanted to get his advice.

"—A ring. Absolutely," Nagi told me with conviction.

“Wait, seriously? A ring, out of nowhere?! Huh? Wouldn’t that be too much pressure?” Startled, I asked him again.

The match was over, and we were sitting in the court’s spectator seats.

“It’s a birthday present for Sis, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I did some research and asked another lady, but—” I remembered Natsumi’s answer:

“Huh? What would I be happy to get? Let’s see... A hug, a kiss, cash, a proper boyfriend, and— Oh, and a job!”

“She was zero help.” I sighed. There hadn’t been much to choose from between her and Yahoo! Answers. “A ring, huh...? Hmm...”

As I stressed about it, several grade-school girls left the court, waving and calling, “Bye-bye, Nagi!”

Nagi waved back breezily. “You like Sis, don’t you, Hodaka?”

“Huh?” For a second, I couldn’t process what he’d said to me, until I did and promptly freaked out. “Dwaaaaaaaah?!” I went hot all the way to the tips of my ears, as if he’d dumped boiling water all over me. “No, no, no, I don’t think I like her, exactly... Huh? Wait, do I? Maybe? But no, no, no, starting when? Way back at the beginning, maybe? Dweeeeeeeeeeeeh?!”

While I was off having a meltdown, Nagi rolled his eyes. “Look, guys need to keep things clear. Clouding the waters is the last thing you want to do.”

“Huh? R-really?”

“The rule is, before you start going out, you state everything upfront, and after you’re together, you keep things vague. Right?”

The epiphany hit me like a brick to the face. Bam! *What’s with that value system?! How’s he so strategic about this stuff?!*

“Whoa...!” *Tokyo is seriously something else*, I thought for the first time in quite a while, and I meant it. “Can I call you Master Nagi?”

Nagi responded with a grin, then suddenly looked away into the distance. “Ever since Mom died, Sis has just been working part-time jobs. I’m sure she’s doing it for me, because I’m still just a kid.”

“...”

As Nagi explained, still smiling, I felt myself sitting up straighter. If Nagi was calling himself a kid, he had to be pretty mature already.

“So...I’d like her to do more of the things normal teenagers do,” he said jokingly, then stuck his fist out to me.

I bumped my fist against his.

“...Although the jury’s still out on you, Hodaka.” My new mentor grinned.

“Thank you very much!”

Smiling, the sales clerk held a paper bag out to me. I took it, but I stayed rooted to the spot.

“Hmm?” After a moment of silence, the clerk took a worried look at my face.

“Um!” I began, taking the plunge.

“Yes?”

“Uh... Do you think someone would be happy to get this as a present?” I asked, letting my eyes fall to the bag in my hands.

The clerk had a kind face and long black hair. She seemed just a little surprised, and then she smiled. Her smile was so lovely that for just a moment, the sounds around us completely disappeared, as if I’d put on noise-canceling headphones.

“—You spent three whole hours in here, trying to decide.” Her voice was very warm, as if she were speaking to a friend. “If it were me, I think I’d be very happy. I’m sure it’ll be fine. She’ll love it!”

Those words made my chest hot. With a budget of four thousand yen, I’d almost driven myself crazy worrying what sort of ring to get. While I was running in circles and stressing out and getting nowhere, this lady had stuck with me for more than three hours.

“Give it your best,” she told me finally, with a kind smile. Noting that her nametag read *Miyamizu*, I bowed deeply.

By the time I left the Shinjuku Lumine mall, it was already dark, but the hustle and bustle of people under the shelter of their umbrellas was as busy as ever. I realized I was used to the lights on the high-rise buildings as they blinked hazily in the rain. I tried to remember the night two months ago when I’d wandered around this same area in despair, reaching back into my mind and trying to pull the memory closer.

Back then, I couldn’t breathe as deeply as I could now. I hadn’t known anybody in this city. I’d felt so insecure, as if I were the only one speaking a

different language. The first person to change that had been Hina at the McDonald's.

When I lifted my head, the outdoor television was showing the weather forecast for the week. The words *Number of rainy days in a row now higher than at any time in recorded history* were scrolling across the screen. But I knew that tomorrow, just for a little while, the place where Hina went would have clear skies.

Tomorrow's job was a request from a father who wanted the park to be sunny for his daughter that weekend. That would be the final job for our Sunshine Girl business. The day after that was Hina's birthday. Privately, I decided I'd give her the ring after she and Nagi and I had cake.

Let me at least give Hina an extra smile or two, I murmured silently, peering up at the rainy sky through my umbrella.

* * *

It felt like forever since the last time I'd heard cicadas. Tokyo Tower, still wet from the earlier rain, shone proudly in the sun, as if it had changed into brand-new clothes.

This park was right at the base of the tower. The fragrant green grass was surrounded by pristine skyscrapers and a big temple. For a while now, a little girl had been cackling away so loud that everyone in the park could hear her.

"Daddy, do it again, do it again!"

"I don't mind, Moka, but you're sure you're feeling okay?"

"Uh-huh, everything's fine today. The sun's out!"

"Okay then, let's go!"

Mr. Suga of all people caught both of the girl's hands and spun her around in circles as she gave a great big belly laugh. She was his daughter, Moka.

"Okay, Nagi next, do Nagi!"

"Sure thing. Here we go!"

"Yaaaaaaaugh!"

Thumping his lower back, Mr. Suga returned to the bench where Hina and I were sitting. He plopped down heavily, putting himself between us.

"Damn, my back ain't meant for this."

“...Why did *you* hire us, Mr. Suga? Hey, wait—you knew I was working this job? And kept quiet about it? And— Wait, you have a daughter?!”

I glared at him. Instead of answering, Mr. Suga just looked at me triumphantly, then gave Hina’s hand a firm shake.

“That was unbelievable! Seriously, the weather forecast said there was a one hundred percent chance of rain!”

Hina smiled at him, which really bugged me for some reason.

“My daughter’s got asthma, see. She’s living with her grandma right now, and I don’t usually get to see her on rainy days.”

Mr. Suga watched, his eyes squinched up in a genuine smile, as Moka chased Master Nagi around on the grass. It was a little unexpected; I didn’t know he could even make his face do that. I could see why, though; those two made a nice picture together as they ran around in the light.

“Man, the blue sky is great to see...,” Mr. Suga muttered.

I took a closer look at his left hand and noticed the silver ring on it. He was touching that ring with the gnarled fingers of his right hand. Only then did I realize how old they looked.

“So you’re Hodaka’s boss, Mr. Suga?” Hina said.

“Yeah! And the guy who saved his life!” he proudly replied. Come to think of it, I’d forgotten about that. Mr. Suga put an arm around my shoulders. “And hey, it doesn’t sound like you get much respect from her. How come?” he asked, sounding amused.

“Huh? Well, Hina’s two years older than me...”

“Hmm? You’re, what, fifteen? No, sixteen? So she’s seventeen? Eighteen? That ain’t much of a difference.”

“I know, right?!” I said, just as Hina said, “It is so!”

“Oh, there they are. Heeeeey!” someone called.

When I looked to see who it was, I saw Natsumi running toward us, waving.

“Agh!” I turned to Mr. Suga in a panicky whisper. “Wait, Mr. Suga, is this okay?”

“Huh?”

“Well, I mean, your wife and daughter— Does Natsumi...?”

Mr. Suga was thumping me on the back, biting back laughter, as Natsumi

made it over to the bench, mystified.

“What? What’s up?”

“Hodaka here thought you and I were—”

“Hey...!” Just as I was about to tell him not to, Mr. Suga said it.

Natsumi’s eyes widened, and she yelled, “Lovers?!”

I turned bright red and hung my head. Watching my own sweat drip onto the ground, I tried to explain. “Well, nobody told me you were uncle and niece... And, Ms. Natsumi, right at first, you said it was exactly what I thought it was...”

“Hodaka, nobody wants to be friends with people who have fantasies like yours.” Natsumi glowered coldly at me, and Mr. Suga smirked.

“If you use common sense and think a little, it’s pretty obvious.”

When I looked at Hina, hoping for help, she was glaring at me, too. “You’ve got a dirty mind, Hodaka,” she muttered. What a nightmare.

“Hodaka, listen...”

At the sound of my name, I looked at Natsumi. She was leaning forward, and the neckline of her camisole was low.

“You just looked at my chest, didn’t you?”

“I did not!” *Hey, that was a trap!*

Natsumi gave a musical chuckle.

“Oh, Natsu!” Moka was flailing her whole arm at us, waving.

“Hiya, Moka.” Natsumi waved back.

Okay, so those two are cousins.

“Daddy, I made you a flower crown. Here!”

Mr. Suga’s expression melted, and he got up from the bench. “Wow, for me?!”

“C’mon, Hodaka, you too!” Master Nagi shouted.

“Oh, my mentor’s calling... Gotta go,” I mumbled as I made my getaway.

“Heh-heh. Hodaka’s hilarious, isn’t he?” I heard Natsumi say to Hina as I left.

* * *

She was a totally normal girl.

I’d been expecting someone less approachable, like a shrine maiden or a

Shinto priest or an astrologer or a charismatic rock star—stoic and awe-inspiring. But Hina was just an adorable teenage girl, smiling and lively. Her hair was its natural glossy pitch-black, while her skin and her lips were smooth as a baby's. *Both Hodaka and Hina are so young*, I thought. I was a little jealous.

"Hodaka's still a kid, isn't he? It's embarrassing," Hina said next to me, a little angrily. Her eyes were on Hodaka.

Ah, so that's what their relationship is, I thought, smiling in spite of myself. Hodaka was a little-brother type, through and through.

"Say, don't you think those two look alike?" I asked her.

"You mean Hodaka and Mr. Suga?"

There was a spring in Kei's steps, while Hodaka was scratching his head as he made his way over to Moka and Nagi.

"Mm-hmm. The thing is, Kei also ran away to Tokyo when he was in his teens."

"Huh?"

"The Sugas are a distinguished family where he's from; they've been legislators for generations. From what I hear, Kei's parents had super-high expectations for him as well, but his big brother was brilliant. He graduated from the local university prep school at the head of his class, got straight into Tokyo University, then went overseas on exchange, and now he's a financial official for the government. He's also my dad."

I laughed a little.

"Y'know, I really don't get along with my dad, either, but for some reason, his little brother Kei and I hit it off just fine. That's why I've been working at Kei's place all this time."

Huh? As I was talking, I started to wonder. Why was I telling Hina about this stuff?

"Well, anyway—"

Maybe there was some wondrous energy around Hina after all. Her big eyes were fixed on me, and it felt like she was drawing my feelings up to the surface.

"When Kei ran away to Tokyo, he met Asuka here. She's the woman who eventually became his wife. There was so much drama around their relationship; both families were fighting with each other and everything. But in the end, they got married, they started the editing production company

together, and Moka was born. I was happy back then, too.”

I’d just started high school. The awe and bittersweet something I felt when I saw the baby at the hospital had mellowed into something gentle and peaceful now, like the scent of a favorite flower.

“His wife died in an accident several years ago, but—”

That story was a bit too complicated. A bit too heavy. Even after all this time, it hurt a little more than I could stand. I smiled, veering away from it.

“He doesn’t look like it, but Kei’s surprisingly devoted, even now. I don’t think it’s because he can’t get a girlfriend or anything.”

When I looked at Kei’s group, they were working very seriously on their flower crowns, their foreheads close together. Moka had her hands on her hips and was bossing the guys around. I could see the joy in Kei’s eyes.

“—Hodaka told me something a while ago,” Hina said abruptly. “He said both you and Mr. Suga were super-cool. He said he’d never met adults who treated absolutely everybody fairly the way you do. He said you were beautiful, and that everyone you met fell in love with you. I always wanted to meet you someday, too—”

“Huh...?”

“And so I’m really happy today. You’re just like Hodaka said.”

Somehow, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Hina wasn’t just saying that. It was what she actually thought. Strangely for me, the words made me tear up a little.

“Me too.” I squeezed Hina’s hands. “I always wanted to meet you. A one hundred percent sunshine girl; that’s incredible!”

Hina looked at me, maybe slightly taken aback.

“The thing is, I’ve spent a long time chasing rumors about sun women. I’ve talked to several people who said they’d met you, too. Everyone was just delighted; thanks to you, their lives are getting happier, bit by bit!”

Hina’s face lit up, and it was like watching a flower bloom. *This is almost something sacred*, I thought. Her joy was as brilliant as physical light, and my eyes narrowed against it. For some reason, I was talking faster.

“That’s something only you can do, right, Hina? It’s incredibly rare for people to have such a clearly defined ability. In fact, that just happens to be what I’m worried about right now! Aaah, I wish I had a special skill I could put on my resume, too; job hunting is such a drag. Lucky you, Hina. A high school girl with supernatural abilities—you’re practically the perfect

heroine!”

Hina giggled. “I...” She raised her eyes. “I’d like to grow up faster.”

I was captivated by her profile. *I see. Yes, of course.* It was as if this was her way of gently scolding me.

“...Somehow, that’s a relief.”

“Huh?”

I took out my smartphone. “Actually, I heard something that concerned me a little during an interview...”

I looked for the movie of the priest that I’d taken at that shrine. *It’s all right, though,* I told myself. *It’s all right. Hina is a normal girl who’s thinking about the future. She’s strong; she’s already looking ahead. She’s ready to firmly say she wants to grow up faster. What we heard was just a garden-variety tale from the past. It’s so silly, this stuff about the sorrowful destiny of weather priestesses.*

Decisively, I hit PLAY.

* * *

The fine rain that had begun to fall rapidly drained the heat from the air. I zipped my jacket up all the way. For a while now, Moka had been coughing painfully.

“Moka, did you wear yourself out a little?”

Mr. Suga took out an asthma inhaler and shook it so that it rattled. He’d picked Moka up, and he had her put the mouthpiece in her mouth.

“There, breathe in. One, two, three!”

Timing it perfectly, Moka sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled dramatically.

“I’m okay! I’m going to play more!” she told Mr. Suga insistently.

We were all at a parking lot near the grass by then, our umbrellas open. Mr. Suga had left his car there. Tokyo Tower wasn’t lit up yet, and with the darkening sky behind it, it loomed over us like a giant’s shadow.

“We should be going,” Hina told Mr. Suga.

“Awwww! Noooo! I wanna play more!” Moka shouted.

“Moka, being with everybody is fun, but it makes you more tired, doesn’t it? You’d better go home.”

“Noooo! I want to stay with Nagi longer!”

Moka was almost in tears, until Natsumi spoke up brightly. “Well then, let’s all go get dinner together, to wrap things up!”

“Yaaay, we’re going to dinner!”

“But...” Hina sounded troubled.

“In that case!” Master Nagi said. “I’ll go with you for just a little while. Will that be all right?”

“Of course!” Natsumi responded, and Moka danced around him. “Yaaaay!”

Mr. Suga was muttering, “Can’t say no to that,” but his lips seemed happy.

“Hodaka, you take Sis back home,” said Master Nagi.

“Huh?” When I looked over at him, he gave me a thumbs-up and a wink. My heart skipped a beat.

“Hina!” Moka jumped down from Mr. Suga’s arms, ran up to Hina, and hugged her legs tight. “Thank you for making it sunny today! I had sooooo much fun!”

Hina positively beamed. For a moment, I was captivated. She crouched down, putting herself on Moka’s eye level.

“Same to you. Thank you for being so happy about it, Moka.”

Not good. Not good—

My heart was racing.

We hadn’t spoken much, either on the way to Hamamatsucho Station or after we’d boarded the Yamanote Line. Hina stood by the doors of the train, gazing silently at the raindrops on the window. I stole glances at her reflection in the glass from time to time; my left hand was in my pocket, closed around a little box. It was the ring I’d bought just yesterday. *I’ll never have a better chance to give it to her...*

The closer the train got to Tabata Station, the more intense that thought became. We would be completely alone together; this opportunity had come out of nowhere.

When we left through the south turnstile, the rain had gotten a little stronger, and the temperature had dropped a little further. Behind the rain clouds, the sky still held traces of afternoon light.

Not good. Not good—

My heart was about to beat right out of my chest. *I'm glad it's raining*, I thought. If it weren't for the sound of the rain, I'm sure Hina would have been able to hear it. Even so, my body kept getting hotter, and I didn't know what to do with it, so I slowed down a little. A Shinkansen glided along the elevated track below us with a hissing noise. Raindrops struck my umbrella like an irregular musical instrument.

Not good. Not good—but still.

I stopped walking. Hina's back got one step farther away from me, then two steps. Three, four.

I drew a breath. It smelled like water.

"Hina."

"Hodaka."

We'd spoken at the same time.

"Ah! Sorry."

"Oh, no." Hina smiled gently. "What is it, Hodaka?"

"No... Nothing really. What about you, Hina?"

"Oh, um—"

Hina lowered her eyes slightly—and for a moment, I thought I saw something cross her face. The shadow of water?

"Hodaka, listen."

Hina lifted her head. She looked straight at me. Her eyes were serious. The shadow of water passed again.

"I—"

More water. The water was dancing, circling slowly around Hina like—fish made of water?

And then it happened.

A ferocious gust of wind blew from behind me, tearing the umbrella out of my hand. I bent over.

"—Ah!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hina's jacket, snatched into the air by the wind. I reached out on reflex.

