At the Crossroads

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At the Crossroads

by Espresso Yourself

Summary

Fashion columnist Nagisa Hazuki lives what appears to be a perfect London life, living on his own and working his dream job, but a rainy evening with a stranger and a crossword puzzle forces him back down to earth and to come to terms with reality. And if love pulls that stranger's head up in the clouds, they're bound to meet in the middle. Right?

Republished/Rewritten version of a deleted fic previously called "Crossroads".

Notes

As I said, this is a rewritten work of mine that was three years in the making. I'm starting off with the first three chapters for you all before winding down to weekly updates. A lot of my editing was just erasing unnecessary subplots and cleaning up the language. I have the entire project outlined already, after three years of writing it! Each chapter should have 4,000 to 5,000 words minimum.
One look outside rained upon Nagisa’s parade - quite literally. He had been looking forward to sauntering outside in the cool autumn sunshine and declaring to the world that he was no longer just an eye-candy assistant but a man worth knowing, a man who was now in charge of an accessories column in *Elite*, one of the best known fashion magazines throughout the world! And his first day on the job, as a celebration of sorts, he wore his best yellow silk button down, a navy overcoat, and tapered grey plaid trousers, all appropriately accessorized with a color-blocked navy, turquoise, and white scarf. And it dared to rain today, of all days.

"I mean, couldn’t it have waited until the weekend? It’s only two days till Saturday!" Nagisa bemoaned the weather to Gou, his friend who’d been put in charge of the magazine’s blog. She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, it’s not like the day’s almost over already," she replied sarcastically, making a tapping gesture with her pencil toward the clock on Nagisa’s laptop. He lay dejectedly upon his keyboard, long since having finished his rough draft. "You’re like, done anyways, right?" she continued. "Take it easy, go home early." Nagisa shook his blond hair in exasperation.

"But I can’t just abandon my post early on the first day! What would the boss think? What if she found out? I’d never live it down! I’ll have to build our relationship from scratch!"

"You know her better than that - if she comes by and sees you gone, I’ll just tell her what a great job you did. You busted your arse for this position - she knows that, I know that, the whole magazine does. After all those extra hours you pulled, you deserve an early night." Nagisa again glanced out the rain-blurred window and thought of home, where a long, hot bath, a fireplace, and some pajamas awaited him. A life of warmth.

"On second thought," he said, snatching the coat from his desk chair and slipping it on, "you may be right." Gou nodded.

"Thought so."

And so he found himself hustling through the streets of the city, weaving through a maze of skyscrapers whose glowing fingertips barely brushed the darkening clouds. Nagisa shivered as rain bulleted his coat and water slapped the ankles of his black boots. A wind picked up, splashing between the blocks of buildings. Absently, he wondered why on earth he walked this way to work. A diet wasn’t worth this much trouble. He glanced around for a place to hole up and wait out the worst of the rain and spotted a little coffee shop across the street. Tugging the collar of his coat around him, he jogged towards it and slipped in quietly.

A bell’s jingle disturbed the static of the music and, for a brief moment, everyone’s gazes flickered toward the newcomer before silently returning to what tasks were at hand. Nagisa approached the counter and quietly ordered an espresso, looking around for a place to sit. The pungent air around him clashed - cold, sodden storm with the hot grounds of coffee. The rustic wood decor brought to mind an older time where houses were few and far between, tucked behind the trees, and people waited out the rain, alone save a candle.

The blond collected his coffee with a sigh; there was no use in such sad thoughts. He paid little heed to where he sat and was rather surprised to find himself looking out at the sidewalk, where shades trudged onward to home. He didn’t wish to think on them.
"Ah," he breathed quietly - he hadn’t finished the crossword puzzle from the morning’s paper, he remembered, and quickly shuffled a hand through his bag before his fingertips brushed the rice-grain edge of the soft news. He tugged it out and laid it before himself, snatching a pen from his pocket to complete it. Now where had he left off? A ten letter word, going across. All the spaces were empty. It had him thoroughly stumped, with the only clue given being "a gaggle of interesting characters appear in this 1930’s Western classic". Nagisa gave the end of his pen a nibble and took a sip of coffee. Could it have to do with World War II? Was it a book? No one option made perfect sense and so, frustrated, he moved on to whiz through some of the other blank words on the crossword. The last letter of his little problem proved to be ‘h’. Out loud, the blond mumbled, "What ten letter word could possibly end with ‘h’?" He chewed the edge of his pen for a few seconds more when a whispered answer was carried back to him, accompanied by the scratch of a pen over paper. "Stagecoach." Nagisa whipped around and saw that he’d been sitting back to back with a different customer.

"What was that?" he eagerly demanded of the man. Rather startled, the stranger turned around to address the blond. Nagisa was rather bewildered when a rather handsome face framed by dark hair and odd red glasses came to look at him.

"Stagecoach - it was a popular American move released in 1939," he replied, his voice significantly quieter than the blond’s - and rightfully so, as this setting was not one in which to shout. Nagisa peeped over his shoulder.

"Is that the crossword you’re working on? Mind if I join you?" Without awaiting a reply from the flustered man, he transferred himself to the seat across the gentleman and began copying the answers down. After a moment of initial shock, the other man reciprocated his actions. "You don’t have 21 down, do you?" Nagisa asked pleasantly.

"No, not yet," he said thoughtfully, gazing steadily at his paper. The blond took a moment to assess that he was well-dressed, and while his choice in wardrobe was astoundingly plain, the cut of his button-down, coat, and slacks were all impeccable; Nagisa would not have been surprised if they’d been specifically tailored to him. His build seemed tall, though not quite lanky, as opposed to his own short stature. "Relax soldier," the man breathed, "with ‘t’ as the second letter." His brow furrowed in concentration and he used his index finger to shove his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Oh! At ease!" Nagisa contributed, scribbling down the answer in its correct space. His companion glanced at him with slight curiosity, as if to ask him how he knew and the blond responded with, "My father was in the military. We’d have to sit all stiff like to salute him until he said ‘at ease’ and then we’d all relax." The taller man nodded thoughtfully. He jumped forward to the next. "Chemically quiet," Nagisa mused.

"Inert," the other man offered, filling in the blank space. The ‘e’ intersected with at ease. "I took a few biochemical engineering classes."

"Watson’s companion," Nagisa recited, trying to locate where it was on the puzzle when quite suddenly, his companion blurted, "Holmes!" The blond glanced up at him, eyebrows raised, and with embarrassment, he admitted, "I loved the Sherlock Holmes books." Nagisa gave a pout and protested, "It was my turn to guess! You cut!"

"It seems I did," he stated, before finally allowing a smile. "Please, proceed." And so Nagisa did.

With his companion’s help, finishing the crossword was a breeze, but quite more enjoyable with someone at his side. While they spoke in mere whispers, it was not long until their voices sounded loud and out of place, regardless of the low hum of the music and pit-pattering of keys. The blond
could not quite put his finger on it, but when he cast a glance outside, he noticed that the rain and shine had come and gone and the sun had left the city to be bathed in swatches of indigo and dim orange.

"Oh," Nagisa remarked when he looked at the time, "it’s late. Sorry," he stood, "but I have to go." He gave his companion a shy smile, which was timidly returned. Nagisa turned and exited the shop, having missed the rosy cheeks he left upon the man’s face, and the dark blue eyes that followed him a ways on.

All the way home, the blond’s smile did not vanish - what a pleasant evening it had turned out to be! It was difficult to find one so sincere these days, so earnest. He’d truly enjoyed the stranger’s company.

The loneliness did not hit him until he shut his door. Vaguely, he recalled that no one would be there to greet him. He slipped to his room and traded his coordinated outfit for pajamas, then lit the fireplace and watched the wood burn. Like paper, the edges of the logs crumbled up and off, forming a grey city of ashes below. How stupid of him to leave without so much as a name. Nagisa had come to a house; he had not yet found home.
Nagisa awoke on his couch in front of his ashy fireplace, the lonesome grey of the morning dripping in through closed curtains. Tick-tock was the beat of the clock and drip-drop was rain's rhythm on his panes as the far away sun rolled into the sky. He was tangled in a throw rug. A photo album lay on his lap and a wine glass with its bottle sat on his coffee table. The book was open to pictures of his father and family. The wine bottle was empty. Nagisa sighed; he truly had been lonely that night.

He shook out his hair - damn, his head hurt - and slipped off the couch, refusing to think on it any longer, despite his heart feeling otherwise. Nagisa successfully distracted himself with temporary outrage when he saw the clock on his microwave which read 6:04 AM.

"Of all the days I wake up on my own, and it's six in the morning," he groaned as he shuffled off the carpet and onto the kitchen floor. His naked feet left odd pattering sounds and had to peel themselves off of the linoleum. Absently, he wondered how long it'd been since he mopped as he opened the fridge. "Let's see..." he mumbled, scanning the shelves. He sighed and settled on orange juice, noting that half the things he had were expired or well on their way. He pulled out the butter as well, then shut the fridge and popped some bread in the toaster. Just a glass for his juice and some ibuprofen to top it all off!

He downed the last of his orange juice and took a couple pills to rid him of his hangover. His toast would be a while yet; in the meantime, he chose an outfit. It took some digging and pulling and tossing his sheets, but he found a v-neck emerald sweater made of a lovely cashmere, a white button-down, his navy coat from the previous day, and after some debate, went for a semi-formal dark wash skinny jean. Casual Friday, right?