...But I missed. Our umbrellas and Hina's jacket were blown away, carried far up into the sky.

"...!"

For a moment, I gazed after them, stunned, as they grew smaller and

melted into the mist.

“Hina...!”

The words *Are you okay?* stopped on the tip of my tongue.

There was no one in front of me. Hastily, I looked around. No one was there. That couldn’t be right—she was right there just a few seconds ago.

“Hodaka!”

Suddenly, I heard Hina, and relief and fear struck me at the same time. I’d heard her voice—but from an impossible direction. I looked up.

Hina was floating in the air above the streetlamps. Water droplets glinted, dancing around her instead of falling like the rain, supporting her. Slowly, as if she were in the palm of an invisible hand, she descended to earth.

The streetlamps along the hill road began to turn on, finally realizing that night was here. Hina passed in front of one of them, and I saw her face, stiff with fear—and her left shoulder as transparent as ice, with the light shining right through it.

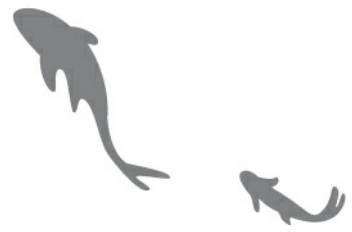
She’s see-through...?

I blinked hard. Hina was past the streetlamp now, and her shoulder looked normal again. As I watched, confused, she slowly came down. The water droplets around her began to disappear, dissolving into the rain. When Hina’s toes touched the asphalt, she crumpled to her knees. Slowly, she raised her head. Her expression held surprise and confusion and terror—and a faint sense of resignation, as if she’d known this was going to happen.

“I first became a sunshine girl...”

Later, on the way back to her apartment, she told me about it.

“...on that day, one year ago.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Last Night

When I turned off the hair dryer, the sound of the rain came back to life. It echoed through the thin walls and roof and filled the room, as if tiny, violent people were all knocking on it at once.

“Last year, a little before Mom died...”

Since we’d lost our umbrellas, we’d been soaked to the skin by the time we got back to the apartment. Hina had taken a shower first, and then I’d taken mine.

“...I climbed up to the roof of that building alone.”

In front of the small sink, there were two cups and two toothbrushes. Facial cleanser, hand cream, spray deodorant, hair wax. When I raised my head, I saw my own dazed expression in the mirror.

“Up there, it was like a puddle of light. One ray of sunlight shone through the clouds to light up that roof. Grass and little flowers were growing all over it, the songbirds were twittering, and the bright-red torii gate was shining in the sun.”

On that day, Hina said, she’d put her hands together and walked through the gate.

Gods, please. Let the rain stop. Let Mom wake up and let us walk under clear skies together again.

Suddenly, the sound of the rain had cut out, and when she opened her eyes—there was blue sky all around her.

That was where she’d seen the grassy plain on top of the cloud and the sky fish, flickering and glittering as they swam.

“The next thing I knew, I was lying under the torii, and the sky had cleared. It was the first clear day in a long time. Back then, I—”

On the way back home, wet with rain, Hina had told me...

“—I think I got connected to the sky.”

Ding-dong!

The sudden sound startled me so much I almost jumped. It was the doorbell. As far as I knew, it was the first time anyone had ever visited Hina's apartment, and I opened the washroom door hesitantly, wondering who it could be at this hour.

Hina was peeking through the peephole in the front door. "Hodaka, hide!" she hissed, and I hastily shut the door again. The doorbell rang a second time, and I heard a woman's voice from the entryway.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late. I'm with the police—"

A ripple of anxiety spread through me. I heard Hina open the front door to who I assume was a female police officer. Apparently, she wasn't alone; this time, a deep male voice said, "Do you recognize this boy?"

My heart thudded. A chill ran through me from head to toe, and my strength drained away.

This is about me. I thought it couldn't possibly be, and at the same time, the part of my brain that was still calm and alert was telling me, *Well, of course it is.* Of course this life wasn't going to last forever. I'd always known deep down this would happen someday, but now it was finally hitting me.

"Would you take a closer look at that photo? The boy has been sighted around here multiple times."

"No, I've never seen him... Did something happen to him?"

"We have a few things we'd like to ask him." The man sounded grumpy. "Besides, he's a runaway, and his parents have reported him missing."

My knees were trembling as if they had a life of their own.

"In addition, Miss Amano," said the lady police officer. "You're living here with your little brother, who's in elementary school, correct?"

"Yes."

"That's also a bit of a problem, actually. Children living on their own, without a guardian—"

"But—!"

Hina shouted back at them.

"But we aren't causing trouble for anybody!"

I heard the front door slam. Apparently, the police were gone for now. Slowly, I got my breathing under control, then stepped out of the washroom. Hina was still standing in front of the entryway, her back to me.

“They said they’d stop by again tomorrow, with people from the child welfare center,” she said quietly.

I wasn’t the only one in a bind; so were Hina and her brother. I was getting more and more confused. What should I tackle first?

Hina turned around, and I could tell she was completely exhausted. “What should I do...? They’ll split us up!”

“—!”

Suddenly, my phone vibrated in my pocket. When I took it out and checked, I saw the call was from Mr. Suga.

Cautiously opening the front door, I poked my head out and looked around. The gloomy shared corridor was deserted. The rain was coming down harder now.

On the far side of the street, beyond the spray of the rain, I could see Mr. Suga’s car in the light of a streetlamp.

When I ran over to the car, Master Nagi opened the passenger-side door.

“Hodaka, we’re in trouble! The police—”

“Yeah, I know. Go on inside; don’t wait for me.”

I climbed into the car and shut the door. Mr. Suga was sitting in the driver’s seat, wearing black-rimmed glasses, with a hat pulled down low on his head. He leaned back in the seat, not saying anything.

“...Mr. Suga?”

“Oh, the getup?” Still facing forward, Mr. Suga smiled his usual half smile. “I’m in disguise.”

“—”

From the radio, an impassive voice was giving the weather report: “*Temperatures have fallen rapidly since sundown. In the city center, it’s currently fifty-four degrees, a record low for August—*”

Click. Mr. Suga switched the radio off. “The cops stopped by my office a little while ago. They’re treating this as the kidnapping of a minor, apparently. I told ’em I didn’t know anything and showed ’em the door, but I’m still a suspect.”

“A kidnapping?!”

“I hear your folks filed a missing person report? They care about you, kid.” Mr. Suga smiled thinly, lowered his voice, and went on. “And also. The

part about you having a gun. That's a lie, right?"

"Huh?"

"The cops showed me a photo from a security camera. It was a blown-up still from the corner of a parking lot, blurry as hell, but it showed a kid pointing a gun at a grown-up. Once they pointed it out, I gotta say it did kinda look like you."

I couldn't take a full breath. My chest hurt.

I desperately tried to explain. "That was— I just found it! I thought it was a toy, and some delinquents picked a fight with me, so I just wanted to scare them... I already threw it away!"

"What, for real?" Mr. Suga laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. "From what I heard, they suspect you of illegal possession of a firearm."

I felt the blood draining from my face.

Mr. Suga took off his hat and put it on my head. "You can have that. Severance pay."

Severance pay? I heard the words, but the meaning didn't reach my brain.

Mr. Suga still wasn't looking at me. "Listen, don't come by my place anymore, all right? I don't want to wind up as a kidnapper." The rain was pounding on the hood, fierce as a drumroll. "I'm petitioning for custody of my daughter, see. After my wife died, I hit the skids for a while, and her parents took our kid away. Pathetic, I know, but now I'm renegotiating. My income and social rep are real important right now. I'm sorry, but this isn't a good time for me."

He was waiting for my answer. I knew that. I knew, but the words wouldn't come.

Mr. Suga gave a small sigh. It stung, how small that sigh was.

"...Look, kid, go home tomorrow. That'll put everything back to normal, you know? It's easy. Just get on the ferry." He took out his wallet and began counting bills with his fingertips. "It'll work out best for everybody that way."

He pressed several ten-thousand-yen bills into my hand, and then, finally, he looked at my face. I was a pitiful sight, I'm sure, with tears welling in my eyes. Mr. Suga hadn't said my name once in that whole conversation.

"—Time to grow up, kid."

When I opened the door to the apartment, stuff was scattered all over the room. The siblings were cramming their belongings into backpacks.

Hina was still focused on her hands as she explained. “We can’t stay here anymore, so...”

“Huh? But where will you go?”

“I don’t know, but—”

“I’m fine with anywhere!” Master Nagi chirped. “As long as I’m with you, Sis!”

Hina shot him an affectionate glance, then let her eyes fall to her hands again. “Hodaka, you should go back to your parents before the police take you in. You have a home to go back to.”

She was saying the same things as Mr. Suga. The rain was getting louder.

Hina looked at me and smiled, as if she were trying to reassure a little kid.

“It’s okay; we’ll be all right.”

“...!”

My chest tightened. Seeing her smile, hearing her words, my mind was finally clear.

“...I’m not going home.”

The siblings stopped working and stared at me.

I’d remembered what I needed to do. This time, I’d protect both of them.

And my legs stopped trembling, just like that. I drew a deep breath, then firmly told them what I wanted to do.

“Let’s run away together!”

* * *

The rain that day had been getting worse ever since evening, and by nighttime, it might’ve been stronger than anything I’d ever seen.

Rain poured down into the streets like a muddy torrent, as if a faucet in the sky had broken. In distant shots of Tokyo on TV, the spray from the rain hid the foundations of the buildings, and the tops were shrouded in thick mist. They looked like floating ruins.

“A moment ago, an emergency alert for heavy rain was issued for Tokyo,” said the TV. “We may get the sort of rain that comes only once in decades. Take all possible precautions to avoid rivers overflowing their

banks and flooding in low-lying areas. Check your TVs, radios, and online for disaster information from local governments and obey any evacuation orders.”

I changed the channel. At the south gate of Shinjuku Station, a newscaster was yelling, back to the crowd, lashed by the rain. *“Typhoon-level rains have hit right in the middle of the evening rush! We have now had multiple delays on metropolitan trains—”*

I switched channels again. Every station was reporting on the weather.

Several subway stations had begun to flood, and evacuation orders had been issued for areas along the Arakawa and Sumida Rivers. Flights to and from Haneda Airport were getting canceled right and left. The amount of rain that had fallen in one hour was over six inches; manhole covers were blowing off all over the place, and areas behind levees were flooding. There were lines waiting for taxis at lots of stations.

“There is a possibility commuters will be stranded,” the TV was saying. *“Please take immediate steps to keep yourself safe.”*

The breath of the people on TV was white, and everyone was rubbing their arms to keep warm.

“It’s abnormally cold for August. At present, the temperature in Tokyo has fallen below fifty degrees—”

“Frigid air is flowing into the city center from a region of low atmospheric pressure in the north. The temperature has dropped more than twenty-five degrees in the past hour, and it could fall even further—”

The newscasters’ voices were growing graver and graver.

“I repeat, an emergency alert for heavy rain has been issued for Tokyo. This may be the kind of rain that comes only once in decades. Please watch for updates and take immediate action to keep yourselves safe—”

“Centered on the Kanto-Koshin region, even after dawn, active rain clouds will remain overhead—”

“The unseasonably acute drop in temperatures is severe enough to be dangerous to vulnerable populations. Please get your thick jackets out of storage—”

“It’s safe to call this an unprecedented, extremely critical atmospheric anomaly—”

Suddenly depressed, I turned off the TV. I knew it didn’t make any sense, but I felt like everyone was blaming me. Why...? I dropped onto my bed

face-first. I tried to think of the reason.

—It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. But...

I remembered what I'd said to Hina in the park that afternoon. "Weather priestesses are human sacrifices," the priest had said, and I couldn't shake the feeling that telling Hina about it had caused this rain. Even though that made no sense at all. But—

"Hey, Natsumi, where are you going on a night like this?!" my dad yelled after me as picked up my helmet and opened the front door.

* * *

The Yamanote Line train we were on stopped at Ikebukuro Station.

As the conductor made the onboard announcement, he didn't try to disguise the fatigue in his voice.

"Um, due to disruptions in public transportation caused by the heavy rain, we don't currently know when operations on the Yamanote Line will resume. There are widespread delays and suspensions of service across all JR lines. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we request that all passengers arrange for alternative transportation. I repeat..."

"Oh, c'mon, so it's not gonna move after all?"

"Let's get off."

"What do we do now?"

"I'll get my parents to pick us up."

Everyone was grumbling as they got off the train.

"What do we do...?" Hina asked uneasily, and I forced a smile.

"For now, let's find a place to spend the night."

"I'm very sorry, but we have no vacancies at present—"

"Do you have a reservation?"

"We're already full up today."

"It's just the three of you? Where are your parents?"

"We'll need you to show your IDs—"

However, there were no rooms at any of the hotels we went to. I couldn't tell whether they were all truly booked up, or whether they were just suspicious of two high schoolers and a grade-schooler, but we kept getting

turned away. In the end, we even tried going to a shady-looking rental room in the basement of a mixed-use building, but they suspected us, too (“You kids aren’t runaways, are you?”) and chased us off (“Reporting you would be a hassle, so get lost, all right?”).

As we searched for a place to sleep, we made trip after trip through the underground hallway linking the station’s east and west sides. All three of us were carrying big backpacks and wearing our raincoats over them. The temperature was cold enough to make us shiver; the rain was as sharp and cold as it was in winter, and to top it off, the shallow pools of floodwater everywhere in the streets soaked our sneakers completely through. We were freezing, our toes were especially cold, and our packs were heavy. We were exhausted. Running away together was my idea, and yet I couldn’t even find us a place to spend one single night—I was furious with how useless I was.

“Look at that!” Master Nagi called out. He was pointing at the exit to the underground hallway. “Isn’t that snow?”

Startled, we stepped outside. It really was snow, swirling and glinting in the streetlights. When I looked at Hina’s face, her expression was something close to fear. I probably looked the same way. I mean, it was August.

The people on the street were all looking up at the sky, startled. Large snowflakes fell onto the water-covered asphalt, soundlessly creating circular ripples one after another. Now that the trains weren’t running, the road along the tracks had fallen into an eerie silence. The temperature was still falling.

I was wearing short sleeves, and I rubbed my arms under my raincoat. *Is this divine punishment or something?* The thought abruptly crossed my mind.

We’d changed the weather by our own whims, and some godlike figure way up in the sky was angry because we humans hadn’t been content with the weather we were given. Because of our selfish wish for clear skies.

I shook my head. That couldn’t be. But—I remembered what Hina had said.

“Back then, I think I got connected to the sky.”

I looked up and saw thousands of snowflakes over our heads, like summer fireworks.

Hina is connected to this sky?

* * *

By the time I got to Kei's office, the rain had turned to snow. I couldn't believe it.

I parked the Cub behind the building. Regretting my careless decision to wear shorts, I went down the stairs to the office, opened the door, and went in.

"Brrrr! Hey, Kei, it's snowing in August!" I was brushing snow off my shoulders as I spoke. "Huh?"

There was no reply, and I found Kei facedown over the bar counter. The TV on the bar was chattering, its volume turned down low.

"Impossibly, snow is falling in the city center. The heavy rainstorm that began this evening has caused widespread flood damage, but now, as of nine in the evening, it has turned to snow over a large area. According to the forecast, it's expected to turn to rain again in the small hours of the—"

I switched it off. There was a half-empty whiskey on the counter and several cigarette butts in the ashtray. *I wonder what happened.* I watched Kei, fast asleep on the bar. *Come on, you quit smoking ages ago...* He was snoring quietly, and he looked so grumpy. His skin was dry and rough, and there were white hairs on his head and in his stubble. *He's aged a bit, too,* I thought.

Rain the cat was curled up asleep on the stool next to him. His sulky expression reminded me a lot of Kei's, and I cracked up a little.

"Kei, wake up. You're going to catch a cold."

When I shook his shoulder, Kei's eyebrows came together in annoyance. "Asuka..." he murmured.

His voice was so weak and sad. I was a little startled. *So he still dreams about his wife—* Suddenly, I remembered another summer day, four years ago, when we had a small party to celebrate the opening of the office.

The place had only just been remodeled from its days as a bar; it was still practically empty, and the congratulatory flower arrangements stood in a proud row. Moka was not much older than a baby, and I played with her the whole time Kei and Asuka were entertaining their guests. I was still in high school then, so I was probably wearing my uniform. Oh yeah, and after most of the guests had gone home, I'd taken a commemorative photo for the three of them. I remember the window with *K&A Planning* written in the background. Asuka was holding Moka, and Kei was so proud.

"...Natsumi?" Kei was finally awake. He sneezed loudly. "Ugh, damn,

it's cold in here. Let's turn on the heat." When he switched on the heater with the remote, there was a dusty smell, and then warm air started blowing.

I went behind the counter and fixed myself a whiskey and water.

"You're a bona fide old-timer now, huh, Kei?" I commented as I worked.

"When people age"—Kei scrubbed at his face with both hands, just like an older man would—"they forget how to change their priorities about important stuff."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" I sat down on the stool next to Kei's. "By the way, where's Hodaka? Isn't he back yet?"

His expression immediately darkened.

"You ran him off...? What? You're kidding, right?!"

"No, look, the cops came here. You think I could keep a kid like that around?"

"Wha—?"

Kei's got a habit of acting like a real ass when he's feeling guilty. "Everyone knows it's more important to hold on to your way of life than to keep everyone else afloat," he said.

"What? So you quit your no-smoking streak, get drunk, and wallow in guilt?" I picked up Rain from where he slept on the stool and pushed him at Kei's face. "'You're a meowserable old man...' See?! Rain thinks so, too."

Rain backed me up with a lazy little meow.

"Seriously, it's pathetic. The way you're acting is so last century. Can you not sit next to me? I don't want to start smelling like a gross old man, too."

I put Rain down where I'd found him, then moved to the stool on the very end to put us at opposite ends of the counter. *He chased Hodaka out? At night, in weather like this?*

"Geez, Kei, you never follow through on anything. If you're going to throw him out, just don't pick him up in the first place. You're trying to be a big bad tough guy, but you're really just too chicken to let go of common sense. That's the worst type there is."

"What the hell? Oh, that's rich, coming from the girl who ran here to get away from her dad. If you hate common sense so much, then drop the job hunting and be a poet or a traveler or something."

I glared at Kei. He drank a mouthful of whiskey and water, then glared

back at me and went on.

“If I’m pathetic, so are you. That girl—what’s her name, Hina?”

I flinched uncomfortably. He knew we both had guilty consciences.

“You told her that stuff about weather priestesses being human sacrifices, didn’t you? If it’s true, she’s gonna disappear one of these days. You think you can tell her about that, ditch her, and hope everything will be fine?”

“Well, I mean, that was... What was I supposed to do, then?!”

“Huh! Don’t take it so seriously. It’s all just bunk anyway, right?” Half smiling, Kei put a cigarette in his mouth. He was dodging the question. He lit the tip with a lighter, then blew out a full breath of smoke very deliberately. “Although...well, hypothetically—” The blue-tinged smoke thinned and dissolved, like a drop of paint in water. “If sacrificing one human would make the weather go back to normal, I’d say go for it. It ain’t just me; if you’re being honest, you would, too, wouldn’t you? And so would everybody else. Society runs on sacrifices. Somebody always ends up with the short straw. You just don’t see it most of the time.”

“What are you even talking about?”

My voice came out sounding angry. I was getting more and more frustrated—at Kei, who was trying to show off how much he didn’t care when it was obvious he was full of crap, at this crazy weather, and at myself for being convinced by what Kei said on some level. He was right; I’d come all the way here because I couldn’t stand to sit tight at home, and yet all I was doing was drinking liquor and grumbling drunkenly. I was mad at myself for that, too.

I didn’t want to think about anything anymore, and I downed my whiskey and water in one go.

* * *

“Hey, kids, just a minute.”

Someone caught my shoulder from behind, and when I turned around, a shiver crawled up my spine. It was two uniformed policemen.

The three of us had been walking down a downtown street.

“It’s dangerous for children to be out on their own at a time like this. What are you doing? Are you all siblings?”

The sudden interrogation left me floundering, but Hina took a step forward.

“We’re on our way home now. I’m in college, and these two are my little brothers.”

“Hmm. So you’re the big sister? Can I see your student ID?”

“I don’t have it with me.”

Suddenly, I made eye contact with one of the officers, and he reacted with surprise. My goose bumps grew worse. I had a bad feeling about this.

The officer turned his back to me, had some sort of conversation on his radio, then came to stand right in front of me, blocking my view.

“You’re in high school? That’s a really big backpack you’re carrying.” He leaned forward, not even trying to hide that he was staring at my face. “You mind pushing your hood up a bit?”

They couldn’t be looking for me, could they? But then Mr. Suga’s words came back to me: “*They suspect you of illegal possession of a firearm.*”

I whispered to Hina next to me. “Hina.”

“Huh?”

“Run!”

Before I even finished speaking, I’d launched myself into a sprint. It was too late now, but I realized that just being with Hina and Nagi would cause trouble for them.

“Stop!”

Footsteps came after me. I ran for dear life without looking back—until someone promptly grabbed the edge of my backpack. I violently shook the arm off.

“This is obstruction!” the other policeman shouted furiously, tackling me from the side and shoving me down onto the pavement. He almost had me pinned. I fought it for all I was worth.

“Hodaka!” Hina shouted. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her running toward me.

“No, stay away!”

But she body-slammed the officer who was on top of me, knocking him to the ground.

“You little—!” The man’s eyes were blazing with anger. He raised his nightstick.

Impulsively, Hina folded her hands. “Please!” she screamed.

Just then, there was an eardrum-splitting roar, and my vision flashed pure white. Lightning had hit a truck on the shoulder of the road, about fifty yards ahead of us. The impact lifted it into the air for a moment as time slowed to a crawl. A beat later—the truck exploded.

It was chaos all around us. Some people were fleeing the scene, while others were running toward it with their phones out to get a better view.

“...What in the name of—?!”

The police officers had been briefly stunned, but they came to their senses and ran toward the fire.

I looked over at Hina, and she'd frozen up, gazing at the flames. Her hands were folded the way they were when she prayed for clear skies. *No way, did Hina—?* I grabbed her hand before I could even finish that crazy idea.

“Now's our chance—let's go!”

Master Nagi was standing stock-still. I tugged him along with us, and we ran for it. We dashed down alleys, heading straight for the shadows. Before long, we began to hear emergency sirens behind us. The snow was falling thicker now.

“It's twenty-eight thousand yen a night.”

“Huh?”

The middle-aged lady looked up at me through the narrow window. She sounded annoyed just talking to us. I hadn't been expecting that answer, and I couldn't find a reply.

“Like I just said, twenty-eight thousand yen. Can you pay?”

“Uh, oh, yes, we'll pay!”

The place was a run-down love hotel. The three of us were soaked to the skin. The woman at the front desk had glanced at us, but she didn't say anything. We rode a rickety elevator up to the eighth floor, used our key to unlock a heavy iron door, went into the room, and locked it. Immediately, we all sank down right where we were. We couldn't take any more.

“Haaaaah...” All three of us heaved deep sighs.

“Guess I'm an actual wanted man...,” I muttered gloomily—

“Pretty awesome!” Master Nagi gave me a thumbs-up.

“Huh? Really?!”

“Heh-heh!” Hina cracked up, and we all giggled. “I had no idea how we were going to get out of that one...”

“Well, yeah! Hodaka was totally gonna get arrested!”

“That was priceless!”

“I was seriously panicking. And hey, it’s not funny!”

We laughed louder and louder. As we did, all the fatigue that had built up inside us dissolved away, along with our anxiety. It was like having 2 percent left on your cell phone battery and managing to plug it into a power source just in time. We could see each other coming back to life.

“This room is so big!” Master Nagi yelled. “The bed’s huge! And the bath’s giant!” Everything about the room seemed to impress him.

The room was a chic one, coordinated in beige, black, and gold, and the decoration scheme was quiet and composed. Nagi filled the bath, and Hina cheerfully boiled some water and made tea for us. I took the opportunity to shove the adult video program menu and sundry other things I couldn’t let the siblings see into the back of the closet. It was probably the most suspenseful thing I’d done since coming to Tokyo.

“Sis, Hodaka!” Nagi yelled to us from the bathroom. “Let’s all go in together!”

Hina and I both spit out our tea at the same time. “Bathe by yourself!” we chorused.

“Awww! Then, Hodaka, let’s go in together as the guy team.”

“Huh?!”

“Have fun.” Hina was laughing.

“So warm...”

Master Nagi and I soaked up to our shoulders in a bathtub full to the brim of hot water.

“Hmm? What’s this?” Nagi pressed a button on the wall. Suddenly, the bathroom lights went out in favor of lights inside the bathtub, and jets of bubbles started streaming in. It was a whirlpool bath.

“Whoa, cool!”

“That tickles!”

We played around in the water for a bit.

“Next bath!”

The siblings high-fived each other. While Hina was soaking, we got dinner ready. When we opened the cupboard under the TV, we discovered a

vending machine full of hot snacks and instant foods. *Yakisoba*, *takoyaki*, cup noodles, curry rice, fries, chicken nuggets. Just looking at the paper packages made my mouth water.

“Whoa, there’s all sorts of stuff! Hodaka, which should we get?” Master Nagi asked me excitedly.

“Let’s just get all of them, Master!”

“Huh? Can we?!”

“Yeah, I got severance pay!”

“Yesssss!” My mentor yelled toward the bath. “Siiiiis! We’re having a feast tonight!”

“I can’t wait!” Hina answered from the bath. The heavy echo in her voice was enough to make my heart beat faster for some reason.

While we were popping the snacks in the microwave one after another, Hina opened the door of the bathroom. “I’m done with my bath.”

“Oh, welcome back,” I muttered, then gulped involuntarily. She was wearing a pure-white bathrobe, and her long hair was pulled over to one side and wrapped in a towel. Her pale skin was flushed faintly pink. Realizing I’d been staring for a full five seconds, I hastily tore my eyes away. Hina didn’t seem to notice; she was too busy squealing happily over the hot snacks lined up on the table.

“Thanks for the food!”

The three of us spoke and clapped our hands together in unison.

“The *yakisoba*’s so good!”

“So’s the *takoyaki*!”

“And the curry!”

We all had to praise the food, which was unbelievably delicious. We passed the boxes of snacks around and around, making sure everybody tried everything. We put the chicken nuggets in the curry to make chicken curry and freaked out (“This is amazing! The discovery of a lifetime!”), then made the cup noodles in only two minutes and lost our minds over that, too (“It’s, like, super–al dente! Way better than a restaurant!”).

After dinner, we had a karaoke competition, and after that, we had a pillow fight, hurling pillows and cushions at each other as hard as we could. Whether we missed or hit or got hit, we loved every second of it. I was so happy and having so much fun that I almost wanted to cry.

If the gods exist, I thought as I flung a pillow.

Please.

This is enough.

We'll be all right now.

We can get by.

So please don't give us any more than this and don't take anything away.

My pillow hit Hina in the face, and her counterstrike landed squarely on mine.

Gods, please, please.

As we laughed together, I prayed more fervently than I'd ever prayed in my life.

Let us stay like this just a little longer.

The digital clock by my pillow made a tiny electronic click as midnight arrived.

At some point during our crazy antics, Master Nagi had conked out on the bed right by the wall. The mattress was huge, and Hina and I were lying side by side on our backs. Hina smelled like the same shampoo I'd used, a fact I was proud of for some reason. The room was mostly dark, and the only light came from the dim yellow glow of the bedside lamp.

The snow seemed to have turned into rain again; I could hear it pouring down outside the window. It didn't sound as violent as before, though. It was much softer and friendlier, like a distant drum being played just for us, traveling across vast reaches of time and space to find us here. The sound knew both our past and our future, and no matter what we resolved or chose, it would never blame us. It silently accepted all of history.

Live, the sound was saying. Live. Live. Just live.

"Hina." Encouraged by the sound of the rain, I took out the ring box. "Happy eighteenth birthday."

I set it down on the sheets. Hina stared at me, startled.

"It's nothing expensive, but I found one that seemed like it would look good on you."

She opened the box. Slowly, a smile spread across her face like a flower blooming.

"Thank you...!"

I gave a brief, awkward grin.

“Hey, Hodaka...” Suddenly, Hina’s voice lowered. “Do you want this rain to stop?”

“Huh?”

Glancing up from the ring, Hina looked at me. Some sort of emotion rippled across her faintly blue-tinted eyes, deep beneath the surface. I didn’t know what it was, though, and I simply nodded.

“—Yeah.”

Just then, like an answer from the sky, there was a low rumble of thunder. Maybe it had struck something; the bedside lamp flickered. Slowly, Hina looked away from me and lay back, gazing up at the ceiling. *Oh*— Then I realized what I’d seen in her eyes.

“I’m a sacrifice, apparently,” she said.

“...Huh?”

“Natsumi told me what happens to sun women. She said they disappear, and then the weather goes back to normal. We’re sacrifices.”

I realized that emotion had been despair.

“Wha...? No way.” I gave a clumsy smile. That couldn’t be true. But my chest was filling up with regret. “No, those guys never know what they’re talking about... That couldn’t actually... I mean, disappear? There’s just no —”

As if to silence me, Hina sat up and silently undid the belt of her bathrobe. Slowly, she withdrew her left arm from the sleeve. I couldn’t look away. Before long, the left side of her chest was exposed.

“...!”

The bedside lamp was shining through it.

Half her body was transparent.

The area from her left shoulder to her breast was as clear as water, and the lamplight reflected inside her body, glowing faintly through her skin. I just stared at her, dumbfounded.

“...Hodaka,” Hina finally said.

Tearing my eyes away from her body, I looked at her face. Although she seemed ready to burst into tears, she suddenly smiled softly.

“What exactly are you looking at?”

“I’m not looking at any—!” I started to say on reflex—but it was no good. *No, I can’t cry. I can’t—* “I’m looking at you, Hina...”

The tears welled up and overflowed, as if my eyes had broken. I desperately wiped them away with both hands and pressed my fists against my eyes, wanting to shove the tears back until they'd never been there at all.

"...Why are you crying?" Hina smiled gently.

Even when you're dying, you smile. I cried harder.

"It was nothing at all at first, but after a certain point, I started noticing. The more I wished for the sun, the clearer my body grew."

Why hadn't I seen the sadness in her expression when she looked up at the sky through the palm of her hand? Or had I seen it after all and just pretended I hadn't?

"If this keeps up and I die..." Hina's voice was very, very gentle. "I'm sure summer will go back to normal again. Take care of Nagi, okay?"

"No!" I screamed. "You can't, Hina; you're not going to disappear! We're gonna live together, all three of us!"

It sounded so childish that even I had trouble believing there was hope, but I couldn't find any other words.

"Hodaka..." Hina looked at me with concern.

"Hina, let's promise each other."

I took her left hand and slipped the ring onto the fourth finger. The ring was silver, in the shape of a little wing. Her finger was faintly transparent, too. Through her skin, I could see tiny air bubbles welling up in the water.

"..."

Hina gazed at the ring on her finger and exhaled wordlessly. She turned to me again, and her eyes seemed about to brim over.

I knew I was talking like a little kid, but I still desperately tried to reassure her. "I'll work, okay?! I'll make enough money for us to live a good life! You already quit the sunshine girl stuff, so your body's bound to go back to normal in no time!"

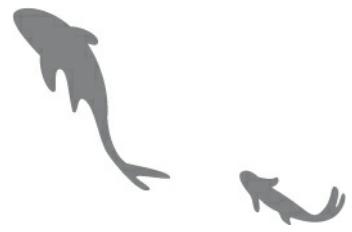
Tears finally spilled from Hina's eyes, and a wave of guilt washed over me as I realized I'd made her cry. Then, out of nowhere, she hugged me.

"...!"

She softly stroked my head, comforting me. There was nothing I could do, and I put my arms around her, squeezing her tighter. I fervently wished it would be enough to keep her here. I believed it. I convinced myself that was how it had to work. That was how the world was made. If I wished hard enough, it was bound to become true.

I thought it; I wished it; I prayed it.

Crying, Hina kept stroking my hair, and in the distance, thunder rumbled again.



CHAPTER NINE

Clear Skies

That night, I had a dream.

I dreamed about something that happened when I was still on the island.

That day, I was pedaling as hard as I could to cancel out the pain from where my dad had hit me. It had been raining on the island then, too. Thick rain clouds were rolling across the sky, but several rays of light lanced down through gaps in the cloud cover. I wanted to get out of there, to get into that light, and I biked down the coastal road for all I was worth. For just a moment, I thought I had it! ...But I was at the edge of a seaside cliff, and the sunlight flowed away, far out to sea.

I'll go into that light, I decided then...

And when I did, I found you.

* * *

That night, I had a dream.

I dreamed about the day I first saw you.

You were all by yourself in that McDonald's late at night, and you reminded me of a lost kitten. But that lost kitten was the one who found the meaning in my life.

I met you and started working. Every time I caused a sunburst, more people smiled, and I continued my work as a sunshine girl because those smiles made me happy. It wasn't anybody's fault; it was a choice I made. Even if I realized too late to turn back...meeting you made me really happy. If I hadn't met you, I couldn't have loved myself or the world as much as I do now.

Right now, you're sleeping next to me, exhausted after crying so much. There are tear tracks on your cheeks. Outside the window, I can hear fierce

rain and thunder like a distant drum. There's a small ring on my left hand. A present you gave me, the first ring I've ever gotten—and probably the last. Softly, I lay my hand over yours as you sleep. I can feel its gentle warmth, like the sun at night.

Before long, like waves are rippling out from our layered hands, I can feel myself becoming one with everything. My boundaries are dissolving into the world. A peculiar happiness and keen sorrow spread all through me.

I don't want this, I think, even as euphoria fills me. Not yet. I haven't told you anything yet. I haven't said *Thank you*, or *I love you*. I frantically rake my spreading, thinning consciousness together, try to bind my thoughts and emotions to myself somehow. I speak. I find my throat, then try to remember the sensation of air against it. *Hodaka*.

"Hodaka." My voice is small and hoarse, sending only the tiniest vibrations into the air. "Hodaka, Hodaka, so—"

I can't even feel my throat anymore. I'm disappearing. I'm vanishing. I summon up the last of my strength, trying to make my words reach your ears.