When he heard the toast pop, he left everything laying on his bed and buttered it up. He leaned against his counter and gazed out of his kitchen window at his neighborhood outside. Little tears fell upon the glass and, though the sky gradually lightened, the day promised to be dark. He munched his toast thoughtfully and allowed his cheer to slip with the running water on his window and regret leaked into his heart. He really wished he weren't so stupid. He could've asked that guy for a name, a number, anything! How could he just forget? As far as dressing went, he supposed the man at the coffee shop could do better, but that didn't really matter. He'd been nice to Nagisa. He'd been so earnest. He swallowed his little pains with the last of the tasteless toast. He'd complain about it to Gou later.

When he finished dressing himself, he trotted off to the bathroom and gave a start when he saw his appearance. His hangover hadn't been that bad, but he certainly looked like he'd been totally trashed last night. "Classy, Hazuki," he muttered to himself, leaning into the mirror and pulling at his cheeks to assess the damage. Brown streaks ran down either side of his face from where his eyeliner and mascara had run and his foundation had given him a couple pimples near his jaw. He whined a little and grabbed a facial towel to wipe everything away and begin anew. He laid off the foundation for today; his skin needed a breather and yesterday had been a special occasion anyhow. Instead, he just used a matte brown palette for his eyes and gave himself two thin lines for liner. He only gave his top lashes mascara today.

Nagisa nodded to himself in the mirror and checked his appearance. His makeup was subtle enough that it barely looked present. Despite his manner of sleep, he felt that if there was a goddess of good-looking, she'd blessed Nagisa with the delicacy of a butterfly's wing today. He fished through a
couple of his drawers and snatched an elegant pair of gold earrings that stretched halfway to his collarbone. He hesitated in choosing a necklace; on one hand, he had an almost chunky locket that matched the earrings perfectly, but on the other was a simple slightly tarnished herringbone chain. It was real gold - a gift from his father.

Now, as Nagisa was in charge of the accessories column, he'd promised himself that he'd set a good example for everyone around and have the most stylish, up-to-date jewelry. As over-the-top was in style at the moment, that meant that he should choose the youthfully charming locket, oughtn't he? Yet still, he sighed and picked up the little tarnished chain. He could feel warmth at the clasp still, after so many years, where his father first fastened it around his neck. Nagisa checked his reflection; the simplicity was becoming of him, he decided.

When he peeped out of the bathroom and checked the time, he was pleasantly surprised to find it was 7:30. It seemed there was no need to race the clock today, he remarked to himself, grinning as he grabbed his coat and slipped on some knee high, dark brown boots. They were one of his favorites, what with their lighter border at the top - the equestrian style was in, after all.

Now in considerably higher spirits, Nagisa practically skipped through the rain and down the couple blocks until he found his bus stop. When it arrived, he paid his daily fare and found a seat in the back, as per his usual routine.

Well after the bus had pulled into the city and had begun working its way through morning traffic, Nagisa found himself looking out the wet window, searching the tall city for a coffee shop tucked within its nooks and crannies. He checked his phone - if he stopped early, he'd have enough time to walk to work the rest of the way, assuming he went quickly and the line was short. Perhaps it was too much to hope that the stranger would be back, looking for him, confessing that he'd felt a connection, and inviting him out for a romantic evening at an expensive restaurant... and in a moment, Nagisa fell for a fantasy, barely ringing the bell in time to signal a stop when he caught sight of the little shack. He jumped off of the red bus and swaggered into the shop - the shop that was now quite busy and had a lengthy line that did not, in fact, hold the tall, handsome stranger. The blond felt a twinge of disappointment. If fate didn't dictate that they meet again, then it probably wasn't meant to be anyhow. Nonetheless, he shot a quick text to Gou and asked her if she wanted anything. It couldn't hurt to grab some coffee and wait around to see if he showed up. Nagisa snorted - at this point, he really was desperate.

The brunet man never did show up. Even after the five minute wait to order and the ten minute wait to collect his non-fat hazelnut espresso and Gou's two-shot Americano, he still wasn't there. Nagisa's trudge to his building, up the elevator, and onto the seventh floor were dejected and he didn't greet his coworker with his usual smile when he handed her the coffee.

"Oh, thanks," the redhead sighed, taking the cup gratefully. "I swear, you have like, a sixth sense when it comes to the days I don't have time to make coffee - oh, and here's the crossword in return." By the time she wasn't interrupted and had taken a sip of her drink, she worked out that something wasn't right. Nagisa nudged a pencil up and down over the crossword puzzle with his fingers, watching it roll back and forth across his desk, a frown having worked its way between his brows. "Well all right, then," Gou continued, "you look like a kicked puppy. What's up?" Nagisa heaved a melodramatic sigh.

"Oh, not much. There was just this cute guy I ran into the other day and I was hoping to see him again and I didn't. And I have a hell of a hangover."

"Just what did you do with this cute guy?" Gou snickered. The blond rolled his eyes.

"A crossword puzzle at a coffee shop. I just drank too much wine when I got home."
"Don't we all?"

"Charming." They shared a laugh and swiveled back to their computers.

"Nagisa!" called a woman's voice from down the hall. Both he and Gou poked their heads up and caught sight of their boss leaning out from her office. "Come over here a second!" she beckoned. The partners shared a nervous glance which carried a single thought - he really should have stayed until the end of his shift.

Nagisa tossed his coat over his chair and smoothed down his sweater. Maybe he should have worn the bigger necklace after all. He recalled the locket remorsefully, as it was safely tucked away in his drawer.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Amakata?" he asked politely, shutting the door softly behind him. He wasn't really sure why - the office reminded him of an ice cube in the far corner of the level, as it was all glass and always blasted cold air.

"Hear you left early yesterday," she began, leafing through some papers nonchalantly. Nagisa stiffened - he was so getting fired, or demoted if he was lucky. She glanced up at him and shook her head. "For God's sake, relax, I don't care. I called you in for a favor. In about an hour, there's a meeting going on with with Japanese executives." Nagisa nodded. *Elite* had been based primarily in Harajuku in the 80's, and featured some of its wilder street fashions. Over the years, its operations expanded to focus on national haute couture, and had only recently spread overseas. "Since you just got a promotion, I haven't had time to find a new assistant. Mind serving coffee and passing files out? It'd be a big help."

"Um - sure," he affirmed, not wanting to say no. She was giving him a sweet look that told him she'd hold it against him if he refused. He briefly wondered how her fiance found it attractive.

"Thanks," she replied, grabbing a formidable stack of manila folders filled with papers and handing them to Nagisa. "Now if you'd just take these and sort through them - remember, you have an hour. Get Gou to help you, she doesn't have anything pressing to do." And so, arms laden with paperwork, Nagisa scampered back to his desk.

"Wow, how much work do you have to do when you get fired?" Gou teased, knowing fully that he'd be in tears if anything really bad had happened.

"Not much when I have you for help," Nagisa retorted easily, balancing the stack on low half-wall between their desks. "We've got, like, an hour to sort through all these. Looks like this is the schedule." He picked up a paper separate from the rest and scanned it through. The Tokyo executives were coming to discuss London's need for a green and sustainable business, it seemed. "I'm a little pissed," Nagisa confessed, leaning closer to Gou. "I mean, I already got the promotion, right? Shouldn't she have a new assistant by now? Why do I have to deal with all this?"

"Hey," Gou replied, "we're in this one together. Let's get started," she sighed, saving a draft and shutting her laptop.

They had only finished about two-thirds of their work when the hour was up. Right on the dot, a brisk bundle of men in astoundingly dull suits marched in the office, not quite going two-by-two. Their voices were a busybody's hum, their singular mind, superior and hive-like. Nagisa felt his lip curl at the sight of them. They made a beeline for the meeting room, causing a whine to bubble up in his throat.

"Ugh, they're here - how far have we gotten?" Gou, long since having transferred herself and the
folders to the floor, peeked up from her lake of papers with prey's panic in her dark eyes.

"We're only two-thirds through!" She glanced over her shoulder and Nagisa followed her line of sight. These men would not be forgiving of tardiness and therefore neither would be their boss.

Ms. Amakata was now hustling over to the boardroom. She caught his eye and furiously tapped at her watch as though it were necessary to point out that they'd run out of time. Her eyes pleaded as if to say 'do something', so the blond popped up and did what he'd done every day for the three years he'd worked as her assistant: he ran to the break-room and made coffee.

"Let's see," he muttered to himself, scanning through the grounds. They had a small variety: a lovely dark roast someone had brought from a trip to Spain, a light cinnamon roast from a company most of the office workers - Nagisa included - positively adored, and a handful of pungent medium roasts. There were three coffee makers in the break-room and a large stack of paper cups someone had thought to bring in from the cafeteria. He poured what was left in each coffee pot into the cups, giving him about six cups, placed them on a tray, and hurried to meeting, faking a gentle smile as he pushed the door open.

The other men glanced at him, summed up a quick judgement, and proceeded to focus on their work. Whether or not they'd mistaken him for a woman, he was clearly beneath their notice, like mud in the crack of a sidewalk. A receptionist to fetch coffee and papers and look confused when the copier got jammed. Nagisa barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes at them - thank God this was the last time he'd ever have to work as an assistant.