"Don't cry, Hodaka."

"—!"

My eyes open.

I've been asleep. Dreaming.

Slowly, I sit up. Everything around me is covered in bright-white fog. A fine mist is falling with a noise like thin sheets of paper softly rubbing together.

...What was I doing?

I can't remember. The only thing inside me is the vestige of something that's been diluted with water.

For the past little while, transparent fish have been drifting around me. As I gaze absently at the sky fish, I suddenly notice something's there. There's no temperature within my body—except for one place that's just a little bit warm.

It's the ring finger of my left hand. I hold it up in front of my eyes. There's a small silver wing wrapped around it.

"...Hodaka." My lips move.

Hodaka? The word warms my whole body, just a little.

Splish.

With a startlingly loud sound, a raindrop falls onto my left hand. My hand, made of water, trembles lightly and swallows the drop.

Splish, splish, plish.

Raindrops fall, one after another. My outline shivers as ripples spread all through me, colliding with other ripples to create still more. If I keep rippling this badly, my body's going to break down. My anxiety grows.

Just then, a raindrop strikes my aqueous ring finger, and the ring slips through it, as if the water has pushed it off me.

"Aaah!"

Impulsively, I grab the falling ring with my right hand.

"——!"

But the ring slips through that hand, too, and vanishes into the ground. Despair rises in me, and for a moment, I remember you vividly as my feelings burst into color again—but then they fade and melt away, leaving only a pale sadness behind.

I don't even know what's making me sad anymore, but still I cry and cry. The fish keep flitting around me, silently.

Before long, the rain stops, and the mist begins to lift.

I'm on a grassy plain. Above me is a blue and perfectly clear sky. The rustling plain shines in the dazzling sunlight.

I am in a field on top of a cloud, invisible to anyone on the surface of the earth. I am blue and white; I am wind and water. I've become part of the world, and without any joy or sorrow, like any other natural phenomenon, I simply shed my tears.

* * *

I woke up with a jolt.

My heart was thudding away chaotically. My temples were pulsing so hard I worried they'd burst open. I was sweating heavily all over. The sound of my own blood surged in my ears like a muddy torrent.

I was looking up at a ceiling I didn't recognize. *Where am I?* I thought, and gradually, the noise in my ears weakened enough to let me pick up different sounds.

The twittering of sparrows. The noise of cars. The faint voices of people.
The sounds of a town in the morning.

Hina.

Suddenly, I remembered everything. I looked over to where Hina had been sleeping next to me.

“...!”

All that was there was her bathrobe, like a cast-off shell. Hina had disappeared.

“Hina! Hina, where are you?!”

I jumped out of bed. I checked the washroom, peeked into the bathroom, even opened the closet. She wasn’t anywhere.

“Hodaka, what’s the matter?” Master Nagi was awake, rubbing his eyes; he sounded anxious.

“Hina’s not here! I can’t find her!”

“Huh?!” Nagi’s startled expression abruptly shifted into sorrow. “...I was dreaming up until just a minute ago.”

“Huh?”

“I dreamed my sister was praying for good weather. Then she rose into the air and disappeared into the sky...”

I gulped. The image of Hina rising into the sky from the torii on the abandoned building surfaced in my mind as if I’d just seen it. Come to think of it, I’d had the same dream—

Bam, bam!

Suddenly, someone pounded on the door.

“Open up! Open this door!” a man’s deep voice called. *That voice*— As I desperately tried to remember, the lock released with a *click*, and the door opened.

Police officers entered, still wearing their shoes. There was a male officer in uniform, a female officer, and a big man in a suit and a regent-style pompadour.

“You’re Hodaka Morishima, correct?” Pompadour planted himself in front of me, holding up his police ID. His eyes were chilly. “As you’re probably aware, you’ve been reported missing. You’re also suspected of illegal possession of a firearm and explosives. Would you come down to the station with us?”

I couldn’t answer. There was nowhere to run.

Just then, Master Nagi shouted. “—Lemme go, hey, let go!”

“It’s all right, come on. Let’s go together.”

The lady police officer had just caught Nagi as he tried to get away from her on the bed.

“Nagi!”

I tried to run over to help him, but a jolt of intense pain ran through my arm, and somebody shoved my face into the bed.

“Settle down,” an irritable voice said from above me. Pompadour had twisted my arm up behind my back.

When they hauled me out of the hotel, I felt blinded.

A bright sun illuminated the town in sharp contrast. The sunlight shone as white as an overexposed photograph, and the deep, dark shadows were like gaping holes in the picture. Above me, the sky was a vivid, cloudless blue—too blue, almost fake looking. This blue sky was a counterfeit. The glaring sun stabbed violently at my eyes until they stung and watered. Everywhere, the cicadas were singing in a manic frenzy. It felt like being harassed by a whole crowd at once.

“Come on, walk,” Pompadour said over his shoulder. The uniformed police officer was right on my heels. When they pushed me out onto the asphalt, I stepped into ankle-deep water. The whole road was covered. The entire town was one giant puddle.

“They said it’ll be a few more days before the water drains from the city center,” the officer said behind me, a note of kindness in his voice. “None of the trains are running, and central Tokyo’s a mess, but it sure is nice to see blue sky, isn’t it? I hear the sun’s out over the entire Kanto region for the first time in three months.”

Blinking back the pain in my eyes, I glared at the sky. I searched that perfectly spotless blue for some trace of her. I couldn’t believe it was true, and yet I’d known this would happen—the two feelings spun around and around in my head.

“Hurry up, move it!” Pompadour snapped from where he stood beside the patrol car.

“—!”

Just then, something glinted overhead. I strained my eyes. There it was

again. A small something fell near my feet with a tiny splash. I crouched, putting my hand into the water.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Pompadour sounded irritated.

“...Aaah!”

My skin crawled—it was a ring. The thing that had come falling down from the sky was a little silver wing-shaped ring, the one I’d slipped onto Hina’s finger.

Hina, a sacrifice...? “Hina! It’s not true, right?!”

Without thinking, I straightened up.

“Hey!” The uniformed policeman grabbed my shoulder. I didn’t care; I tried to run. The officer pinned both of my arms in a nelson hold, but I struggled and yelled at the sky for all I was worth.

“Hina, come back! Hina, Hinaaaa!”

But the sky didn’t so much as tremble. My voice just disappeared into the transparent expanse.

“...All right.”

In the seat next to me, Pompadour heaved a big sigh, as if this was all a big hassle to him.

“Have you decided to calm down?”

The police car was driving slowly over the flooded streets.

“We’ll get the details at the station, but there’s something we need to confirm now.”

I was looking down, and I didn’t respond.

Pompadour didn’t care as he went on. “Hina Amano, the girl who ran away with you last night. She’s fifteen, right?”

“Huh...?” I raised my head in spite of myself.

Pompadour was eyeing me with total disinterest. “Any idea where she might have gone?”

“Hina’s fifteen...? Not eighteen?”

Pompadour’s eyebrows rose slightly. “She lied about her age on the résumés she sent to the places where she worked part-time. I’m sure she did it to keep the bills paid, but Hina Amano is still in her third year of middle school. She hasn’t finished her compulsory education....You didn’t know that?”

“Oh, come on...” The words slipped out. “So *I* was the oldest one this whole time.”

I heard Pompadour *tsk*, and I realized tears were rolling down my face.

“All right, kid,” the detective said, making no attempt to hide his impatience. “I’m asking you if you have any idea where she went.”

The inside of my chest flared hot, like it was on fire. This—this was rage. I was furious.

“Where’s Hina?” I glared at Pompadour. “Hina’s gone. It’s how we got this weather. But nobody knows anything; they’re just enjoying it like a bunch of idiots...!”

Tears were working their way up again. Crying was all I’d been doing lately. It was pathetic, and I pulled my knees up to my chest.

“It just isn’t fair...” The words slipped out like something a petulant little kid would say, which made me tear up even more.

“We don’t have time for this...”

“You think we’ll need an expert medical witness?”

The detectives were whispering together. Outside the window of the patrol car, the sun-drenched city flowed past, glinting and glaring.

* * *

My head was throbbing with every heartbeat.

Lately, even a good night’s sleep wasn’t enough to get all the booze out of my system. I’d only just woken up, but I was already limp and worn out. On top of that, the world outside the window was so blinding, I couldn’t get my eyes to focus.

But I couldn’t stop staring at the TV. Rubbing my eyes, I flipped through channel after channel.

News reporters are generally supposed to just, y’know, report, but right now, every single one of ’em was over the moon.

“For what must be the first time in several months, the sun is out over the whole Kanto Plain!”

On TV, the skyscrapers in the city center looked almost like gravestones with sharp lines between the light and shadows. On another channel, kids were running around on a watery street.

“Last night’s heavy rains seem like a dream. As of eight o’clock in the morning, the temperature is over seventy-five degrees—”

“There is flooding in many areas, centered on the Arakawa River region. The depth of the water ranges from roughly four inches in some areas to nearly twenty inches in low-lying—”

“Operations are suspended on all urban JR and private railway lines, and efforts to restore service are underway. We still don’t have a complete picture of the damage done last night, but it sounds as though it will be at least a few days before the transportation infrastructure is restored—”

“Still, spirits are high under the first clear blue sky in ages!”

True, everyone out on the street was wearing a smile. *Does the weather really change people’s moods this much?* I mused absently, as if this had nothing to do with me. As for me—I wasn’t real happy at all for some reason. For the past little while, I’d felt a strange twinge of regret, the kind you feel when you step on a bug and kill it without meaning to. *You feel it, too, don’t you?* I wanted to ask Natsumi, but she was out.

I heaved a big sigh. No point in dwelling on feelings without a cause. Or listening to strangers celebrate. I switched off the TV and stood up, then wandered over to the window. Water had built up in the window well; it looked like an aquarium out there. The office was in a half basement, and there was about three feet of rainwater between the glass and the concrete wall outside. The window’s thin sash had cracks in several places, and water was trickling in.

Without giving it any real thought, I set my fingers on the frame. Thanks to the water pressure, it didn’t budge. I put a little more force into my fingers.

The glass suddenly shattered, and water poured into the office. The stream knocked down the pile of books by the window, washing documents far back into the room. I stared at it, dumbfounded. By the time the water finally stopped coming in, the office was flooded ankle-deep.

“Daddy, did you look outside?!”

When I answered the phone, the call was from Moka. *The voice of a little kid is like a breath of life itself*, I thought, the way I did every time I heard it.

“It’s sunny! Amazing, huh?! Hey, I wanna go to the park again!”

I could hear the joy in her voice. Kids her age were so lucky—believing

everything in the world was put there just for you, certain that when you smiled, the whole world smiled right along with you; convinced that when you cried, the world was out to get you.

When had I lost it? Wonder if the kid—if Hodaka ever outgrew it?

“—Yeah,” I said. “Daddy’d love to take you to the park today. Try asking your grandma, Moka.”

“*‘kay! Oh, hey, Daddy? Yesterday, I had an amazing dream!’*”

“Hmm? What about?” Even as I asked, a chill ran up my arms. *Damn, and I was trying so hard to ignore it.*

“I dreamed Hina was praying for sun!”

I knew it. I finally gave up and remembered. That’s right; I’d had a dream, too. The sunshine girl was rising into the sky from the roof of a building with a torii gate on it.

And out of nowhere, I wondered. Had everybody in Tokyo had that same dream? Somewhere in their hearts, did they all know this sky had cost somebody’s life?

“...Oh yeah? Maybe she did,” I replied hoarsely.

In my mind, I told myself it couldn’t possibly be true, pressing the words into my mind like the forceful strokes of a ballpoint pen.

* * *

The patrol car stopped outside a police station right by Ikebukuro Station.

They dragged me out of the car, then marched me through the building with one police officer in front of me and another one behind me and into a gloomy hallway lined with doors all close together. The plates beside the doors read INTERROGATION ROOM.

“...Um, Mr. Detective?” I asked, bracing myself.

“...What?” Pompadour turned around, glowering coldly down at me.

I drew a deep, deliberate breath, then blurted out the speech I’d prepared in the patrol car. “I—I want you to let me go look for Hina. She’s helped me out all this time, and it’s my turn to go help her. Once I find her, I’ll come right back here, I swear, so—”

“We’ll listen to what you have to say...”

As Pompadour spoke, his expression didn’t change even a hair. He

opened the door in front of me.

“...inside. Move!”

A hand pushed my back, and my feet carried me inside. It was a cramped interrogation room, like the ones you see on TV shows. There was a small table, a lamp, and two folding metal chairs facing each other. Behind me, the detective and the officer were talking in low voices.

“Where’s Yasui?”

“He’s checking out the Yamabuki-cho angle.”

“Tell him we’re about to start the inquiry.”

“Understood, sir.”

Impulsively, I made up my mind.

I lowered my head, ducked out of the room between the door and the officer, then booked it back the way we’d come.

“Wha...?! Hey, stop!”

A second later, I heard an angry yell behind me, but I didn’t look back and leaped down the stairs. I put my hands out, catching myself on the landing, then ran on down to the first floor.

“Catch that kid!”

Several people looked at me, startled. The station wasn’t big, and if I got through the lobby right in front of me, I’d be at the exit.

“Stop!”

A security guard with a wooden sword sprang out from beside the exit, and as I tried to avoid him, my foot slipped.

“Aaaaaaugh!”

I fell, but by sheer accident, I slid right between the guard’s legs. Scrambling to my feet, I dashed out into the street, paying no attention to the traffic. Several car horns blared, and someone yelled “Damn idiot!” from a truck that had been making a left. I ignored them and ran for dear life, without even a glance over my shoulder.

I was as shocked as anyone as I ran: *Are you kidding me?!* It was a miracle; I’d escaped from a police station. At this rate, though, they’d catch me again before long. I needed some sort of transportation.

I spotted a bicycle on a corner I was passing, and I jumped onto it. I kicked up the stand, but as I tried to ride away, something caught with a jolt. The wheel was chained to the guardrail with a bike lock.

“Dammit!”

I was starting to panic. When I looked back the way I'd come, Pompadour was bearing down on me with a face like thunder. I glanced around frantically. There were uniformed officers coming out of the streets on both sides, too, trying to trap me between them. And just then—

“Hodaka!”

Startled, I turned toward the voice. A woman was speeding toward me on a pink Cub, a yellow scarf flapping behind her.

“Wha—?!”

It was Natsumi. She screeched to a halt right in front of me and yelled in confusion, “Kid, what on earth are you doing?!”

“I’m going to where Hina is—!”

Natsumi’s eyes widened in surprise, and then—unless I was seeing things, her lips turned up in a smile. “Get on!”

“Stop, both of you!”

Right in front of the detective, the bike took off with me on it.

“Damn kid!”

Pompadour’s yell receded behind us. Natsumi sped into a narrow alley. There was water on the road everywhere, and the Cub sent up big goutts of it as we went. Before I knew it, the brightness of the sun wasn’t stinging my eyes anymore.

“Ms. Natsumi, why—?”

As I spoke, I was clinging to her so I wouldn’t get thrown off by her rough driving. Natsumi answered without looking back. “I got a call from Nagi! He said Hina had disappeared, and you’d been arrested!”

“Where is he?!”

“In custody at the children’s welfare center.”

Just then, I heard a police siren coming up behind us.

“Don’t tell me they’re out here after us—”

“This is hilarious!” Natsumi gave a rather hysterical laugh. Pulling on the goggles that had been sitting on top of her helmet, she said, “Guess we’re fugitives now!” and gunned the engine. “All right, kid, where we going?” She sounded like she was having the time of her life.

The temperature was rising rapidly. The sharp wail of the police siren was coming closer, through the energetic chorus of cicadas. At the far edge of what I could see, the skyscrapers of Shinjuku shimmered like a reflection in water.

* * *

The building was next to a big park. I was expecting something less ordinary.

Once I told the front desk why I was there, the receptionist said, “Please write your address and full name here,” and handed me a visitor list. I saw that the name *Kana Sakura* was written in the next space up. *What a jerk!* I thought. *You can’t just steal somebody’s last name!* As payback, I wrote *Ayane Hanazawa* and put down a fake address.

“He’s a popular fellow,” commented the white-haired old guy at the front desk. “He just got here, but you’re already his second visitor.”

“What, really?”

I smiled and bowed, brushing my hair back behind my ears as it fell over my cheeks. Long hair is insanely annoying.

The old guy seemed nice. He smiled at me and said, “Go ahead; you’re all set.”

“Ayane! You came?” Nagi greeted me with a smile as I opened the door that said INTERVIEW ROOM.

I was happy to see he looked as cheerful as usual. Yeah—no matter what’s going on, Nagi’s always fine. He’s been through more than anybody, but he’s still the kindest and smartest person ever. And I’m the one who knows that best.

Kana was sitting primly opposite Nagi; she shot me a sneaky glare, then gave me a fake smile. I lifted my lips back at her.

Nagi briskly introduced us to each other, since we hadn’t officially met before.

“Kana, this is Ayane. Ayane, this is Kana.”

I knew. We’d passed each other at the bus stop several times. Kana Hanazawa, with her long, soft hair, was in her fourth year of grade school, a year below me. Infuriatingly, she was Nagi’s current girlfriend. Still, I was the older one, so I had to be mature about it. “It’s nice to meet you,” I said cordially.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Kana said, bowing modestly.

Then Nagi gestured toward an adult who’d been sitting by the wall, blank-

faced, the whole time. She was a young woman, much younger than I'd been imagining, but she had very stubborn-looking, thick eyebrows. *Oh, so this person is—*

"This is Ms. Sasaki, a police officer. She's the one who brought me here. She says she'll stay with me all day today!"

"What?! Wow, Nagi, you're like a VIP!" I chirped in a particularly high-pitched voice to hide how much I hated that police lady.

"Thank you for all your help!" Kana and I said in unison and bowed, and the police officer nodded back wordlessly. *Mean old lady.*

"Thanks so much for coming, you two! I know it was pretty sudden. You were probably surprised."

Nagi was sitting on a kiddie chair. The room was small; it had a bookshelf with the kind of picture books you'd see at a library, along with building blocks and other toys. On the wall was a large poster that said *Protecting Children's Futures Together*.

"You can say that again!" we chorused.

"Yeah, when I heard the government had you, I thought my heart would stop!" I said.

"Seriously! My heart's still pounding like you wouldn't believe. Here, Nagi, feel!" Kana leaned forward.

She's telling him to touch her chest?! Ugh, this girl's really going for it.

The officer guarding us looked taken aback.

"Ooooh, it really is!" I promptly said, grabbing Kana's chest hard.

Kana glared angrily up at me, and Nagi gave a charming laugh. The officer watched us, confused by our social dance. Kana's heart really was racing. She was nervous, too.

That was when Nagi sent Kana a swift wink, and Kana gave a small nod. It was the signal. Slowly, she walked over to stand in front of the police officer.

"U-um..." She fidgeted and faltered, and the officer looked at her questioningly.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, uh... This is the first time I've ever been on a visit like this, and I'm nervous..."

"Yes...?"

"Um... I gotta go..."

“Oh!” The officer’s face broke into a relieved smile. *So that’s what this is about*, she was probably thinking. “Yes, yes, it’s this way.”

The door clanked shut. The only ones in the room were Nagi and me. *Finally!*

We both got up from our chairs and started to strip off our clothes.

“Sorry, I really owe you one!” Nagi had already taken off his parka. He wasn’t smiling like usual, and I could tell he was nervous, too.

“Geez, Nagi, what are you even doing? I can’t believe you called your ex-girlfriend for help!” I complained, taking off the shawl around my shoulders and my long wig. My actual hair was short, only about as long as Nagi’s.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into this. But you were the only one I could count on, Ayane.”

I knew that. To be honest, I was glad to hear from him.

“There!” I hid my awkwardness behind a moody pout and handed the wig to Nagi, then unfastened the belt on my dress. “Turn around. I’m taking this off, too!”

Please let Project: Rescue Nagi go well. I hoped the gods would hear my wish as I stripped off the dress.

* * *

When did this little guy get so heavy?

I was carrying Rain under my arm; he was unresisting, limp, and relaxed. Probably wasn’t worried about anything. I tried to open the office door with one hand. The pressure from all the water on the floor made the door heavy, and I had to shove it with my shoulder to get it open. I was greeted by scorching sunlight and the deafening song of cicadas.

“—Mr. Keisuke Suga. Thanks for your help last night.”

When I was halfway up the narrow outside stairs, somebody spoke above my head. I looked up and saw the detective who’d come by the office late yesterday.

“...Again?” I gave a big, dramatic sigh. “Well, it looks like summer is finally back to normal.”

My sarcastic reply had no effect on the middle-aged detective—what was his name? Yasui? He used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his forehead,

beneath his salt-and-pepper hair. A young uniformed police officer stood behind him mutely.

“I told you everything I know last night,” I said as I set Rain down on the asphalt. The cat peered up at me, confused. *Your master’s not here anymore, so go wherever you want*, I informed him with my eyes.

“Would you let us take a gander around your office?” Detective Yasui asked while he and the police officer passed me, heading downstairs. “Well, I’ll be. It’s flooded. Tough break,” he muttered without any sympathy that I could hear.

“Hey, whoa! I didn’t say yes, all right? There’s nobody there!”

The detective and officer stopped in front of the door. “Well, I’m actually pretty embarrassed to say this, but...,” Detective Yasui began, watching me. He was testing me. “That runaway we asked you about—we found him this morning. We took him into custody and brought him down to the station. And then, to tell you the truth—”

I stuffed my emotions down, faked disinterest, and kept my expression neutral. After a long pause to keep me in suspense, the detective went on awkwardly.

“He made a break for it, you see—ran right out of the station. That one’s never happened before.”

“...!”

I wasn’t confident I was managing to keep my face blank anymore. Rain gave a worried-sounding mew.

* * *

“An abandoned building in Yoyogi?!” I shouted back to Hodaka behind me. I couldn’t actually see them, but I could hear police sirens constantly, sometimes coming closer, sometimes receding.

“Yeah, Hina said that was where she became a sunshine girl! She said she got connected to the sky there!”

“...!”

When Hodaka said that, a near-forgotten memory of last night rose in my mind again. Come to think of it, I’d dreamed about Hina praying and floating into the sky. If that was in Yoyogi, it wasn’t all that far from here.

“So if I go there, I’m sure—”

“Get down!” I yelled, ducking suddenly.

“Waugh!”

A fallen telephone pole blocked the alley, and the Cub just barely managed to slip under it. The road was littered with evidence of last night’s torrential rain: building materials blocking the way, scattered branches, fallen trees and signs, empty abandoned cars. As I rode through back streets, avoiding the obstacles, the wide avenue up ahead of us got closer. Abruptly, the noise of the police cars grew louder.

“Oh, shoot!”

I’d shot out onto a four-lane road right in front of a patrol car with a wailing siren, and it stayed on my tail.

“*You, on the Cub! Stop!*” a threatening voice yelled at us through the car’s megaphone, but I didn’t care what he said. There was no way I could stop now.

“It’s that detective!” Hodaka said. We were coming up on a big intersection. That was the corner of Mejiro Station. *Right around here, I’m pretty sure there’s a—*

“Hang on!”

As I shouted to Hodaka behind me, I gunned it for all I was worth. I zipped diagonally across the lanes, and we darted right in front of a truck that was making a right turn into the intersection.

“Waaaaaaaugh!” Hodaka screamed. We slid past the truck by the skin of our teeth, and the Cub swerved into a narrow stairway in the gap between two buildings. For a moment, we were airborne. *Crash!* The Cub hit the landing, putting its suspension to work, then rattled down more stairs. The dumbfounded faces of pedestrians skimmed by us, and then we popped out onto a narrow one-way street running alongside the tracks.

“Holy crap! Hey, am I awesome or what?!” I yelled in excitement. I felt as if I’d just jumped out of an airplane; adrenaline was surging through me. I couldn’t stop laughing.

Hodaka, who was still clinging to my stomach, sounded scared: “Uh, Ms. Natsumi?!” The police sirens were receding rapidly.

I just grinned. “Oh my god, that was so cool! Damn, that was *fun*! I think I’ve got a knack for this!”

Just then, I had the most brilliant idea.

“—Oh, hey!” *I’ve got it! This is the work I was cut out for!* “Maybe I’ll be a motorcycle cop!”

Hodaka yelled back tearfully. “They’ll never hire you after this!”

Oh. He had a point.

Well, job hunting didn’t matter now.

Yoyogi, here we come! I pulled myself together and squeezed the handlebars tight.

* * *

“Far as I can tell, the boy ran off to look for the girl who was with him.”

I leaned beside the bar counter, glaring at Detective Yasui as he scanned the office. I’d hoped he’d go home faster if I showed him that nobody was in there, but the guy didn’t seem to be leaving anytime soon.

“It’s so strange.” The detective looked up at the window. “According to him, the girl vanished in exchange for this weather.”

“Ha-ha.” I forced a laugh. “What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t tell me the cops are buying that bull—”

“No, no, we don’t believe it,” the detective said, laughing.

He put a hand on the pillar to get a better look at something. That pillar—

“But you know—he misses her enough to ruin his future for her.” The detective crouched down. He was examining the pillar, smiling. “Almost makes me wish I had a girl I cared about like that.”

Moka’s heights from every year she’d lived here, up until the age of three, were carved into that pillar. Asuka’s writing was there, too. Both the letters and the memories were there, as vivid as if it had all been just a few days ago.

“Not sure why you’re telling me this,” I told the detective glumly.

Somebody he’d go that far to meet. Did Hodaka have somebody like that? ...Did I? Somebody I’d sacrifice everything just to see again? Somebody I’d want to see even if the whole world laughed at me and told me I was wrong?

“Mr. Suga...,” the detective murmured.

I had, once upon a time. *Asuka. If it meant I could see you again, what would I do? The same thing, probably—*

“Are you all right?” he asked, straightening up. He was staring at me, a little mystified.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, uh, you’re crying.”

When he mentioned it, I finally noticed the tears running down my face.

* * *

The windows of an empty, stopped train flowed past us, glaring in the sunlight. I realized I was starting to hear police sirens again, although I still couldn’t see the cars. It was the first real midsummer day in quite a while, and the inside of my helmet was muggy and hot. Hodaka’s body was hot against my back, too. The inside of my head, though, was as icy clear as an alpine wind. I’d let a boy who’d escaped from a police station onto my bike, I’d gotten myself into an idiotic car chase with the cops, and now I was headed for an abandoned building. We were committing crimes to save Hina (yeah, what we’d been doing for the past little while was *way* illegal), and our only reason for doing so was a dream. Even I thought it was funny. But—

Right now, I felt incredibly refreshed, as if I’d stripped off all my damp, heavy clothes and tossed them aside. It had nothing to do with job hunting or the law. What I was doing was *the right thing*, 100 percent. There was not a doubt in my mind that justice was on my side here. In this story, I was with the protagonists. How many years had it been since I’d been able to say that with so much certainty?

“—Ms. Natsumi, over there!” Hodaka yelled from behind me.

“...!”

We were racing down a gradual slope, and water had collected into a big pond at the bottom. I scanned our surroundings. This road beside the tracks had no turnoffs. From what I could see, the pond was only about ten yards across, and the road continued after it. The sirens were getting closer and closer.

I could do it. I had to.

“We’re going through!”

“Huh?!”

As I yelled, I opened up the throttle all the way. The surface of the water raced toward us. Right before the pond, I lifted the handlebars slightly. The road resistance instantly disappeared.

“Waaaaaaugh?!” Hodaka screamed, and the Cub seemed to laugh at him as it skimmed across the water, sending up a glittering spray.

Suddenly, I imagined a camera rolling right beside us. Everyone but the two of us was a supporting actor. The whole world was there just for me; I was at its center, and when I shone, it shone, too. *Just a little farther to the asphalt on the other side... Damn, the world is so beautiful...*

However, with a lurch, the water resistance stopped the tires. The Cub was still sliding through the water, but it was also spitting out bubbles and sinking.

“That’s as far as I go!” I told Hodaka clearly. My role ended here—I knew that before I drove in.

But...

“Hodaka, go!”

“Right!”

Using the Cub’s cargo rack as a foothold, Hodaka set his hand on the roof of a sunken truck. He launched himself off the bike and onto the truck’s roof. My Cub fell beneath the surface, and I dismounted. The water was just about up to my waist.

With no hesitation, Hodaka clambered up a barbed-wire fence. “Thanks, Ms. Natsumi!”

Meeting my eyes for just a moment, the kid jumped down onto the railroad tracks, then set off running, straight ahead. I sucked in a deep breath and shouted at the top of my lungs.

“Hodaka! Ruuuun!”

He didn’t even glance at me. He was getting farther and farther away. There was a smile on my lips. The police sirens were just around the corner.

This is as far as I go, kid. Silently, I said it one more time.

My girlhood, my adolescence, my moratorium—they all ended here.

Kid, I’m gonna grow up just a little earlier than you. I’ll become a role model to you and Hina whether you want it or not. I’ll be the kind of adult who makes you want to grow up faster so you can be the same. I’ll be nothing like Kei—I’ll be a fantastic, amazing, super adult like no one’s ever seen.

Watching my adolescence recede into the distance, I prayed with sunny skies in my heart.

So you two come home safe, too.



CHAPTER TEN

Still Anything That Love Can Do

The trains weren't running, and the deserted rails made me think of brown, rusty sand dunes.

Among the dense cluster of buildings, this area was a little higher than everything around it. Four rails ran through the vast lot, perfectly straight, and far up ahead, the buildings of Shinjuku shimmered in a heat mirage like a vista bleeding through from another world.

I ran over those sand dunes with purpose.

The false blue sky and the enormous cumulonimbus clouds holding it up like white pillars watched me coldly from overhead.

Hina.

Hina, Hina, Hina.

I glared at the clear sky.

Hina, are you up there?

"Hey, Hodaka."

With a fantastic smile, as though something was about to begin, you'd told me—

"The sun's going to come back now."

Back then, in the midst of a glittering sun-shower, you gave me something.

"That's for you. Don't tell."

The hamburger that night, one of the most delicious things I'd ever eaten. The impromptu potato chip fried rice at your apartment.

"So you're younger than me. I'll be eighteen next month!"

You'd always acted like the big sister. I'd always leaned on you.

"So, how have things been since you came to Tokyo?"

You'd asked, and I'd answered.

"Well, it's...easier to breathe now."

But that was because I'd met you. Because you'd given me something

precious.

“I like this job. The Sunshine Girl job.”

Fireworks blooming in the dark sky, one after another; the smell of the night air, mingling with the gunpowder; the scent of Tokyo and the fragrance of your hair.

You looked at me that day, and you smiled gently as you told me:

“Thank you, Hodaka.”

Sweat was getting into my eyes. My head was so hot it felt like it was on fire.

I finally realized I’d been running with the helmet on. I ripped it off and threw it away.

You gave me things I’d never had before: hope and aspirations and connections to other people. Love, maybe. And, more than anything, courage. The courage you gave me was what was driving me forward now.

Before long, up ahead on the rails, a station platform came into view like an isolated pier. The workers on the platform saw me and shouted in surprise.

“Hey, kid!”

“Stay off the tracks! Stop!”

Without answering, I ran right through the station. I passed Takadanobaba Station, then Shin-Okubo Station, and then the tracks abruptly widened. Rubble, fallen trees, and building materials were scattered all over the lot, and I started to see workers here and there cleaning up. They yelled at me and blew their security whistles, but I kept running. My legs kept carrying me forward at top speed. My lungs kept drawing in air, then pushing it out. I kept thinking only of Hina.

The next thing I knew, I was finally among the familiar buildings of Shinjuku. I crossed a big elevated railway track I’d walked under countless times. As I ran along the rails all by myself, passersby looked up at me. There were a lot of them, all pointing their phones at me. They were laughing. Jeering.

How dare they, when they all know, I thought as I ran. They can only live this way by stepping on somebody else. Someone was sacrificed to give them this life. Hina was the price of this blue sky for everyone.

...Everyone, including me.

“May I have your attention please; this is a public service announcement: Someone is trespassing on the Yamanote Line platform—”

Shinjuku Station loomed up in front of me like an enormous fortress, and I heard a station announcement from the precincts. A crowd of recovery workers in coveralls stopped what they were doing to look at me.

“He seems to be an ordinary citizen, crossing without permission. Please prioritize your own safety and let the railway police deal with him—”

I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Repeating the words silently, I ran through the grounds of Shinjuku Station. Platforms and pillars and electric lines streamed past me.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Hina, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for making you be a sunshine girl. I’m sorry for putting the whole burden on you and making you shoulder everything.

The station staff and workers were watching me in amazement.

“That’s not safe!”

“Stop!”

They only said it; no adults tried to physically stop me. Finally, I entered a gloomy tunnel with rows of pillars in it. As I splashed through the water over the concrete, I could hear my own footfalls behind me as if they belonged to some other person.

Then, when I was out of the tunnel, beyond the mixed-use buildings, that abandoned building in Yoyogi came into view.

“Hey, Hodaka...”

Last night in bed already seemed like the distant past. Glancing up from the ring, Hina had looked straight at me.

“Do you want this rain to stop?”

And I’d—

“...Hff! Hff, hff, hff...”

Finally, I stopped in front of the abandoned building. My chest heaved dramatically, hungry for oxygen. Big beads of sweat rolled off me, falling into the puddle at my feet and creating ring-shaped ripples. When I looked up, the torii gate on the building’s roof was shining red in the sunlight.

Why had I said yes back then?

Why hadn’t I been able to say the weather didn’t matter at all?

Why couldn’t I tell you that rain or shine, I didn’t care as long as you were there?

Hey, Hina?

Is there still anything that I can do for you?

* * *

Last night's rain and wind had done a lot of damage to the building.

It was already falling apart to begin with, but now the exterior walls had mostly deteriorated, and the rubble was scattered all the way to the train tracks. I climbed the fence by the rails, jumped down into the lot, and went in through a crumbled wall.

The interior of the building was hushed and dim and humid. Fingers of sunlight reached in through holes here and there, creating complicated patterns on the floor and walls.

I ran up the inside stairwell, heading for the roof, but a few floors up, the ceiling had collapsed onto a landing and blocked off the stairs. That way was a no-go, so I dashed into a room on that floor to find an exit to the emergency stairs.

And just then...

"Hodaka!"