He worked his way around the table, softly murmuring, "May I interest you in some coffee?" only occasionally receiving a 'yes', 'no', or 'what roast?', followed by a 'no'. They didn't bother with pleasantries. His smile fast faded and his sunrise eyes faded to a dawn-grey mask. For such bigshots, Nagisa thought, they sure were disrespectful.

"May I interest you in some coffee?" he repeated tiredly, glancing through a crack in the meeting room's door at Gou, who was frantically assembling the last of the folders.

"Yes please," answered a voice, low and polite, and not unlike honeydew on Nagisa's ears, as they'd been clogged by the sludge of rude behavior. It brought back the tickle of rain on his forehead, coffee grounds mixing with a storm, and music obscured by the sound of machinery tucked by a blue and orange street corner. He glanced down. The man glanced up. Their eyes met halfway.

"Oh! Um," he began, after a bit too much time had passed between them, "we have a light cinnamon roast, a dark roast from Spain, and Americano brewed right now." The brunet's cheeks had gone slightly pink - no doubt he recalled their evening together as well.

"The dark roast sounds nice," he softly said to Nagisa. The blond quickly obliged, his cloudy skin now lined with a rosy glow like sun over the rolling fog. In the corner of his eye, he caught Gou waving energetically to him. He placed the coffee down by the man, hurried his way around the others, and collected the folders from his friend, taking care to set one aside so that he could scrawl his cell number on the first page. When he passed them out, he made sure that he caught the eye of the handsome stranger and pantomimed opening the folder before slipping out with a satisfied smile.

Gou was leaning back in her desk chair when Nagisa rejoined her.

"You're looking considerably cheerful for someone that had to go around serving coffee to a bunch of arses," she commented in an offhand manner. The blond waved off his previous irritation with his boss and slid into his chair.
"So get this," he addressed her eagerly, "that guy I met the other day? The one I was bummed about not finding? So he was in there and I wrote down my number for him." The redhead raised her eyebrows and her lips bent upwards in a smile.

"No way!" she exclaimed, leaning into her friend. "So, what does he look like? Like, sexy hot as a pepper, cute as a button, or like, storybook handsome?" Nagisa frowned - all of those sounded ideal in their own way, but if he were being honest with himself, the man was none of them. He was certainly adorable in an off-beat, nerdy way, and he had the sex-appeal of a serious man, both of which combined gave him an odd form of handsome.

"Some mix of the three. He's really tall, too, with like, that kind of black hair that's almost blue and like... blue-ish eyes, I guess?" Gou gave an excited jump.

"That's like, perfect!" Nagisa grinned like he was sharing a secret and opened his laptop to begin revising the draft he'd finished yesterday.

"He's totally gonna text me," the blonde enthused. He was absolutely of certain of that. It was funny, however, that the things of which he was most certain almost never came to pass.

Chapter End Notes

just a note that i use brunet as a synonym for 'black haired' bc saying the latter is much more awkward to read plus it wouldnt make sense for rei to have fucking blue ass hair
Nagisa slipped back to his home base after a bathroom run, his earlier feeling of overwhelming self-satisfaction continuing to accompany him. He wasn’t nearly as far along in his draft as he ought to have been, courtesy of stopping every minute or so to enthuse to Gou how pleased he was with finding his stranger. He suspected the redhead was even farther behind than he was at this rate. When he sat down, however, it was her turn to interrupt him with news.

"So you’ll never believe who just texted me," she enthused, causing Nagisa to swing his chair around to face her. She had alighted and her eyes were shining with excitement.

"Who?" Nagisa prompted, leaning in closer.

"Hana! She’s back from France!" Nagisa gasped which spun quickly into an excited squeal. When he and Gou had first been taken on as employees, Hana had been going steady with the magazine for a solid two years and they’d quickly discovered that she was on the fast track for an important promotion within the business, following the imminent retirement of the man who’d first recommended her for the job. The three had fast become friends, despite Hana’s elevated status, and Nagisa figured they’d never be separated.

Of course, he’d been wrong. Hana’s mentor figured he had a few good years left in him and again advised the magazine to give her an opportunity that would involve her with other magazines on an international scale. She had been flabbergasted when she discovered that this opportunity was for a paid two-year internship with the French branch of *Vogue*. The magazine covered basic living expenses and she’d receive valuable credentials and education. And so, Hana accepted.

As the two years progressed, Gou, Nagisa, and Hana had stayed in touch and the blond figured she’d be returning soon, but there had been no announcement of this from anyone. He was appropriately shocked at her return as, it seemed, was Gou.

"She’s been back for like, a day, apparently," the redhead began, "but she was getting over jetlag. Hope you’re not busy tonight ‘cause I accepted her invitation to go out to drinks on your behalf." Her eyes twinkled and Nagisa’s expression was painted with amusement.

"You know me too well."

Their colleague had invited them to a rather upscale, posh club known for their outrageously fruity drinks and often high prices. Nagisa fancied that a place like this was where heiresses went when they wanted to drink away their sorrows. He couldn’t imagine spending nearly that much of his rent money to get drunk, but indulgence with old friends was a different matter.

The interior was bathed in low, buttery light, accented in darker shades of violet and rose, and provided many a dark corners for too-tippsy dancers to begin their nightly business. It was Friday night, after all - the majority of the club’s occupants were preparing give them good use. The couches were sleek and sharp-edged, colored in chrome so not to distract from the lights. There were tables here and there, but Gou and Nagisa found Hana right where they expected her to be: seated at the bar, engaged in conversation with an openly harassed bartender.

Hana, better known in the fashion world as the up-and-coming fashion photographer extraordinaire Chigusa Hanamura, could just as easily have landed a job posing in front of the camera rather than snapping the shots behind it. She stood at 167 centimeters tall with slightly tanned skin and dyed chestnut hair pulled back in a bun which only served to bring attention to her high cheekbones and
eyes that were a lovely green. When she caught them standing there, she grinned, released her captive, and beckoned them her way.

"Oh my God," Nagisa exclaimed, wrapping Hana in a tight embrace, the top of his head bumping her chin slightly. Gou clambered in next to them. "It’s been forever!"

"Certainly has," Hana replied succinctly, stepping back from her comrades and tugging them immediately over to the bar.

"You clearly haven’t forgotten Nagisa’s taste though," Gou commented, reading over a list of the drinks. They shared a laugh and placed their orders. Nagisa was rethinking what he’d mused on earlier - maybe this was a good place to get drunk. After all, they were certainly right about the drinks.

"What’s happened since I left?" the photographer inquired, opting, as she often did, to skip the small-talk and dive straight into the information. To this Gou informed her of Nagisa’s recent promotion (which prompted Hana to order him another drink), complained about supervisors, and gave a little rant on stupid assignments.

"I mean, really, they wanted me to go back and re-tag all of the month’s posts ‘cause of a stupid mistake the tech department made?" she finished, shaking her head. "What bullshit." Hana nodded once in sympathy, concluding the topic and methodically moved on to the next.

"Love lives," she announced, flicking a manicured nail at Gou to indicate that she must suffer first. The redhead rolled her eyes.

"Nonexistent. I’ve been on a couple dates with some decent-looking guys, but they turned out to be arses." Her face curled into a grimace as she recalled, "I even dated one of those loan-shark guys for a month or so. It was doomed to failure when he threatened to call in my unpaid debts." Nagisa and Hana shook their heads in unison at the disloyalty he no doubt had shown her.

"What about you?" Hana proceeded, her gaze flickering to the blonde. "How are things going with that guy from before?" With this, Nagisa visibly flinched and Gou uncomfortably drowned her gaze in her drink. Hana pried, "What happened? You were fine," and Nagisa sighed.

From thence forth the bar lost its exquisite lustre and the blond was practically drowning himself in his sorrows. "I was royally dumped," he stated flatly, tipping back a fruity drink. "It wasn’t too long ago - during the summer," he sighed. "I was expecting a ring at that point, honestly."

"Now, now," Gou chided - after having dealt with the immediate aftermath all on her own, she wasn’t eager to see him fall back into that post-breakup depression. "What about that tall, dark, and handsome stranger you’ve got distracting you?" Hana’s eyebrows perked up, inviting him to continue.

"Well, there is him now I suppose," Nagisa continued, his cheeks going slightly rosy. Gradually, he grinned. "We met at this coffee shop and hit it off over the crossword puzzle."

"I see that’s still your only hobby," Hana interjected, and they shared a brief laugh.

"Probably a match made in heaven," Gou agreed. Nagisa blushed harder and took a long sip of his drink.

"Anyways," he plowed through their giggles, "he showed up at a meeting with the Tokyo execs today and I wrote my number in his folder." The three gave cheers to that, and they fell into easy conversation about France, food, and a lovely date thereafter.
By the time Nagisa had left the bar, he was heartily warmed by alcohol and the few hours he’d spent in good company, and the streetlights were beginning to flicker on. The sidewalk was slick with an earlier drizzle, but it was of little consequence now; the evening had turned lovely, despite the bite of a chill. He pulled the lapels of his coat close to his shivering body. As he did so his phone vibrated, tickling his heart all pretty. He scurried to reach it and thanked his lucky stars that he wasn’t one hundred percent intoxicated. He was certain he could conduct the conversation respectably despite his state.

"Nagisa Hazuki speaking," he chirped daintily, springing evenly along the boulevard.

"Oh, hello!" A gentle yet surprisingly masculine voice answered him. He was faintly surprised: he recalled the voice of the man being distinct, sharp, and efficient, not at all like this somewhat dreamy voice that spoke. He wondered if perhaps the static could truly distort it so much? "I’m sorry for the time, but I’m working for my report on overseas fishing and I would like your opinion on the impact that overfishing for cosmetic use has on the environment."

Several seconds of confused silence ensued, broken only by a huff of disappointment on Nagisa’s end.

"Sorry, I think you have the wrong number," he replied, effectively cutting off the conversation. He dried the screen of his phone before slipping it back in his pocket.

Three days later, he still was in a mood as foul as the autumn weather. The little blond had been short-tempered with both Gou and Hana, who had been struggling to get back into the groove of the magazine’s way. They’d openly told him that he was acting like a little bitch lately, but he couldn’t help being irked by the smallest mistakes, though he was blind to his own. He’d had to rewrite his column three times already, after having been rejected by Ms. Amakata for his “forceful, un-fun tone”.

Nagisa flung himself down beside Gou and Hana in the cafeteria, crumpling down to the surface of the table rather than even trying to sit up. Around him, senseless, aimless chatter of business, clothes, she said what, and such echoed through the high, windowed ceiling. The top of the cafeteria was more than two floors high and didn’t have much artificial lighting, as most was supplied by the skylight. His friends shared a quick glance and leaned down a little to look at him where he lay.

"Sweetie," Gou began concernedly, "I think it’s time for an intervention. You’ve been moping around for days about some guy you met that hasn’t given you a call - I mean, that’s happened to you loads of times!"

Hana nodded in agreement and continued,

"It’s not like you to take rejection this hard. Usually they’re just for one-night stands." Nagisa huffed indignantly and slapped his hand on the table, not unlike a child would.

"Is that really what you two think I do all the time?" he protested noisily, feeling as though a marble had been caught and tangled in between his vocal chords.

"Well, you are kind of a slut," Gou admitted brazenly, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder. Hana rolled her eyes and gave her a kick, clipping Nagisa on the calf as well, muttering about how she felt like a mother in the midst of a children’s squall. The blond shimmied upwards and pathetically cast his gaze away, head in his hands.

"It’s not only the guy," he lamented, "it’s the new job and there’s this hospital bill I haven’t paid yet and my ex’s still been calling to get some of his stuff and hasn’t been at all kind about it and I’ve been hungover twice in a row and - ugh! It’s just not my week!"
"It’s Tuesday," Hana commented offhandedly, to which Nagisa rolled his eyes. He opened his mouth to make a scathing reply, but was stopped by her well-manicured hand lifting in an expression of silence. "Don’t make that a self-fulfilling prophecy. Go take a walk, get out of the building a bit."

In a flash, she whipped out a couple of notes and handed them over. "And get us some coffee while you’re at it."

And so he found himself marching roughly down the streets in search of the shop where he’d first met the damned man in the first place. Gou had tossed some pounds at him and requested he grab her some of the coffee he’d bought a few days back, which of course had led him to where he began. Honestly, the things he suffered for his friends. He knew in his heart, however, that his behavior warranted both a break - as Hana had suggested - and a coffee run for his friends. Although they’d given him what he needed to pay for it, he planned to simply purchase it himself as an apology for the shameful, petulant way he’d acted these past few days.

He slipped like a drowsy raindrop on glass into the flow of the line once he arrived and sighed at the poor weather. Pit-patters came along as the first of the darker clouds came strolling along and he realized that they were in for quite a storm tonight. He double-checked the time - he had about an hour and a half before he needed to be back at work. He’d been planning on an extended lunch to collect photographs to accompany his article today - a bit of field work, as it were.

He ordered himself an interesting mocha that was flavored with blackberry and the usual for his friends - both of which contained too many shots for his own taste - and settled himself at the counter beside a window. He was quick in yanking out his crossword puzzle, though it was from a few days back. What between his ex calling, a few hospital bills he’d left unpaid for too long, his couple of hangovers, and the drafts he’d worked on from home over the weekend, it was understandable that he hadn’t finished it yet. He sipped at his coffee, hunched over the paper comfortably, and commenced his period of relaxation.

Here and there a gentle jingle of the storefront’s bell would disturb him, but he otherwise made excellent time on his puzzle, each successful word erasing a little bit of the tension carried in his mind. He hardly noticed that someone had claimed the seat beside him until he saw the hem of his pants. It was sharp, precise, and by all means perfect, though they were a bewilderingly dull color.

He peeked over the edge of his paper to examine the rest of the outfit and pass a judgement - it was his job to do this, of course - and was shocked when he realized that the stranger from the meeting sat there beside him, thoroughly immersed in his own work.

"Hey!" he greeted with a chipper tone, his smile delighted and warm. A few patrons gave him annoyed glimpses and he remembered to lower his voice. "Fancy meeting you here," he proceeded. At first glance the man was affronted by this sudden, welcoming reception, though a slight brush of pink on his cheeks brought to attention by those funny red glasses, betrayed the impression of irritability. "I didn’t think I’d see you again," Nagisa commented, prompting the other to continue.

"Why ever not?" he questioned, leaning away from the documents in front of him and turning to face the little blond.

"Well," he responded, his voice picking up a little edge of regret, "you never called or texted me, y’know, when I wrote my number down in that folder the other day." He kept his sympathetic smile up though the disappointment was apparent in his demeanor, he supposed. He’d always been easy to read. He was bewildered when the well-behaved gentleman at his side smacked his forehead and muttered under his breath what Nagisa supposed was a curse.

"I forgot to write it down," he explained, though it sounded more as though he’d just realized it himself.
"You were supposed to keep the folder," the blonde explained cheekily, the hum of a laugh rising in his throat. The gentleman smiled slightly and replied,

"I was there as a favor to my coworker - he was ill that day but didn’t want to miss it. I gave the briefing to him."

"That would explain the call," the smaller man snickered, remembering the strange man that had phoned him after his escapade with Gou and Hana. "He wanted my opinion on the environmental impact fish had or something." The brunet’s face reddened further and he profusely apologized.

"Good Lord, I’m sorry about that, I don’t know what he was thinking." He passed a sleek, black iPhone to Nagisa and requested politely, "Might I have it now?" The blond obliged happily. As he was typing, the man straightened himself and glanced at the newspaper he’d been working on. "You’re working on yesterday’s puzzle?" he inquired, his violet eyes analyzing everything he’d already written. He nodded and gave an exasperated sigh.

"It’s been a busy week," Nagisa replied. The gentlemen reached in the pocket of his coat, draped upon the back of his stool, and glanced over the answers he’d previously written down.

"I’ve got different answers," he remarked with confusion lacing his voice. "See, for twelve across, I’ve got ‘chiffon’, and then all the answers around it are totally messed up." He scanned over both papers with an earnest intensity and Nagisa found himself chuckling - and this time, the stranger most certainly was affronted. "What’s so funny?" he pried, eyes flickering back and forth.

"The clue asks for a silky fabric found in South Asia - seven letters across. It’s not chiffon, that’s French. You usually find silks in Asia, so the answer’s dupioni, not chiffon." In reference to the evening they spent with one another the past week, he pointed to himself and reminded, "I write for a fashion magazine as a columnist." An appropriate pinch of pride peppered his voice and he gave his most dashing smile to the man beside him.

"Oh, I thought you were a receptionist or something of the sort. Why were you the one to hand out the briefings and coffee?" he interrogated, brows quirked at a funny angle. Nagisa gave a sigh as thick as the storm clouds and confessed,

"Okay, I just the promotion a week ago. But I was just doing my boss a favor since she hadn’t gotten a new assistant yet." The other man nodded and offered his congratulations, giving the blond’s ego a nice stroke. He shifted his focus back to his newspaper and frowned at it, as though it had committed a personal offense against him.

"You’re certain the answer isn’t chiffon? I mean, as I recall, it’s a very lightweight fabric - wouldn’t they use those in South Asian clothing?" He sounded quite determined to convince Nagisa of this, but he just chuckled prettily.

"I’m positive. It’s not exclusively made with silk, anyways, you can have cotton chiffon, nylon chiffon, or rayon chiffon, too," he explained. Offhandedly, he commented, "You don’t like to be wrong, do you?" The brunet broke into a flustered grin and he made reply, "Not particularly." He rewrote the word in and scrunched up his eyebrows while Nagisa informed him, "I was having trouble with three down - see, it intersects with dupioni at the ‘n’ and before I wrote in dupioni, I had barrister, but now it doesn’t fit and I can’t think of another word." Nagisa tapped the spaces with his pen and read over the clue - ‘an advocate that can act in place of a client’. It had him thoroughly stumped and he’d skipped over it every time he finished writing in a word. When he glanced back toward the man, he found him grinning smugly and consequently, it was his turn to feel rather vexed.

"What?" he inquired, tapping his pen on the edge of the paper, now quite flustered.
"Barristers can’t act in place of a client," he informed the blond, pushing his glasses up his nose, "however, attorneys can.” Nagisa cocked an eyebrow and awaited for his companion to take his turn. “I’m an attorney myself,” he acknowledged, following their little trade-off.