...there was a big figure in front of me, coming toward me. A ray of light illuminated his face.

"—Mr. Suga?"

It was him. He was glaring at me.

"I've been looking for you, Hodaka."

"Huh...? Why?"

"Kid, do you even know what you're doing?"

For some reason, I could hear anger in his voice.

I yelled back in spite of myself. "Hina disappeared!"

"—!"

"It's my fault. It's because I made her be the Sunshine Girl."

"Hodaka, you—"

"It's my turn to help her. I have to...!"

Just then, police sirens broke into our conversation. I strained my ears. They were still quite a ways off, but I had no time to waste.

"I have to go!" I broke into a run.

"Hey, wait!" Mr. Suga grabbed my arm. "Where are you going?!"

"You can get to the other world from up there!"

I pointed at the ceiling, where part of it had crumbled into a gaping hole. The top of the red torii was visible beyond it. Above the sky was the other shore, a different world.

“What are you talking about...?”

“She’s in the sky; she has to be! If I take the emergency stairs and get up there—!” I tried to cut in front of him.

He yanked my arm, hard. “Hodaka!”

“I have to save her!”

“Hold it! She can’t be in the sky; you know that.” Mr. Suga’s grip on my arm tightened.

“Lemme go!”

“Snap out of it!”

He slapped me across the face. The pain made me realize those sirens were very, very close. Mr. Suga bent down, peering into my eyes.

“Just calm down, Hodaka. You should go back to the police right now. If you talk to them, they’ll understand; it’s not like it was really your fault.”

I was confused. Why was Mr. Suga siding with the police? The sirens stopped below the building, and I heard several car doors open. The hurried footsteps were coming closer.

Mr. Suga caught both of my arms, pleading with me. “If you keep running away, it’ll be impossible to fix this. You know that, don’t you?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Run away? Which one of us was running away? Who was pretending they couldn’t see any of this?

“Don’t worry.” Mr. Suga’s voice turned gentle. “I’ll go with you. We’ll explain to them together. All right?”

As he spoke, he was pulling me toward the exit by force. I was fighting against the strength of an adult, and I was losing.

“Let go! Please! Let me go!”

“I told you, calm down!”

“Lemme go!” I bit Mr. Suga’s arm as hard as I could.

“Ow—! You little—”

He kicked me in the stomach. My back hit the wall, and I slid helplessly to the floor with a pathetic groan.

“...!”

When I opened my eyes, there was a gun right next to me, buried in the weeds. It was the one I’d thrown away so long ago.

I grabbed it on impulse and, still sitting on the floor, pointed it at Mr. Suga. “Stay out of my way!”

Mr. Suga’s eyes widened. “Hodaka...?” He sounded confused as he asked with a little laugh, “Kid, what do you think you’re gonna do with—?”

“Let me go”—I squeezed my eyes shut—“to Hina!”

Bang—!

The heavy sound of a gunshot echoed in the abandoned building. I’d pointed it at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. Mr. Suga’s mouth was hanging open, and he was staring in dumbfounded shock.

Why? I thought, glaring at him. Why am I pointing a gun at somebody I used to like? Why won’t anyone listen and get out of my way?

“Hodaka Morishima! Drop the gun!”

Several sets of footsteps came running into the room.

“Huh?!” Mr. Suga yelped, his voice cracking.

It was a team of four policemen, guns at the ready, with Pompador in the lead. In no time, Mr. Suga and I were surrounded.

“Hey, whoa, no, hold it; hang on a minute! It’s all a misunderstanding—just let us explain!” Mr. Suga desperately tried to talk them down, but the detective’s group was still glaring at me, weapons drawn, faces stern.

I was still holding my gun, too.

“The two of us were just talking about that, right, Hodaka? We were just about to head over to the police together!”

I stood up wordlessly and pointed the gun at the police, glaring back at them.

“Kid...” Mr. Suga’s voice was tense.

“Mr. Morishima, put down the gun,” the middle-aged detective shouted, and—

“Look, please don’t make us shoot you,” Pompador muttered. I glared at the adults in front of me in turn, aiming at each of them. For the past little while, my knees had been shaking uncontrollably. All I was doing was standing there, but my heart was racing out of control. The air was scorching hot against my throat.

“Hodaka, it’s fine! Just put that thing down already, okay?” Mr. Suga’s voice was trembling. He shouted at the group around us. “And what the hell’s the matter with all of you?! Buncha grown adults coming after one kid with guns; he’s only sixteen! You think this is okay?! He’s not a criminal or

anything like it—he’s just a runaway!”

“Leave me alone!” I yelled.

They all looked at me.

“Why are you getting in my way? You don’t know anything—you’re pretending you can’t see the truth!”

Tears welled up, uninvited, and the adults beyond my gun’s muzzle blurred. Was this checkmate? Was it all over? Would I just get caught before I could do anything that mattered? Would this end before I could use the courage she’d given me, before I could act on the feelings ready to burst inside me?

“I just want—”

With tears streaming down my face, I shouted with everything I had.

“—to see her again!”

I threw the gun away. In the moment when the police weren’t focused on me, I made a break for the window and the emergency stairs beyond it. But Pompadour grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and tackled me from behind, shoving my face into the rubble-strewn floor. The searing pain warped my vision.

“Secured!” Pompadour straddled my back, snapping a handcuff around my left wrist.

“Dammit, lemme go!”

If I let him keep going, both of my hands would be restrained. I fought like crazy, but on my back, Pompadour didn’t even flinch. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the other officers running toward us.

“Hey, assholes—” Just then, Mr. Suga’s voice rang out. “Get your hands off Hodaka!”

Right then, something knocked Pompadour off my back. Startled, I raised my head. Mr. Suga was on top of the detective, straddling him.

“What the hell, you—” Pompadour got up, yelling, and Mr. Suga slugged him.

“Hodaka, go!”

For a moment, my eyes met Mr. Suga’s. Then I jumped to my feet and broke into a run past both of them.

“Stop!”

The middle-aged detective was standing in front of the window, blocking it, ready to shoot me if he had to.

“—Hodakaaa!”

I looked for the source of the sudden shrill voice.

“Nagi?!”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Nagi dashed into the room from another door, wearing a dress, and tackled the middle-aged detective to the ground. As Nagi pummeled the detective’s face, he shouted.

“Hodaka, this is all your fault!” He was glaring at me. Eyes swollen from crying, nose dripping like the little kid he was, Nagi screamed at me. “Give me back my sister!”

“—!”

I jumped onto the emergency stairs from the window, as if those words were a punch that had knocked me into the air. The moment I touched down, the rusted metal landing came loose and fell. Reflexively, I grabbed the handrail, pulled myself up, then raced up the stairs.

The fallen landing hit the ground with a crash.

I ran and ran and ran.

I ran to use all the strength I’d gained, and all the courage I’d gotten from Hina, and all the feelings still screaming inside me. At last, I dashed out onto the roof.

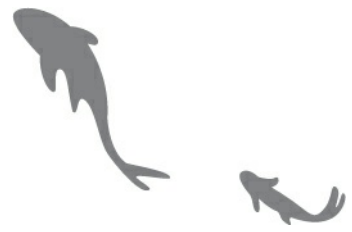
Gods, I thought.

Please, please, please.

I believed, with utter conviction.

And as I went through the torii gate, I wished as hard as I could.

Take me to Hina, one more time—



CHAPTER ELEVEN

More Than the Blue Sky

When I opened my eyes, I saw a deep-blue sky.

The color was incredibly dark, very nearly black. Below me, there was a huge arc shining azure. The boundary between the sky and the ground—Earth. The air was freezing cold, and every breath I exhaled froze and twinkled like glitter. I was falling straight down helplessly, from high in the heavens. Even so, I wasn't afraid. It was an odd sensation, like a lucid dream.

Far in the distance, the sky rumbled. When I looked in the direction of the sound, red light was flickering from a cloud toward outer space. *Was that lightning?* The phenomena of this world above were nothing like the ones on the ground.

Before long, a white band came into view below me, an impossibly long strip of clouds that ran all the way from one horizon to the other. They twisted around one another like tree roots, undulating slowly, flowing in the opposite direction from the sun.

“Those are...!”

As I fell, getting closer to the band, I saw something strange.

“Dragons...?!”

As I approached, the band started to resemble a mass of living creatures. Enormous white dragons twined together, swallowing one another, circling the planet.

“Are those...sky fish...?”

Right then, I sensed a presence above me and looked up. My eyes widened. One enormous dragon was surging toward me, its white mouth gaping.

“Aaaaaaaaugh!”

The dragon swallowed me. On the inside, it was like a muddy torrent. I was swept helplessly along through the gloom—not quite water, not quite mist—as if I were right in the middle of a waterfall that went on forever. Soft

objects struck me with wet splats. When I pried my eyes open, I saw what looked like a school of little fish. Finally, the world ahead of me grew brighter, and then, suddenly, there was blue sky all around me again.

I was out of the dragon.

The sky was a familiar vivid blue. When I looked up, the band of dragons was rapidly receding into the distance. The air was sharp and cold, but it wasn't a frozen void anymore. Before I knew it, several sky fish had begun to follow me as I fell, sticking close to me. They were as transparent as water, a whole lot like Hina's body had been at the hotel. She was here, in this sky—I was sure of it. I sucked in a deep breath of cold air. Then, at the very top of my lungs, I shouted her name.

“Hinaaaaa!”

* * *

A distant drum sounds like a whisper.

Tump, tump, tump.

No, it's a pulse. Whose?

Mine. —Me? Do I still exist?

Thump, thump, thump.

My pulse accelerates. My body is waking up all on its own. Why?

Because someone called me.

Badmp, badmp, badmp.

Because wishes can find me here. Because he's wishing for me to exist.

“—Hina!”

I can hear it. His voice, calling my name, reaches me. I open my eyes. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the fish surrounding me withdraw with a swish. *I guess I couldn't become part of them,* I think vacantly. I set my hands on the grassy plain and sit up slowly. I look at the sky.

And then I see it.

Our wishes given shape. My wish and his, overlapping.

“Hina!!”

Shouting in the sky in front of me, desperately reaching out for me—is Hodaka.

“Hodaka!”

As if I've snapped awake from a dream, I stand up. My chest is hot. My whole body is on fire. I run with all my might, driven forward by the joy and love welling up inside me.

* * *

"Hina!!" I screamed.

Hina was running over the grassy plain below me, and I stretched my hand out to her desperately. But I couldn't get any closer; the strong wind was buffeting me.

"Hodaka!"

Hina was reaching for me, too. *We have to get out of here*, I thought. This plain on top of the cloud was the "other shore." This world wasn't meant for us—this was a world for the dead.

"—Hina, jump!"

As the wind blew me upward, I yelled. Hina nodded. She ran to the edge of the plain, then flung herself into the blue sky like a track star doing the long jump. The wind caught her, carrying her closer to me. I reached out. Finally, her hot hand caught mine. The next moment, as if gravity had finally noticed us, we began plummeting to Earth.

"Hina, I found you! I actually found you!"

Hina was right there, right in front of me. Her eyes, her voice, her hair, her scent—they were really just a few inches away.

"Hodaka, Hodaka, Hodaka!"

"Don't let go of my hand!"

"I know!"

We plunged into a valley between thick clouds. The sunlight was blocked out, and the world around us darkened. The humid smell grew stronger as our clothes got damp and heavy. A wall of leaden clouds crawled in a slow convection current, like the organs of some living creature. Once in a while, deep inside, gigantic bolts of lightning flickered. Every time it happened, an earsplitting roar shook the air around us.

"Aaah!"

Our wet hands slipped apart again. Hina fell, and I followed her. She was falling toward a black hole, as if it was sucking her in. The distance between

us grew. I reached out frantically.

“Hina, let’s go home together!”

As if she’d remembered something, Hina’s face clouded, and her expression turned hesitant. She shouted back to me, uncertain. “But if I do, the weather will go back...!”

“It doesn’t matter!” I shouted angrily.

Hina started, but I’d made up my mind: Nothing else mattered. I’d even defy the gods. I already knew what I had to say.

“It doesn’t matter! You’re not a sunshine girl anymore, Hina!”

A reflection of lightning flickered violently in Hina’s wide eyes. We plunged through clouds vibrating with thunder, falling straight down below a cumulonimbus cloud. Beneath us were the shining streets of Tokyo. My hands were gradually drawing nearer to the city, and to Hina. Yes, I knew what I needed to say.

“I don’t care if the sun never comes back!”

Tears welled up in Hina’s eyes.

“I’d rather have you than a blue sky!”

Hina’s big teardrops danced in the wind, striking my cheeks. In the same way raindrops create circular ripples, Hina’s tears were creating my heart.

“And if the weather goes crazy—”

And finally, my hand...

“—it can just stay that way!”

...caught Hina’s again. She immediately took my other hand. We held tightly on to each other. Our vision, the world, everything around us was spinning. At the heart of this beautiful, breathtaking world, we danced hand in hand.

Hina’s face was right there. We were close enough to feel each other’s breath. Her long hair flowed in the wind, gently stroking my cheeks. Her eyes, still brimming over with tears, were like a secret spring only I knew about. For a moment, that sight burned itself into my eyes—the sun and the blue sky and the white clouds, Hina and the city below, shining in the light.

I smiled, and I told her:

“Pray for yourself, Hina.”

Hina smiled back. She nodded. “...Uh-huh!”

We closed our eyes and pressed our foreheads against our clasped hands. And we wished.

It was the cry of our hearts, of our bodies, of our voices, of our love.
Live.

* * *

I thought I'd heard thunder in the distance.

I froze and stood still as they were dragging me to a police car, and the detective with the hair glanced back dubiously.

"Hey, Mr. Suga," he snapped, but I ignored him and looked up.

I wasn't sure when, but thick clouds had begun to billow into the afternoon sky. I glanced at the roof of the abandoned building. A cold, damp wind was rippling the weeds up there, whisking leaves up into the sky.

"Don't just stand there. Come on."

He pulled on the handcuffs around my wrists, but I kept gazing up at the torii gate. According to the officer who'd gone up the stairs after him, Hodaka hadn't been on the roof. They'd decided he'd escaped, and the police were still searching the vicinity. But I had a feeling he actually was there. For some reason, I felt uneasy. My throat stung something awful, and my skin was breaking out in goose bumps. A kind of premonition was crawling up from my feet.

Just then, the sky over Tokyo flashed, while thunder rumbled loud enough to shake the ground. Right after that, I saw it. Like several dragons attacking at once—an enormous mass of water came plummeting down.

The skies just opened up with rain as heavy as a waterfall.

The weather had virtually snatched away the blue sky by force, and the cops and I just stood there, stunned.

When it happened—everyone could probably tell the rain wasn't normal. The truth was, we'd all known a day like this would come eventually. We'd always sensed that our peaceful lives wouldn't last forever, that we couldn't possibly make such a clean getaway.

We hadn't done anything specific. We hadn't decided anything. Hadn't chosen anything. Even so, just getting away was never an option. Every one of us had sensed that, someday, the world was going to change forever, and we'd all just pretended we couldn't see the truth.

As those thoughts ran through my head for no real reason, I kept gazing

up at the rainy sky, soaked to the skin.

It's been three years since then, and in all that time, the rain has never stopped.



FINAL CHAPTER

We'll Be Alright

The faint sound of rain mingles with the song in the gymnasium.

Noticing it, I stop singing. The classmates next to me glance my way. I silently glare at the letters above the platform that say GRADUATION CEREMONY; I'm the only one who's quiet.

This is a small ceremony for the graduating class of the island's high school, even though there are only about ten of us.

On reflection, how swiftly the years have flown. Now our time of parting is at hand. Fare thee well.

My classmates are wearing their uniforms for the last time today. While they tear up as they sing the graduation song, I stay still and tight-lipped, listening only to the sound of the rain.

When I leave the school, the air smells like spring.

With my tube-shaped diploma case in one hand and my umbrella in the other, I walk along the coast road. Just a little while ago, the sea wind was so cold it was like a slap against my skin, but by now, it's mellowed into something softer. Several boats are floating offshore, gliding slowly, back from the afternoon's fishing. Bright-yellow flowers bloom by the roadside, and pale-pink blossoms are starting to open on the cherry trees.

Spring really has come again.

I can't believe it, somehow. I gaze at the view of the island, the same as it's always been. Why is spring here again, as if nothing happened? Why are the seasons still turning? Why are people going about their business, just like always?

After all, it's been constantly raining since then.

As I watch the fishermen unloading their catch in port, I think, *Even so.*

Ever since that day, there's been a subtle change in people's faces. It's very slight, no more than a single drop of ink in a big swimming pool. Color, taste, and scent are no different, and I wouldn't be surprised to find the people themselves haven't even noticed. I can tell, though. People's faces, and their hearts, definitely aren't what they were three years ago.

“—Morishima!”

When I turn around at the sudden call, two girls from a lower grade are running down the hill toward me. I know who they are, of course (there are only about thirty students in the whole school), but we've never said more than hello to each other. Their names are, uh— I can't remember. The girls stop in front of me, and one of them nervously starts to speak.

“Um, there was something we wanted to ask you...”

“Is it true that you're going away to Tokyo?” the girl with pigtails asks.

When I tell her yes, the short-haired girl next to her elbows her. “There, see? I told you. Today's your last chance.”