"Okay," he defended himself, "that was not fair, the clue is singular and the word is plural.” He hastily scrawled in the answer, folded the paper up and shoved it away, at last having finished it. He caught a quick glimpse of his phone and saw that he had an hour to go. Ever observant, the man caught his look and, in a tone that was rather let down, he inquired, “Must you be on your way now?” Nagisa’s cheeks were dusted in pink at the disappointment the man expressed as for so long now, he’d thought himself rejected. Inevitably, the corners of his mouth rose into a smile and he shook his golden locks to and fro.

“No, I actually have like, another hour. I wonder, though… have you started today’s crossword?” He fluttered his eyelashes, the fawn strands gliding across what few sun freckles remained from the pleasant summer they’d had before and his plum liner shimmered with his eyes, all of which served to bring attention to those beautifully blossoming cheeks. The man awkwardly scrambled through his papers, messing up what once had been a perfectly prime organizational scheme and practically ripped the day’s paper out from under them, all while maintaining that of course he had barely started and he needed help with so many of the words. Nagisa laughed and leaned in over the paper, gracing an arm over the other man’s shoulder. “I’d be happy to lend you my expertise,” he replied flirtatiously, twirling a pen in his left hand with practiced dexterity. They examined the first clue together and its corresponding place on the puzzle. The editors had really wanted to challenge them - it was a twelve letter word with a prompt of “buzz, boom, bang”! His companion examined it thoroughly.

“Have you any clue what it could be?” he said, appealing to Nagisa for help. The blond gave a frustrated sigh, but snapped his finger a moment later when the answer came to him.

“Wait, try onomatopoeia!” The brunette wrote it in and mumbled,

“Why didn’t I think of that? I always got top grades on grammar quizzes in school.” Nagisa snickered at his offended tone and replied,

“So did I - but I bet you never got good grades in literature courses.” He flinched slightly and seemed rather cross as Nagisa had been right on point, but the smaller man warmly added, “You seem more like the science, maths, and I dunno, about everything else kind of guy.”

“That is true,” he admitted to the little blond, but pursued the topic by adding, “You seem the type to enjoy bending things to suit you. Not that that’s bad,” he quickly corrected upon seeing the dumbstruck face of his partner and continued, “in fact, I find it a rather remarkable skill.” It was true - Nagisa had always had trouble handling hard facts and took well to interpretation, however, always finding the loopholes in whatever he didn’t like. He’d never been content with anything else. “It would explain why you’d have chosen such a free-willed path as a writer for the fashion industry. In opposition to this,” he rambled, “I’ve never been so inclined to operate as such. It’s why I chose to be an attorney.” Nagisa nodded thoughtfully and found himself asking,

“But don’t you have to interpret and like, I dunno, change the law so that your client can get off?” The stereotype that came to mind was that of sleazy lawyers easily ensnaring their opponents to win their money.

“Perhaps,” he replied with a hint of a sneer, “for defense attorneys. I’m a prosecutor, I generally take on criminal cases.” The little blond’s prettily plucked eyebrows shot up as he enthused,

“Oh, wow! That’s incredible!” His partner shrugged and opened his mouth to reply, but mid-word,
in fact, he was stopped by a stupefied Nagisa. “Aren’t you ever worried that you’ll put away someone innocent?” The brunet’s jaw was slack open still as he regarded him curiously. He seemed to be hesitating to answer and carefully chose his next words:

“The thought has in fact occurred to me before, though I haven’t much… dwelt on that. I just do my job.” Nagisa nodded, grateful for the honest reply, but prodded,

“But the real question is will you think about it, don’t you think?” The man uncomfortably nodded and mumbled an agreement. For a few moments they sat in their own silence, unperturbed by the indie music, the gentle chatter of rain on the windowsills, and the hum of indistinguishable voices. Nagisa finished up his coffee and checked the time. “Listen,” he began, “I’ve gotta go - I’m actually supposed to be doing some photography right now, but text me, okay? And think about it, too!” He chirped his end and fluttered up in a flurry of gathering and the man, polite as ever, slid his coat upon the blond’s shoulders with a gentle, “allow me”. Nagisa beamed at him and asked as he was leaving, “What’s your name?” The man, still awestruck from the first flurry of lashes replied,

“Ryuugazaki Rei. Or - erm, sorry, Rei Ryuugazaki. Right. We’re in the west. Um, what’s yours?” The blond giggled at the error and teasingly tapped his phone screen, having entered it quite a while before, before turning with a flourish of his sunny tresses and long, bleu-de-France coat. His coffee roast lashes gave a final flicker in the direction of Rei Ryuugazaki. Nagisa hadn’t missed the cherry pink blush upon his cheeks this time.
I remembered I wasn't gonna be home starting Thursday, so have an early chapter.

Two coffee cups tapped the desks like a robin gracing its perch upon the first bloom of spring. Soft colors swirled behind the blond's creme cheeks, obscured only by the dot of some freckles. His warm lashes, dashed by the beginnings of mist, shivered above them, so soft and careful. His plump lips were left open in wanting for a feather-light embrace that promised of new beginnings, of happy endings, and a lifetime more of quivering kisses. Nagisa was caught in a fantasy, so much that he barely saw the bewildered glance shared by Gou and Hana and the perplexed stare of Ms. Amakata, but so long as he could feel the echo of Rei's lingering hand upon the curve of his shoulder, he felt he could disregard his friends entirely. Sweet words that had never been uttered teased Nagisa's ears as he flitted into his chair, fingers teasing the top of his laptop as all reason flew away until -

Ms. Amakata?

The blond snapped up rigidly and like a slap in the face, he absorbed the mystified gazes of his coworkers, save Gou, who at this point in time was accustomed to it. His boss was leaning beside Hana, perhaps having been checking some of her work, mouth half-open as though she'd been speaking when he floated in. Hana’s gaze held a certain amount of concern for his mental health, most likely due to the fact that he hadn't even acknowledged the editor. The redhead, however, had swung herself in front of her computer, sipping at the coffee Nagisa delivered.

"This coffee is cold," she criticized absently, setting it off to the side while she typed a few words of her assignment. Ms. Amakata blinked the daze away and shifted closer to Nagisa.

"Should I be worried about you?" she inquired comically. Hana leaned back in her chair and swiveled around, one brow arched impeccably above the other.

"No. This is about a man, isn't it?" When Nagisa confirmed her analysis with a nod, their boss laughed, patted him on the head affectionately and informed him,

"I wish you the best of luck then. Dress him well." She wrapped up a comment to Hana and then made her leave to her ice office, faintly smiling for her love-struck subordinate. Naturally, Nagisa faced no such mercy from his friends, for as soon as their boss was out of earshot, they had him pinned to the ground with a harsh interrogation, pairing up good-cop, bad-cop style to squeeze the information out.

"It was the same guy wasn't it?" Gou asked blithely, color raising enthusiastically to her cheeks. "If it was the guy from before, then you were totally wearing his favorite color. Did you see how black his hair was? It was like, practically blue. God, that coat would be perfect for his favorite color. Plus, like, that makes the primary colors for you."

"You think this was a good coat?" Nagisa demanded apprehensively. "I like, wasn't sure if he would've liked it." Gou nodded as the other woman picked up the trail of investigation.

"What did you find out? Job? Name? Store of preference?" Hana demanded, almond eyes boring
into her victim.

"Rei Ryugazaki, attorney at law. He does, like, prosecution for criminal cases. He probably gets his
clothing tailored and it's like, all grey." If he got to know the man any better, he was well aware he'd
need to take Ms. Amakata's advice to heart, certainly. The color didn't suit him at all. "But like," he
proceeded, "I asked him if he ever wondered about the people he put away, right, like what if they
were innocent? And he was all, 'I dunno, never thought about it', so I was all, 'then think about it'
without thinking, and I think I might've made him feel awkward! Like, what if I ruined my
chances?" The majority of the story was directed at the photographer, who analyzed each and every
word with extreme caution. Gou excitedly glanced between them, offense at the coffee completely
forgotten.

"I think," she began carefully, her lips slightly pursed, "that you asked the right question. A good
man will keep it on his mind and, by default, you as well." Gou clapped her hands delightedly as the
tension leaked out of Nagisa's body.

"Rei," Gou commented lightly. "What a great name. So like, what else did you say?" Nagisa
informed them of the crosswords, to which they rolled their eyes, the conversation of dupioni, at
which they giggled, and the story of his exit. Gou gave her approval at the latter, citing his excellence
in charisma. "Flawless," she remarked admiringly. "You're such a tease." He snickered and replied,
"Yes, we sluts are well versed in flirtatious behavior." The redhead colored and apologized
sheepishly for her earlier words, but the blond waved it off with a grin, and instead said, "Everyone's
a slut sometimes. Well. At least among us, anyways." Gou laughed and offered up the remainder of
her commentary on his behavior.

"But seriously, what a good move. This way, you'll totally be on his mind, you sexy little beast." Nagisa
soaked up the praise, but over Hana’s shoulder caught the amused expression of his boss,
who apparently had been watching them for a bit. She tapped her computer screen and the blond
waved abashedly in acknowledgement. The friends giggled happily together and then, now peaceful,
returned to their work. Goodwill for their friend stirred in the hearts of the ladies and the young man
focused his tender feelings into his writing.