We're standing under an arbor by the side of the road, facing each other. The sounds of the rain and surf mingle together.

“Go on; just ask him—it's now or never!” the short-haired girl urges in a whisper, and the girl with pigtails hangs her head, flushing bright red.

No way, I think to myself in shock. Is she about to tell me she likes me...?

“Um, Morishima!” Screwing up her courage, the pigtailed girl looks at me with watery eyes. “There's something I've always wanted to ask you!”

Whoa, geez. I didn't see this coming. What do I do? The palms of my hands start to sweat.

“Um, so, I heard that in Tokyo—”

Oh, crud. How do I turn her down without hurting her? Help me, Master Nagi.

“—you’re wanted by the police. Is that true?!”

“...Huh?”

My two underclassmen are watching me with excited, expectant faces.

“...No, it’s not.”

“What? But— I know you don’t look it, but they say you’ve got a record and everything! They say you’ve got connections to the yakuza in Tokyo!”

I feel like an idiot; what was I expecting? I’m a little relieved, and I give her an honest answer. It’s not like I’m trying to hide it.

“The stuff about the yakuza isn’t true, but I did get arrested. I had a hearing in Tokyo.”

“Eeeeeeeee!”

The two of them take each other’s hands and jump up and down gleefully.

“That’s soooo cool! You’re like a movie hero!”

“Thanks,” I tell them with a wry little smile.

Beneath a rainy March sky, the long whistle signals that the ferry is leaving port.

As the ship’s enormous hull plows through the seawater, the heavy vibrations travel through my seat to the rest of me.

My ticket is for the second-class cabin, the one closest to the bottom of the ship. The voyage to Tokyo will take more than ten hours, and we’ll be arriving at night. This is the second time in my life that I’ve made this very trip, on this ferry. I stand up, heading for the stairs to the deck terrace.

I remember that summer, two and a half years ago.

When I woke up on the roof, in the rain, the police arrested me then and there. Hina was still fast asleep under the torii, and the police picked her up and took her somewhere else. At the police station, Pompadour had told me that she’d opened her eyes soon after, that nothing was medically wrong with her, and that she’d probably be allowed to live with her little brother again.

In the small room they took me to at the public prosecutor’s office, I learned that I was under suspicion for multiple offenses. Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law, article 3: violation of the prohibition against possession of a handgun. Penal Code, article 95: obstructing the performance of public duty. “Firing a weapon at someone” fell under Penal Code articles 199 and 203, attempted murder. Running on the railway tracks had been a

violation of the Railway Operation Act, article 37.

However, the sentence handed down to me in family court was, unexpectedly, probation. They'd taken into account the fact that I hadn't had the gun on purpose and, as such, had determined that the gravity of the whole incident was low and that my inclination toward delinquency was mild.

By the time they'd let me out of juvenile detention and I'd finally gotten back to the island, it had been three months since I ran away. Before I knew it, midsummer was behind us, and a hint of autumn had slipped into the air. When I trudged dejectedly back home, my parents and my school had welcomed me awkwardly, but warmly. I'd felt so chained down by my dad and my school before, but once I was back, home and school were just natural places to live. I wasn't perfect, and neither were the adults. Everyone lived that way, imperfections and all, brusquely knocking into one another once in a while. Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped having trouble accepting that.

And so my high school life on the island began again.

Those were oddly quiet years. I walked through each day as if I were walking over the ocean floor, or somewhere far above the ground. The words people said to me didn't come through very well, and what I said didn't seem to reach them, either. Some things I used to be able to do automatically, but now I couldn't anymore. Falling asleep without being aware of it, eating each meal as if it was a given, even just walking—for some reason, I couldn't really do any of it anymore. If I wasn't paying attention, I would almost put my right hand and foot forward at the same time when I walked. I'd stumble on roads, forget what I'd been asked about in class, and freeze during meals while holding my chopsticks, several times. Every time someone pointed it out to me, I'd put on a smile and offer a mild reply: "Sorry, I just spaced out a little."

I did as much as I could to go through life the way I should, so that I wouldn't worry anybody, so that they could rest easy. It extended only to things like being proactive about cleaning, and listening seriously in class, and not avoiding people—in other words, behaving pretty much like an obedient elementary schooler—and yet before I knew it, my grades had gone up, and I had more friends. Adults spoke to me more often, too. All of those things were just side effects, though; they weren't what I was aiming for. At night, beyond the wet window glass, and in the morning, beyond the gray

ocean, I kept trying to sense her presence. I kept searching the sound of the rain for the distant drumbeats of that summer night.

In that way, I was carefully holding my breath until graduation day. My monthly interviews with my juvenile probation officer ended just before my last year of school ended, and then my punishment was over, leaving only the simple risk of falsifying personal history if I wrote *No rewards/punishments* on my resume.

When sunset is near and the whistles of ferries passing each other have grown more frequent, I've climbed back up to the deck terrace again. I draw in a deep breath, drinking in the cold wind and rain. On the horizon, the blinking lights of Tokyo are beginning to come into view.

Two and a half years, huh?

I murmur the words aloud, as if I'm double-checking the divisions on a scale. A long time has passed, and the further I get from that summer, the more what happened then seems like an illusion. What I saw was too beautiful to be real, but the details were too sharp and clear for an illusion. I'm getting more confused again. However, the view that finally appears tells me plainly that it was no figment of my imagination.

The landscape of Tokyo has changed.

The Rainbow Bridge is underwater, and only four pillars project from the ocean, towers that must hold some significance. The many boxes scattered across the water's surface like blocks are the tops of buildings that haven't been submerged completely. This is the new shape of the Kanto Plain, where the persistent rains caused widespread flooding. At this point, one-third of the Tokyo area is underwater.

Still, even so, the city has remained the capital of Japan. The vast, low-lying eastern area had been below sea level to begin with; its conventional drainage functions weren't able to keep up with the never-ending rain, and slowly, over more than two years, it had sunk into the ocean. During that time, people had moved farther west, and even now, vast levees around wide flood control basins are being constructed around the flooded Arakawa and Tone Rivers. Even when the climate has changed this much, people have kept on living in the area, as if that's the normal thing to do.

I'm back here, too.

I've returned with everything that happened that summer inside me. Now that I'm eighteen, I'm going to settle here for good. And I'm going to see her again.

What has Hina been feeling, living here?

As I watch the city draw nearer, I consider whether there's anything I can do for her.

* * *

I'd settled on an apartment near the university.

I had only two cardboard boxes of stuff to move, and I got them to the apartment by putting them on a handcart and taking a long ride on a train. I'd heard that the rush to move west over the past two years had raised the rent in this area, but an old apartment like this had sounded affordable even for me, if I worked two part-time jobs. This area is near the center of the Musashino Plateau, and the flooding had hardly affected it at all.

Listening to the rain, I clean the room and get my stuff squared away by myself. By the time I'm done with my meal of instant ramen, the sky has begun to darken. The Internet radio is giving a weather forecast for the Kanto area for the next week. It's expected to rain the whole time. The high is projected to be around fifty-nine degrees. Since the rain isn't falling hard, we should be able to enjoy the cherry blossoms for quite a while...

Letting the report go in one ear and out the other, I'm perusing a job-search website on my phone. The world is overflowing with jobs. But... *I still haven't found it*, I think.

I still haven't found it.

I still don't know.

Over the past two and a half years, after wearing out my brain on the question, I decided to spend my time at university in the Department of Agriculture. I wanted to study something that would be necessary in this era, now that the climate has changed. Just having a set goal, vague as it was, seemed to make it a little easier for me to breathe. I still haven't found the really important thing, though. I want to know my reason for going to see her, and what I can do for her.

"Oh."

I make a small, startled noise—during the job search, part of my brain suddenly remembered something else. *Speaking of part-time jobs, is that site still around?* I try entering the URL.

“...It’s still there!”

The screen of my phone shows a picture of a sun and the words *Sunshine for you!* in colorful characters. A pink frog in a yellow raincoat says *100% Sunshine Girl!* in a speech balloon.

It’s the website we made for the Sunshine Girl business. When I type in the password to log in as an administrator, I hear an electronic chime.

You have one request, the screen tells me. Startled, I tap it to see what it is.

It’s a job request for the Sunshine Girl from nearly two years ago.

* * *

“My, are you here by yourself?”

When she sees me standing outside her front door, Mrs. Tachibana sounds dubious.

“Where’s the little Sunshine Girl?” she asks, a bit disappointed, and I hastily explain.

“U-um, she isn’t a sunshine girl anymore. I just wanted to let you know...”

“You came over just to tell me that? All the way out here?”

“Yes...”

Claaang, claaang. The sound of piles being driven in echoes through the corridor of the housing complex. This area is near the Arakawa River, and although it hasn’t been submerged, they’re building a large levee nearby.

“Well, my home isn’t very big, but do come in for a bit.”

Ms. Fumi’s apartment is about twice the size of mine, but it’s still significantly smaller than the traditional Japanese house we visited before. There’s a combination living and dining room that’s about 140 square feet, with one Japanese-style room next to it. I can see the levee they’re building through the aluminum-sashed window; the yellow pieces of heavy equipment moving around on it look like miniatures.

There are several photographs in the room. An elderly man who's probably her deceased husband. A lively family photo. Her grandson's wedding. Only the scent of the incense drifting from the small Buddhist altar is the same as it was back then during Obon.

Ms. Fumi sets a tray heaped with sweets in front of me.

"Oh, please don't trouble yourself!"

"No need for niceties; you're young," she says, sitting down across the table from me. I've come to visit her, but I can't think of anything in particular to talk about. I try to keep the conversation going anyway.

"Um, you moved, didn't you? The place we visited was more toward Shitamachi..."

"Yes. That whole area's underwater now," Ms. Fumi says, as if it doesn't mean much to her at all.

"...I'm sorry." I apologize without thinking.

"What are you sorry for?"

Ms. Fumi seems amused, but I can't look straight at her; I lower my eyes and falter. "No, uh..."

What on earth am I even qualified to say? I start wanting to confess everything: *I'm the one who stole the blue sky from Tokyo. People lost their homes because of me; it was my selfish decision that took the sun away.* But what good would it do to say that? I know it would just bewilder her.

"—Did you know this?" Ms. Fumi suddenly asks, her voice gentle, and I raise my head. As she continues, she takes a Choco Pie from the tray and unwraps it. "That part of Tokyo used to be ocean. Up until the Edo period—just a little while ago."

"Huh...?"

"Back when they called this city Edo, the town itself was an ocean inlet. It's in the name, you know? 'Inlet Entrance.' Tokyo was the entrance to the inlet. People and the weather changed the land, little by little."

Ms. Fumi hands me the Choco Pie she's unwrapped. For some reason, it feels as if she's passing something important along.

"So you see—in the end, things have only gone back to normal. At least, that's what I think sometimes."

As she speaks, Ms. Fumi is gazing out the window at the levee, and her expression is rather wistful. Unable to find the right words, I study her wrinkled profile.

It just went back to normal...?

I wonder what a certain someone would say about it. I decide I want to find out.

* * *

“What’s with you? You’ve been thinking about that stuff this whole time? You may be starting college already, but you’re still just a kid.”

As he speaks, the middle-aged man in front of me is banging away at a keyboard in a dramatic display of just how busy he is.

“What do you mean, ‘that stuff’...?” I protest.

I thought this guy might understand, at least, so I took the plunge and told him about it. And he’s just giving me crap instead.

“Young people these days. You get more hopeless every year. Guess Japan’s finally gone to the dogs.”

“Well, I mean, back then, we—”

“You think things are the way they are now because of you? You saying you kids changed the world for good?”

Rolling his eyes, he finally looks up from the display and focuses on me. Pushing his trendy glasses (although I’m sure they’ve got prescription lenses) up on top of his head, he narrows his small, usually frivolous eyes to slits.

“Like hell you did, you moron. Get over yourself already.”

It’s Mr. Suga, wearing the same old tight shirt and telling me off with a lazy-sounding slur to his voice.

“Quit fantasizing and look at reality, wouldja? Real life. Listen, you kids seem to have the wrong idea. No matter how much time you spend navel-gazing, you ain’t gonna find anything in there. All the important stuff is outside. Don’t look at yourself; look at other people. How special do you think you are anyway?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

Mr. Suga’s smartphone chimes, and he picks it up. “Hey!” he chirps. He pushes it at me, showing me the screen.

“Check this out! I had a father-daughter date a little while back!”

“...Whoa!” I exclaim.

The photo on the screen is a blurred selfie of Mr. Suga with Moka beside

him; she's grown up a lot. Master Nagi and Natsumi are also there; they're both striking poses with sideways peace signs. Nagi was a striking kid to begin with, and now that he's taller and slimmer, he's the spitting image of a real prince. He's in middle school already. Natsumi was always beautiful, but now her mischievous smile actually seems mature, and her looks are even more devastating and extraordinary.

"Natsumi and Nagi went along, too, not that anyone asked 'em to. Those two are thick as thieves now, although I couldn't tell ya why..."

Even as he grumbles, Mr. Suga seems happy. He and his daughter still aren't living together, but his relationship with his wife's parents isn't a bad one, and it sounds as though there's a good chance she'll be able to live with him in the near future, depending on how his work is going. K&A Planning has moved into a room in an apartment building, and it's a proper editing agency now, with three staff members. The fact that its president, Mr. Suga, seems busy may not be entirely an act, either.

He abruptly switches over to lecturing me. "Kid, quit futzing around worryin' about stuff you can't change and go see that girl already. You said you haven't seen her since then? So what the hell have you been doing?"

"Well, I mean, you know... I was on probation all that time, so I couldn't cause trouble for her, and even if I'd tried to get in touch, she doesn't have a phone. Besides, actually meeting her, I'm kinda, like, nervous about it, or I want a reason for it, and I don't really know what to say..."

Just then, a bell tinkles. I know that sound. *No way*, I think, my heart speeding up, and then a ball of black and white ambles in. He slowly climbs up onto Mr. Suga's desk with the help of a chair, sits down heavily, and looks at me.

"Ra...Rain? Man, you got big..."

It is Rain, although he was a kitten last time I saw him. When I first ran into him in that alley, he was just a little bigger than a smartphone, but now he's enormous, like a sumo wrestler. He looks like he must weigh about thirty pounds, and his lazy, mean-looking eyes are exactly like Mr. Suga's.

Mr. Suga glances up from the keyboard, pounding away at it again. Seeing those expressions side by side, they remind me of a parent and kid.

Mr. Suga waves a hand at me, shooing me away. "Go on, get—head over there now. Just stop by her place already; you're holding up operations here!"

"Sorry for bothering you," I tell him.

As I trudge out of the office, the staff members tell me, “Stop by again, all right?”

I start wanting to ask them if they’re gonna be okay, working for a boss like him.

“Hey.”

Just as I’m about to open the door and leave, Mr. Suga calls to me, and I turn back. He exhales with a wry smile and looks straight at me.

“Just...don’t let it get to you, man.”

“Huh?”

“See, the world—it’s always been screwed up.”

Somehow, I can tell that saying it has taken a load off his shoulders.

* * *

After leaving Mr. Suga’s office, I board the Yamanote Line at Shinjuku Station. It isn’t a circle anymore; it’s a C shape, interrupted by a sunken area. The ends of the C are Sugamo Station and Gotanda Station, and water buses leave from each one. I want to take the long way around, so I get off at Gotanda, cross a pier, and transfer to a two-story boat. The second floor of the boat is open to the elements, and like me, a few passengers are bundled up in raincoats, gazing out over the water.

Everyday conversations brush past my ears: “What do you want to get for lunch?” and “There’s a new shop open” and “I’m looking forward to the flower-viewing party this weekend.” A rain as fine as silk is falling evenly all across the inland sea. Maybe because the east side of the route was originally a residential district, the roofs of quite a few buildings poke up through the surface of the water. The view reminds me of a flock of sheep sleeping in a spacious pasture. Released from their long, dutiful service, the multitude of roofs look somehow relieved.

“Next stop, Tabataaaa, now stopping at Tabata.”

I hear an easygoing voice make a shipboard announcement. Beyond the rain, I can see the hill road that leads to Hina’s apartment.

I take off my raincoat, put up my umbrella, and walk along the narrow, sloping road.

I walked this road lots of times that summer. There's a line of cherry trees on the embankment on my right, their blossoms half-unfurled, and a panoramic view opens up below me on the left. Before, it was a crowded view of train tracks and buildings, but now it's the inland sea, and it goes all the way out to the Pacific Ocean. Here and there, the tops of all sorts of buildings protrude from the water. The elevated Shinkansen track runs in a straight line, almost like an enormous pier. Green ivy and bright flowering weeds tangle around the vast, deserted blocks of concrete, claiming new ownership over them.

"It was ocean to begin with..." I murmur aloud, taking in the view. "The world's always been screwed up..."

I hear the rain striking the earth, and spring birdsong. Water-bus engines, and the distant noise of cars and trains. My own footsteps, sneakers on wet asphalt.

I take a ring out of my pocket and examine it. It's small and silver, in the shape of a wing.

If I see her again...what should I say?

"It's no one's fault the world is like this." I murmur the words aloud as a test. Is it okay to say that? Is it what she'll want to hear? *Tokyo started out as ocean. The world's always been crazy, right from the beginning.*

Suddenly, water birds take flight, and my eyes follow them.