Within the following hours, he offered perhaps some of his best work. His assignment was to write a
column on autumn's latest fashion trends, and ever practical and fashionable, he chose to write on
scarves. It was a rather safe topic as well, though who could blame him? It was his first column, after
all. In his article, he noted the unique combination of cherry blossom pink and sunflower yellow
designers strayed towards this year. As no normal person could afford to buy themselves an entirely
new wardrobe for fall, he advised that a well-placed colorful pop could draw a beautiful amount of
attention to an otherwise dull outfit and make it stand out as trendy and fun. He sourced reasonably
priced stores known for their accessories that he'd earlier photographed, though they hadn't yet been
fitted in his spread properly since, as a favor to him, Hana had offered fix them in Photoshop. She
hadn't finished, but she was to correct colors and erase backgrounds in exchange for microwaved
coffees and the money he'd “borrowed” earlier.

When the photos were finished and he had received via email from Hana, Nagisa printed off his final
draft. Ms. Amakata checked it as the day dimmed and deemed it worthy to be sent to the formatting
department for publication. At this time, Gou bade him and Hana goodbye and left the building for
home. He waved at Hana, who was wrapping up her work and preparing to leave herself. Noting the
late hour, Nagisa prayed he hadn't missed his chance to give the article and pictures to the formatting
department. He hurried off to the lab in which they did their work, and dropped the files off with a
friendly face. On his way back to his desk, however, his phone buzzed once, then twice. He
illuminated his phone screen to check his texts. Both were from the same unknown number, but
Nagisa automatically knew it had to be Rei.
From: Unknown Number

Nagisa is a beautiful name.

From: Unknown Number

I apologize for the lateness of the request, but I have a dinner reservation for two at 8:30 and my colleague cancelled. Would you care to join me?

The polite, awkward phrasing caused a laugh to tickle its way out of the blond and he replied, 'Sure thing!!! where?'. His cheeks reddened pleasantly with the thought that he must really have made an impression on the straight-laced attorney to be invited out so soon, however he nearly choked on the air in his windpipe when the text he received in return was 'Amber Alley'.

Amber Alley was a world-famous restaurant in an unquestionably high-class neighborhood meant for incredibly successful businessmen, editors, stage and movie actors, and about everything Nagisa would never amount to. Often when he was young and enjoyed flipping through celebrity gossip magazines, the backdrop would be that restaurant. He could've sworn that the rich and famous just crawled out from a hole in that restaurant. Wealthy and celebrated aside, however, it was renowned for its incredible food, with items from all around the world blended to create fantastic dishes with unbelievable contrast and originality. Once, when he was young, his father promised to take him, but it was a foolish thing to say: a family like the Hazukis could never afford it.

Of course, at this point he had worked up quite a panic and flipped his head wildly from side to side, searching for an ally of any sort. Luck struck like lightning. He spotted Hana in the process of stepping into an overcrowded elevator and positively screeched, "Hana! Fashion emergency!" She snapped her neck around so quickly he would be amazed if she didn't get whiplash, hopped away from the elevator like it was hot and was immediately shut out. She glanced back sorely before striding over to Nagisa with swiftness and furious grace.

"You'd better have meant that," she snapped, crossing her arms, her brows taking a deep dive and the corners of her mouth sagging.

"The guy, Rei," the blond frantically explained to his fuming friend, "he invited me to eat at Amber Alley, I only have two hours, I can't afford to buy something new, please, please, please help me!" She regarded her friend, her disposition easing from miffed to mindful as she mused over his options. A moment later, she sighed decisively and waggled her finger.

"Come here," she beckoned seriously, swiveling around and stalking off down a hall that Nagisa knew led to the studios in which the photographers worked with their models. And, he realized as Hana pulled out a set of keys to unlock a door to the right of the studio, the dressing rooms for the models. The lofty woman flicked a light on in the spacious area and forewarned him, "If you ruin one of these suits or dresses, I'll lose my job, then kill you." He didn't doubt it in the least. Breathless, he pivoted and dumbfoundedly asked in a small voice, "Should I wear a suit or a dress?" Hana lost her severe scowl and snickered with affection over scorn. She knew as well as he that the blond never had been faced with an opportunity to look as fine as she or Gou, for as the youngest in a large, poor family, he wore mostly hand-me-downs throughout most of his life. While he was proud of how far he'd made it into a business that was known to be unkind to newcomers, he seldom imagined yet always desired that he would look like one of models upon the glossy cover. Like most, however, he contented himself as one of the many working behind the scenes. Hana and Gou both could have had what he never could attain and they knew it. It had been their choice as opposed to their fate to join him there and they were well aware...
of the fact. Sympathy daunted them at times like these, where their hearts would don the guilt of certain privilege that he had not yet been able to reach. But at times like these, they shook off their pity and instead thrust their aching hearts into helping him accomplish all he could. And so, Hana smiled kindly at him - a rare sight indeed.

"You like dresses. If he doesn't, then it's too damn bad." Those words were all the permission he needed from the photographer. Headfirst he dove into the racks, ransacking them for the absolute perfect fit. Though he may have been trying a little too hard for what was allegedly a first date, there was never a time when he didn't want to look his best for himself. A shill, zealous shriek came from the hangers as they were pushed from side to side. He mindlessly grabbed pieces he enjoyed and Hana frantically scurried to catch whatever he threw at her. It took him next to no time to separate out things that he'd wear from the ones he'd rather not. The second step, however, was trying them on. With a certain practiced fluidity, he slipped out of his blue coat, fine jeans, and button up, shedding what little jewelry he wore along with it. And so it began - the first dress.

It was an off-white silk chiffon dress with a round, strapless neck. The skirt dropped into a charming, billowy A-line and was tied at the waist with a champagne sash. The hem barely brushed his knee and he gave Hana a twirl around. She nodded in a considerate show of approval, though her brow furrowed. "I can't wear this," Nagisa declared. "It's too bridal. I look like a 12 year old flower girl." This time, her nod was vigorous. The next dress had a sweetheart neckline covered with a sheer fabric that lent it long sleeves in the form of an illusion. Jewels were sewn and studded all over it and while certainly expensive-looking, it was concluded that the body-hugging form and extreme shortness would make him look like a desperate tramp among the rich. It would draw too many eyes - and not in a positive way. Were he clubbing, perhaps the situation would be different. After that, he tried out a flirtatiously strapless piece in turquoise but Hana shot it down with no hesitation. "You don't have the boobs for that." A moment later, she amended, "You don't have boobs at all, in fact." They laughed and proceeded.

The next dress flared out at the hips, but his were too thin to fit in it, and the following one hung on him like a sack. After that, one was too casual, another like a teenager's first prom dress, another an entirely heinous color with skin and hair, and another just down right slutty. There were bell-skirts, full skirts, long and short ones, and the necklines ranged from square to sweetheart. None of them fit Nagisa's more masculine form and he felt his hope sliding away like a raindrop. And so dripped into a padded chair, two-thirds of the way though the rack, eyes drooping with the weight of water. "I should've guessed. Nothing fits," he stated dejectedly. Permanently he felt he was caught between a far too feminine form to be masculine yet nothing designed for women fit him either. And while he could design things to be gorgeous, he himself simply wasn't created to be beautiful. Hana sat on the arm beside him.

"There are still some left," she informed him, though he only rolled his eyes. Gou was much better at consoling him than she. "We could just use the first," Hana attempted again. Nagisa shook his head and the first few tears fell over the edge. The woman at his side grated her teeth. "Just try one more," she urged, glancing over the next one. Another floor-length one hung on the rack next - they hadn't even used it in the shoot as the model had been too tall to fit. Dejectedly, he dragged himself to it, but what was the point? In the end, it would just hang off of him - but the one behind it... That one was of an appropriate cocktail length, off-the-shoulder, and bathed in a rosy shade. Hana caught the spark of interest and tapped at the floor-length one. "Nu-uh, we have an order. This one first." Nagisa shook his head.
"God, what are you, my mum?" He swiped at his eyes, drying them with the back of his hand. There wasn't time to be upset, anyhow - he would be late if he didn't hurry! And so, he dropped one more dress, stepped into it, and hauled it up his body. He backed into Hana and she obligingly zipped him before sending him off to the mirror.

He should have felt an inkling of it when the silken fabric embraced the curve of his waist or perhaps when the lace graced over his shoulders, right where Rei Ryugazaki had touched him, that he wouldn't need the next dress on the rack. He was bathed in wine violet, a radiance that was not quite shine emulating from every fold in the fabric. The skirt was gathered on one side, not quite at a fixed point, but in a manner that brought attention to what shape his hips did have. It flared out ever so slightly at the ankle, providing him with ample space to walk. It was high-waisted and the round neckline was hidden underneath lace that widely circled his collarbone and just teased at slipping away from his shoulders, wrapping around his arms as three-quarter sleeves. The back dipped to a V just between his shoulder blades in a delicate suggestion of sensuality. The wine of the dress and gold of his hair cultivated an exquisitely luxurious image, not unlike the sharp and soft lines of a regency painting. Nagisa was pretty sure he had to sit down.

Both he and Hana stumbled back into their chair and gave apprehensive giggles.

"God," Hana whispered at him. He bit his lip to keep a smile from spreading too far. "It's the color of a young Syrah. Or a Mourvedre," she remarked, admiration deep in her voice. Nagisa nodded - it wasn't red enough to be like a Pinot Noir, but the two wines she suggested were rich in color and almost plum in tone. She stood and fished around a desk surface for a minute before returning to the blond with a hairbrush and some makeup. As a photographer, she had a particularly steady hand and as such, she was able to fix his makeup with relative ease. His hair she swept off to the side, creating a style reminiscent of the 1920's, finishing with an ornamental hair clip on the offside of his hair. It depicted a roseate butterfly caressing a lotus encrusted in gold. His reflection in the mirror was remarkably androgynous, containing all the dignity and strength of an unbreakable woman in the finesse of the fabric along his hips, yet balanced with the opulent endurance of a man in the line of his jaw and the eager shine in his delicate eyes. Both he and Hana knew in that moment that he was ready for everything this opportunity - and all that were to come - had to provide.

Nagisa collected his clothing and folded it neatly his bag, catching a glimpse of his phone as he did so. His breath hitched in his throat and the woman shot him a questioning glance.

"Oh God," he groaned sickly. "It's 8:42!"
"I feel like Cinderella: Fast & Furious edition," Nagisa griped, his tone entirely astounded as Hana sped through a second red light, already having raced under four yellows and one stop sign at a dramatic speed. The blond wasn't even aware Priuses could accelerate so quickly - it was a fact he ought to keep in mind when in the neighborhood for his own car. He was splayed straight across the backseat in a desperate attempt not to wrinkle the fine silk the dress was made of. Unconsciously, he protected the clip in hair with his little hands every now and then, especially when they came to any unexpected stops.

"Appreciate the shit I go through," Hana warned simply in reply over the sounds of horns blaring at her from various directions. He could practically see the affronted looks of their high-class occupants as Hana sliced them off between lanes, certainly doing her damnedest to get him to Amber Alley in a fashionably late manner. The entire neighborhood was stiflingly high-class, from the modernist bars to the closed brunch bistros. Above many of the restaurants were swanky apartments and rather than alleys, well-lit gardens, trees, and fountains were tucked in its corners. All around, ladies and gentlemen of the highest fashion permeated from the towers, each one a shade in tight cocktail dresses or fancy cars, each bar emitting a firework of light in its own signature color that sent him reeling. Many had themes that nodded towards post-modernism and art-deco styles of architecture, but when they arrived at Amber Alley, it was clearly distinguishable from the rest. The face of the building was entirely baroque with a grandly golden lighting scheme to highlight the impressive carvings. In immaculate rows on either side of the flagstone walkway were faultless trimmed roses, illuminated by the glow from the curtained windows right above: in front of them, the path split and diffused into the darkness, no doubt leading to outdoor seating areas. A fountain rested languidly in the center of the path, creating a pleasant roundabout out in the front of the restaurant. In the cold blue chill of the night, it was a rippling oasis of citrine warmth, music in the silence of the stars, glittering with so much more promise than the infinite sky.

Hana eased her vehicle into a leisurely speed as she pulled up in front of the fountain. The blond had leaned up and timidly scooted to the edge of his seat beside the window, peering out into the bright, unknown mirage. He daubed chapstick over his naked lips and readjusted his hairpiece, hesitant to leave the sanctuary of the dark car and his friendship. This was a world unfathomable to him in none but his dreams: to be arriving here was nothing short of a miracle. He gripped his black and gold clutch purse tightly, swallowing deeply as he slipped the chapstick away. Hana regarded him kindly through the rearview mirror.

"Well?" she prompted, tapping her fingernails on the steering wheel. "Go on. Text me when you need to be picked up. You're gorgeous." Nagisa gave her an affirmative nod, more to ease his knotted stomach than anything else, and opened the door to step out. As soon as Hana pulled away, he found himself rooted to the spot, swallowed by the emerging sea of people that had progressed through their entrance much more efficiently than he. To them, he was of little interest, but several people around him waved artificially to a group of reporters. Once or twice, he felt a shoulder dig into his own and he further withdrew, lowering his head and crossing one arm defensively in front of his body. The other brushed stray hairs behind his ear, and heart fluttering like a bird in a cage, he wondered if the date was truly a wise idea - his impulsive agreement certainly hadn't helped his nerves. He ought to have rescheduled. He ought to have done something to stop it, but 'should have's were of little consequence now: for here he was, leaving a perfectly respectable man waiting inside for nearly 20 minutes now.

And so, flittering heart approaching his throat, he rolled his shoulders away to expose his collarbone, dropped his arms by his side, and dug his nails deeply into the silk of his borrowed clutch in
determination. With his chin tilted elegantly upward, he advanced towards the doors with dignity, the crests in the folds of the fabric around his waist illustrating an undeniable allure. When he at last reached the door, the attendants at either side used their gloved hands to allow him into this golden palace.

The interior was as fantastic as the exterior, each shadow that the light cast as still as though it were carved of amber. The ceiling in the foyer was low, but just beyond, Nagisa could see that it stood twice as tall as what here he was under. His ascension into the room caused a few waiting heads to turn and, utterly intoxicated, observe this pauper in a prince's world. He was timeless, like an exquisite wine dusted by the summer sun, bathed in royal violet under the starry sky. Before he had the chance to continue on his way, a host appeared confidently at his elbow.

"Might you be Mr. Nagisa Hazuki?" he inquired formally, speaking to the blond as one would a lord.

"Yes," he nodded, twiddling his purse in his fingers. The man graciously passed it on to another employee who stored it in a far off coat closet somewhere. His arms were left to hang awkwardly at his side, occasionally coming to trail along the folds of the skirt.

"Your table is ready," the man continued politely, "and the other member of your party is here." Tactfully, he took the lead, Nagisa falling lithely in step behind him. They entered the dining area beside a low stage, where an ensemble played a low, Latin hum. In front of them was a ballroom floor, surrounded in a horseshoe of tables gloved in refined white linens. The ceiling was high and despite the crystalline chandelier, the entire area was dimmed intimately, the main light source coming from candles. The blond and his escort wove through the occupied tables until, in the back, they reached a platform, semi-blocked from view due to a half-wall and curtaining organza fabric drifting down. They ascended a small flight of stairs and turned to face the far corner nearest to the hanging cloth. There Rei sat, arms on the table, absently gazing off to the side, his brows furrowed at funny angles, like hands on a clock. As they began to approach the table, the petite man worried that he'd angered his date and abashedly patted down his dress. When the brunet had the sense to look up, however, his face was for a moment stunned before transitioning to thrilled. He rose in an automatic gesture of chivalry but awkwardly hit the table on the way and caused a musical clatter. Consequently, he colored himself as red as wine, fixed his gaze off to the side and bit his lip a little.

He peeked at the blond as the host seated him and reclaimed his own post across from Nagisa, who smiled with pretty charm.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," he apologized sweetly, smoothing down the napkin that was laid upon his lap. His companion shook his head in reply.

"Please, don't be," he insisted. "It was such a last minute plan, I'm usually not so... spontaneous." He chuckled nervously, peering at Nagisa through his red glasses. "I just - I wanted to see you again. I mean, of course, that much is obvious. I'm extremely pleased that you could make it on such short notice. And you're so..." He paused, analytically swept his star-struck midnight eyes over the blond, and deliberately chose his next words. "Gorgeful - I mean beaugeous." He shut his eyes as though it would erase the color on his face. Nagisa chewed on the edge of his lips, all at once flattered and amused. Rei took a deep breath, giving up on the previous compliment and proceeded, "You're lovely."

"Thank you," he responded, voice both tender and meek. He rather fancied how the brunet had said that he was lovely, as opposed to his dress or his looks. He sipped daintily at his water and asked of the other man: "So, why did you want to see me so soon?" Rei composed himself, straightening his core even more so than it had already been and, as though he'd thought over the answer before Nagisa had even spoken, methodically asserted:
"I thought of what you had said to me earlier. I wanted to inform you that I couldn't reach a satisfactory solution." The blond tilted his head in question, leaning comfortably over the table toward his date. Shyly, the brunet confessed, "I wanted to say something that would please you, but I realized if I reached a conclusion based off of that, it would have the opposite effect. Simply because you asked me what I would do proved that you have a lot more depth than I believe others - including myself - first are able to see." The blond nodded, well aware that he came off as positively shallow, and wondered briefly where the man was going with his blatant honesty. Of course, Nagisa admired that about him, but all the same, it added to his awkwardness - though this, he was beginning to adore slightly. "To put it more simply," he stated, "you intrigue me and I very much like that. I want to know more about you." They both drank some water and when the blond did not immediately reply, Rei stammered, "I don't mean to put you off or to sound rude, but I just - I mean, I simply am curious. But more than curious, I mean - it's just, well... You're just - " The smaller man’s giggle cut him off, and he waved an apology with a gentle hand.

"I get it," Nagisa soothed. Below the table, he crossed his legs, fingers teasing the edge of his frosty glass. Rei bowed forward, mirroring the blond's earlier actions and waited for him to proceed, dark blue eyes drawn to wherever there was a mild movement in his composition. A waiter suspended the intimate moment, and asked what drinks they would like to be served. Rei’s eyes swept over Nagisa.