Then my heart leaps.

She's there.

At the top of the slope, without an umbrella, her hands folded.

She's praying, eyes closed.

In the midst of the ceaseless rain, Hina is facing the sunken city and praying for something. Wishing for something.

No, that's wrong, I think, and it's like waking from a dream.

That was wrong; it wasn't true. The world didn't start out crazy—we *changed it*. That summer, up above that sky, I made a choice. I chose Hina over the blue sky. I chose her life over the happiness of the majority. And we made a wish. No matter what the world became, we simply wanted to live our lives together.

"Hina!" I shout.

Hina looks at me. Just then, a strong gust of wind sends cherry blossom petals flying and whisks the hood off her head. Her long black hair, tied back

in two ponytails, flutters in the wind. Her eyes fill with tears, and she breaks into a big smile. As soon as she does, the world blushes into brilliant color.

“—Hodaka!” Hina yells, and I throw my umbrella aside. We start running at the same time. Her face comes closer, bobbing up and down. Then, when she’s right in front of me, Hina jumps into my arms and clings to me. Her momentum startles me, and I spin around with her in my arms to keep from falling over. Then we stand, facing each other. Still smiling, we catch our breath.

Hina’s big eyes are gazing up at me, from a different height than before, and I realize for the first time that I’ve grown. She’s wearing her high school uniform, and it hits me that next time, she really will be eighteen. Suddenly, worry crosses her face, and her fingers touch my cheek.

“Hodaka, what’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“Huh?”

“You’re crying.”

I realize tears are streaming from my eyes, like the rain.

How extraordinary are you? You’re crying, too.

And how useless am I? I’d wanted to ask you if you were all right.

I smile at Hina. I squeeze her hands, make up my mind very, very firmly, and speak.

“Hina, we’ll—”

No matter how drenched we are by the rain, we’re alive. No matter how much the world changes, we’ll live.

“We’ll be all right.”

Hina’s face shines, as if it’s been illuminated by the sun. Raindrops trickle over our clasped hands in a soft, gentle caress.



AFTERWORD

This book, *Weathering With You*, is the novel version of an animated movie I directed, which is scheduled to open in 2019.

—I remember writing the same thing in the afterword for *your name.*, which was published about three years ago. Just like back then, the movie isn't finished yet. We're still stressed out about the production work (with no end in sight) and also right in the middle of the voice recording process. (It's exactly two months before the release.) While all that was going on, I finished writing the novel one step ahead of the movie. Although I tried to make the novel interesting enough that people will be able to enjoy it without seeing the movie, I'd like to borrow this space to talk about how the story of *Weathering With You*—both the novel and movie versions—came to be.

(I'll talk a little about the last scene as well, so if you're concerned about spoilers, please read the book first.)

I think what triggered the idea for this work was the fact that my previous film, *your name.*, regrettably became a far greater hit than I and the rest of the production staff had assumed it would... Sheesh, what a terrible way to put it: "regrettably became a far greater hit than we'd assumed." For me, though, it really was in a completely different league. The movie *your name.* was in theaters for more than half a year, and that period was the first time I'd ever

been exposed to so many eyes and so many diverse opinions. While I was eating dinner at home, some celebrity would be on TV, giving their views on the movie (and kind of running it down); while I was drinking at a pub, I'd hear people saying what they'd thought of it (and moderately running it down); and even when I was just walking down the street, I'd hear the movie's name mentioned (and, again, someone would be running it down). Social media was flooded with comments about it, and of course I'm sure more people enjoyed it than not, but I saw quite a few individuals who were furious with it. I spent that six months wondering what exactly it was that had made those people mad. That was also the time when I drew up the proposal for *Weathering With You*.

I didn't exactly get a clear answer out of that experience, but I did make up my mind about something for myself. It was that movies aren't school textbooks. Maybe I should have realized earlier, but I had a renewed awareness that movies (or, more broadly, entertainment) don't need to be "correct" or set an example. On the contrary, they should talk about the things textbooks can't discuss, such as our secret wishes that others would frown upon if they knew. I decided I'd say things that textbooks didn't say, that politicians didn't say, that critics didn't say. I'd create stories on a different level from morals and education. That's my job, after all, and if it gets me in trouble with someone, well, that's how it goes. All I can do is turn what I actually feel in my own life into stories. As resolutions go, it may have been rather belated, but that's the mood I was in when I wrote *Weathering With You*.

As a matter of fact, when I reached that determination and wrote this story, it was a lot of fun. It was an adventure I could personally get excited over. I didn't give a single thought to making something "good enough for a summer blockbuster that would appeal to people of all ages and genders." My main characters ran themselves ragged without thinking twice, with no reservations or caution or guesses about others' feelings, until they'd exhausted their batteries. As I turned their story into a script, I felt as though they were spurring me on. Over ten months, I made it into a video storyboard (that's the blueprint for the movie), and it took four months to turn it into this novel. After a year and a half of work, the film is also finally nearing

completion.

As far as differences between the film and novel versions go, they're fundamentally the same. However, there are quite a few things I show in the novel that aren't in the film. This isn't because I couldn't fit everything into the movie (as far as I'm concerned, the movie doesn't have too little or too much of anything, either), and it wasn't intended to be bonus material for the novel or anything. I believe it's due to the differences in the media themselves.

For example, for lines in movie dialogue, shorter is generally better (in my opinion). This is because they're more than just the bare text. In their completed form, a vast amount of information is layered over them: the expressions and colors in the visuals, the emotions and rhythm in the voices, the sound effects and music. If what's at the core is simple, the ornamentation becomes more effective. However, novels have none of those things. With films, the story is the content, and the visuals and audio and everything that conveys it is the vessel; with novels, the content and vessel are made of the same stuff. For that reason, just writing the story down as words isn't enough to make it a novel. (That's a script.) Novels are a medium in which story and expression are indivisible. Because of that, even if it's the same line from the same character, it needs to be set up differently depending on whether it's in a film or a novel.

To provide a specific example of what I mean—near the climax of the story, Natsumi screams “Run!” at Hodaka. In the film, the sense of speed in the animation, the actress's voice, the sound of the motorbike's exhaust up until right before, and the music that plays right afterward all come together, and that alone makes it a scene with definitive impact (or I hope it does). In the novel, though, it's hard to make that single line of dialogue have the same effect that it does in the film. And so, in the book, I had to use various similes and show a certain amount about Natsumi's life in the first half of the story. None of that is in the film, but for this moment in the novel to hold its own against its film equivalent, I had to base it on its own process. As a result, some things are shown only in the novel, and they're part of the joy of writing for me. I hope they become part of the fun of reading for you as well.

About the relationship between *Weathering With You* and music.

When I finished writing the script for the film, the first person I thought of to show it to was Yojiro Noda of Radwimps. So I sent the script to him not as an offer for music, but as a friend. I simply wanted to get his thoughts on it, to hear what the script made him feel.

Then, three months later, I received demo songs for “Is There Still Anything That Love Can Do?” and “We’ll Be Alright.” Ultimately, they were the very “thoughts” I’d wanted to hear. These songs were bursting with the words I was desperate to know but just couldn’t find on my own. I felt as if I’d stumbled onto a secret treasure trove. And so naturally (but, now that I think about it, pretty selfishly and forcefully), I ended up asking Yojiro to be the music director for *Weathering With You*.

However, at this point, there’s something I have to confess. The truth is, when I first listened to “We’ll Be Alright,” I didn’t think I’d be able to use it as a song in this film, and I told Yojiro as much. I simply couldn’t think of a place for it. Both the lyrics and the melody seemed too powerful to play during the film. However, a full year afterward, the song I’d received right at the beginning ended up saving me.

I was having trouble with the direction for the last scene. I’d nailed down the content for everything else in the video storyboard, and the work on the art was moving forward. I’d also drawn the storyboard for the epilogue up to Mr. Suga’s line (“See, the world—it’s always been screwed up”). All that was left was the final three minutes after that point. The story developments were already in the script, but I just couldn’t seem to figure out what Hodaka and Hina were feeling at the end. When I showed the people around me an experimental storyboard I’d finished, the response was lukewarm.

I worried about it for more than two months, and then, when I was discussing the music for the last scene with Yojiro, the topic of the unused “We’ll Be Alright” came up. When I listened to that song again, I was stunned.

It was all written in there.

Yep. What I needed, and the emotions that mattered most, were all there in “We’ll Be Alright,” which I’d been given back at the very beginning. When I drew the storyboard for the last scene, it was as if I were just tracing it from the lyrics, and the song I’d received a year ago found its place. Sure enough, when I did that, I had the last scene of this story, and nothing else

would do.

One last thing.

For *your name.*, I started writing a novel in tandem with my work on the main film grudgingly, on a request from the production committee. This time around, I feel as though this work saved me somehow. The writing was fun, plain and simple, and there were several things I managed to take back to the film from the novel. Best of all, I grew even fonder of the characters who inhabit this world. If I'm not alone in this, and you the readers enjoy this book along with its writer, I couldn't be happier.

In addition, working on the novel meant I had to leave the studio frequently during the production of the film, and I was able to do that without worrying thanks to the mighty efforts of art director Atsushi Tamura and the rest of the Ogikubo Studio animation staff. I really can't thank them enough.

Thank you very much for picking up this book, and for reading it.

May 2019, Makoto Shinkai



ESSAY

YOJIRO NODA

It's currently June 7, 2019. Almost two months have passed since I was asked to provide this essay. Back in early April, when I was still working on the soundtrack for the film, the director asked me if I'd write the essay for the *Weathering With You* novel. With absolutely no clue about what constituted an essay, I told him, "If you're sure I'm the one for the job, then yes, I'll write it." I took him up on the offer simply because I'd get to read the novel before anybody else.

To be honest, at this point, I regret that decision. No matter what I write, it feels wrong somehow. I've spent my days writing and erasing, writing and erasing, over and over. I had no idea what sort of essay would be a good fit for this novel, and the first day of our nationwide tour sneaked up on me. It's tomorrow, in fact. This really wasn't a task for a guy like me.

So, with a good measure of defiance thrown in, I'm going to attempt to shed a little light on this story by looking back over the work I've done with the director up till today.

The director first sent me the script for *Weathering With You* on August 26, 2017, exactly one year to the day from the release of *your name*. The director is a romantic, so I thought that was very like him. I've spent the whole year and a half since then with this story. Ultimately, a total of thirty-three pieces of music will appear in the movie. That's a big increase from the twenty-seven pieces for *your name*. I journeyed through the story with Hodaka and Hina—who hadn't even been colored and certainly weren't moving yet—in the storyboard and with Director Shinkai, and we kept up a running dialogue about it the whole time. Over our year and a half on this project, the director and I exchanged more than 350 e-mails, and we met directly for countless in-person preparatory meetings as well. While all that was going on, when we were adding the music, the talk would naturally turn to what was in the characters' hearts. Whose feelings was the music in this scene closest to? What perspective should we add sound from? The director is kind and good-natured, so he'd genuinely listen to the opinions of an outsider like me, too.

“What do you suppose he (the character) is thinking now?”

“Would she say that?”

All of us, producer Genki Kawamura included, got involved in these conversations. (If I had to say, Mr. Kawamura was in charge of the rational side, and I was in charge of the emotional side.) We all fought using our impressions of the characters that definitely did exist, if only inside ourselves. The director had formed the characters' unique traits and personalities while he created the film, and by writing this novel, he brought them into sharper focus; that came through to me very clearly as I read the book. It also seemed as if he was checking his answers, in his own way.

In the novel, unlike in the film, all the characters speak from their own, first-person perspectives. What's going on in Hodaka's and Hina's minds is shown many times, of course, but the things Suga and Natsumi are thinking and feeling don't come up that much in the film. If you tried to pack everything into the movie, it certainly wouldn't fit into ninety minutes. Being able to hear their inner voices, even though they aren't the protagonists, is one of the true pleasures of the novel, and it made the story feel even richer.

The other day, when I happened to mention that I was having trouble figuring out what to write for this essay, the director said, “For me, Yojiro, I was intrigued by how much effort you poured into *Weathering With You*, and

I'd like to know why you did it."

I thought about why, and I had the answer inside of two seconds. It was because it's a Makoto Shinkai film. It was also because Director Shinkai was good enough to believe in me. That's all it is. I have no qualms about choosing one person over another. I can't be kind to everyone, and I've got only one body. All I can do is everything my limits allow me to do. I'm sure there are lots of people who dislike me for that, of course, and that's all right. However, nothing could make me happier than meeting someone I can trust and getting the opportunity to make something new with them.

In the process of creation, reflecting someone else's opinions or ideas in a work you love is unexpectedly tough. Even if their fields are different, I'm sure anyone who creates will understand that. As they create, I'm sure lots of people believe that "this is a story only I know, and I'm the one who knows the right answer to it." However, the director listens to the words of the people he believes in. His belief is so straightforward that I won't be satisfied unless I give him everything I've got (and I can't personally tell whether I've actually managed to give everything). That feeling drives me forward.

When I finished reading this novel, my frank impression was that the text in the novel, the movements of the characters, the flow of the words and emotions, and the beautiful pictures that will be shown in theaters—they're all Makoto Shinkai to a T. They are also the shape of this world, as seen through his eyes. We can decide the beauty and ugliness and evanescence and sadness of the world for ourselves. Others might arrogantly sing their own praises and try to refute your vision of the world by citing the miserable state it's in or their vast knowledge and saying that those things constitute some immutable reality, but we can define this world for ourselves. What's in other people's hearts is the one thing no one can restrict. Makoto Shinkai knows this. He also knows that technically, the beauty of the Shinjuku district, the unique glow of the urban sky, and even the most sumptuous cooking can't compare to a casual gesture of kindness from someone.

I like the world the director believes in. I also like the strength he believes in. In order to live in the midst of a vast flood of people and things, individuals tend to find ways to standardize themselves, trying to get closer to a vague, generally accepted "correctness." They feel more at ease that way.

This isn't an entirely bad thing, but little by little, they lose sight of the boundaries between what they really feel and the world's "right answer."

At first glance, the director seems to be more mild-mannered, to be more considerate, and to value harmony more than anyone else. As I watch him, I end up thinking, *He could (and probably should) act like a bit more of a big shot*. I think it's his natural kindness that makes him act the way he does, though.

However, no matter how well he keeps up appearances, and no matter how hard his intellect tries to strike a balance with his surroundings and the world, a kind of steadfast core in his heart stands out. It gets unruly, no matter what he does. It starts screaming quietly. He has this zone where he won't listen, no matter what anybody says. Just like Hodaka, in *Weathering With You*. I'm drawn to that.

Hodaka is aware of the fate that's been handed to Hina. Historically, people actually did offer other humans to the gods as sacrifices in an attempt to secure peace for humanity. Even so, Hodaka goes to save her. Hina is necessary to his world. It doesn't matter whether society is satisfied with the ending of this story. I thought that straightforwardness of Hodaka's was the spitting image of the director.

Director Shinkai has created many fine works, such as *5 Centimeters per Second* and *The Garden of Words*, and has also had great success in business terms with *your name.*, and this time, he went into the work with greater self-confidence, a dependable staff, and unshakable technique. To me, in his previous works, it seemed as though—whether due to his aesthetics or shyness, or possibly out of consideration for his viewers—he tended to get a bit timid about his endings (and I'm really starting to worry I'm speaking too freely here). In this film, though, it felt as though the director stuck with what he wanted, all the way to the end. He literally became one with Hodaka and went to save Hina. That was what it felt like to me. It made me happy.

In the film, a song called "We'll Be Alright (Movie Edit)" plays over the end credits. I think it was in December last year that (according to the man himself) Director Shinkai was inspired by the lyrics to this song and redrew the final scene. I felt an enormous sense of responsibility, and for a while, it felt like a heavy lead weight in the pit of my stomach. So up until the middle

of this April, I tried to negotiate for a different song for the end credits. Right to the end, though, the director insisted that he wanted to conclude the film with this song, no compromises. His eyes were as straightforward as always, just as they'd been for the past year and a half.

He said he thought audiences who'd watched the movie all the way through and heard the words *I want to become what all right means to you* were bound to find solace in the end.

"We'll Be Alright (Movie Edit)" is a song that was made for *Weathering With You*, Hodaka and Hina's song. It's a song for a pair tossed about by the fate the world has unexpectedly given them. However, I didn't know whether it would ultimately become the audience's song.

"The world was riding on your small shoulders, and only I could see it." I didn't know whether viewers would accept those words as their own. As I was reading this novel, though, I started to understand. Everyone has their own world, and they're all doing everything they can to live in it. They have roles; they bear responsibilities, whatever they are; and they're carrying themselves, the one life they have to live, through each day from today to tomorrow. It wasn't just Hina. All people are struggling as they live in that "world" that's just for them. They know how heartening and reassuring it is to have someone see them from nearby. "They see me," "They know about this small world of mine," "There's someone who cares, who asks if I'm okay." They know just how much support those things provide. And when they see someone special and irreplaceable struggling, everyone prays, "I want to become what *all right* means to this person."

I think that's what this song, "We'll Be Alright (Movie Edit)," means. The director taught me the meaning of my own song.

Director Shinkai, thank you.

(Radwimps, illion)

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