"A full-bodied red, please. What do you have?" he requested, hardly glancing away from his date. The waiter listed off several brands, but the blond colored with embarrassment, thinking perhaps that he ought to stick with water - those certainly weren't anything he could afford. Rei, however, thought otherwise.

"I think I'm rather fond of the idea of that Syrah you mentioned," he informed the waiter. Rei glanced at his date for approval and Nagisa gave his affirmation, giving the waiter his cue to vanish towards the kitchens. Neatly the blond picked up the previously abandoned sense of affinity by sending his gaze over to Rei. The man was entirely pink, but he liked that. "So, um - get to know you. Right, uh... How old are you?" the lawyer began lamely, running a palm over his pants. It was considerably safe ground, but the blond himself was curious.

"I just turned twenty-five a couple months ago," he informed the brunet. "What about you?" Rei gave a sigh and admitted, "I'm thirty, going on thirty-one." Nagisa giggled, but shrugged off its significance.

"Passing thirty can’t be that big a deal." But Rei shook his head.

"Just you wait. Well, anyhow it’s impressive that you’re only twenty-five and already a professional writer. The magazine you work for is well-known, too, isn’t it? You must be quite dedicated." He blushed and puffed out his chest in pride.

"Thanks! But I really just got it ’cause I was an intern there in uni. They hired me right after I graduated, so I mean, it's not so big a deal. I didn't go to school after that or anything. You, you're like, a pretty successful lawyer right? That's cool too - you probably worked way harder than me to get there."

"It wasn't easy," he acknowledged, "but I couldn't do anything creative like clothes and whatnot." Their wine arrived at that moment and Nagisa took care to inspect it as the waiter served the bottle. He swirled the alcohol around until it painted the edges of his glass, and deeply inhaled the aroma - it smelled faintly of cloves and blackberry, and carried the musky, distinct scent of age. He hummed in pleasure as the powerful liquid stroked his lips.

"This is perfect," he informed the waiter, who proceeded to fill both of their glasses before leaving the bottle at the table.
"Are you a wine enthusiast?" Rei questioned, a smile growing across his face.

"Absolutely," Nagisa confirmed passionately.

"Common ground at last," he replied, raising his glass to the blond, who met him halfway. The crystal gave off a high, resonant sound as they met at the center. The smaller man then uncrossed his legs, allowing one delicate foot to tease the edge of Rei's trousers.

"But opposites do attract," he declared flirtatiously. The brunet choked on the drink and gave a couple coughs, face as red as the wine he was served.

"They do indeed," he stuttered out eventually, his smile shy and embarrassed. Nagisa laughed coyly, raising his glass to his lips and delicately taking a sip of the full-bodied wine. "Do you have any siblings?" Rei asked, fumbling around with his words. The blond's foot was still playing around with his, but he withdrew, not wanting to render his date completely incoherent.

"I do," Nagisa confirmed. "Three older sisters."

"I have an older brother," he added, his voice no longer wavering with every brush of the leg, but eyes heightened with a sense of disappointment, like the last wind of night as the grey dawn approached. "More in common," he murmured, lifting his glass and swirling the wine around inside. He opened his mouth to perhaps ask another question, most likely crossing another one off the mental list of information he wanted, but Nagisa cut in before he had the chance.

"Why'd you go into law?" he inquired curiously. The attorney seemed calculating and shrewd, but his quiet demeanor didn't seem to appeal to the fast lane of trials and courts. Certainly, he'd have done better in a science and medicine track, he thought to himself, so the blond was interested in how he'd been inspired to take a path of justice. Rei regarded his answer thoughtfully and replied,

"I believed in making the world better. There are many people who go through injustices - the murder or assault of a loved one specifically in my track - who cannot speak with their own voice. There are many things they don't understand, particularly when in emotional turmoil, and I wanted to disentangle the facts of such situations in a way to make the world run more smoothly and prevent such occurrences from happening in the future." Rei regarded him softly. "No one's ever really asked me that before," he informed Nagisa. "Why did you go into fashion, then? It's never been an industry I really understood." His brows furrowed in a way familiar to the blond - it seemed he too found the fashion world judgmental.

"Well," he commenced, attentive to both his words and his date's reactions, "it can be a tough place for a lot of people, but I really think how people present themselves is important. If you, for example, came into court wearing like, a tracksuit and trainers, you'd be completely out of place. It wouldn't really matter what you said - it'd come off as unprofessional. I mean, that's obviously a really exaggerated situation, but it presents itself in subtler forms that are hard for people to understand sometimes. I want to make it easier for them." He hesitated a moment, his shoulders tensing up a little, but relaxed them and explained, "That, and I understand what it's like not be comfortable with how to express yourself through your dress and still find yourself flattering. A lot of women and men nowadays are uncomfortable with their looks - whether it's because they're overweight, think they're fat when they're perfectly normal, they're transgender, they're too tall, too short - it's just something I understand, y'know? And I want to help everyone be as beautiful as they want to be. Because really, everyone is - it took me a long time to realize how I could be happy with myself." The brunet raised his eyebrows and remarked:

"That's a rather incredible thing to say. I admire your conviction. But, you must admit, there are many flaws in that industry - I would daresay that many think it's working against them, not for
"Yeah, but there are flaws in law too - I mean, you could put away someone innocent." Rei flushed, chuckled at the reference to their earlier conversation, and murmured his acknowledgement of the fact. For a while more, they were silent - the older man would gingerly observe the other when he thought he wasn't looking, but Nagisa would claim his eye and refuse to look away. They would both smile flirtatiously, but after a moment proceeded to read over their menus. The blond almost felt like he was in high-school again, all at once sexually frustrated, shy, and innocently flirtatious - he thanked God for his matured sense of how to combine the three subtly like the echo of pepper in his wine. They played their little game with such focus that neither noticed the approach of their server, who had been sent to take their orders. They jumped at his presence and both grinned somewhat humbly. The men rapidly scanned their menus, far too entranced with one another to be romanced with food.

"You know, I think the calamari with those sauces sounds like a really good appetizer. What do you think?" Nagisa beamed at Rei, who murmured a confirmation. The waiter nodded. "And to start, let's see... I think I'll have the pear and blue cheese salad first and then... Well, what do you recommend to go with that? I'm kind of torn between the cabbage with miso and the pork stew." The server briefly considered the options and smoothly replied,

"I think the pork compliments the salad nicely - the meat is very tender and sweet. It's redone from a Filipino dish and one of my personal favorites." He nodded, replied with his consent, and they both glanced to Rei.

"I think I'd like the seafood amuse bouche to begin and the cabbage miso second," he responded concisely as the woman collected their menus and gracefully started towards the kitchens. As she left, Nagisa eagerly leaned towards the brunet.

"You should let me have a bite of that cabbage miso, it sounds delicious. Plus, miso soup is my favorite." Rei smiled indulgently at his date but said, "Only if I can have some of the pork." He paused considerately and then proceeded, "Your name - Nagisa Hazuki. That's Japanese. Are you from there?" Nagisa, who had taken a sip of his wine, flipped his hand around as a temporary answer.

"I'm only a half - my dad was born there, but my mum is English," he disclosed. "Dad wanted me to learn Japanese in school and I lived there with him for a while, though, so I'm actually fluent. But I was born in Yorkshire." Rei gave an inclination of his head, and much to Nagisa's surprise, continued in Japanese,

"I was born in Japan, but we moved here when I was about seven. I've got dual citizenship, along with my parents and brother - though only my brother lives in Japan still." The blond's face grew delighted with this new development and he said,

"Really? That's so funny, how this happens. But I wonder... Your brother - he isn't that basketball star called Ryuugazaki, is he?" Rei laughed and, somewhat exasperated, gave his assent.

"He is. He's about as insufferable as he looks, as well," he informed Nagisa, having switched back to English. The blond chuckled and joked,

"Tell me about it - I have to deal with three older siblings, but at least none of them are famous. Must be awful." The brunet chuckled, hair trembling with blues and violets in the low, diverse light, and the candle reflecting pleasantly in his eyes.
"He tried so hard to get me into basketball when we little. I ran track, though - he kept telling me it was for sissies and that I'd never get a girlfriend - turned out I never wanted one." He rolled his eyes at the faraway memories and Nagisa giggled as well.

"My sisters used to dress me up and put makeup on me - Mum was always furious with them! See, for me, when I grew up, they realized that I had better style than they ever did," he bragged triumphantly. Both laughed so richly that they had to wipe tears from their mirthful eyes. When they calmed themselves, Nagisa questioned, "So, where did you live when you moved here?"

"Essex," Rei replied, finishing off his wine. Elegantly, he took the bottle and refilled Nagisa's glass before topping off his own. "I guessed you were from up north," he commented inconsequentially as his date thanked him and drank. "You have a lovely way of speaking. I like listening to you." The blond thanked him just as their calamari dish arrived. It was artfully arranged on a rectangular platter, a smaller one with three varying sauces accompanying it. He gave his hands a delighted little clap and scooted forward to examine it.

"Ah, it smells so good!" he enthused. "I'm really hungry, too - I haven't really eaten since my coffee this afternoon. Let's see... I'll try the yellowish sauce and how about you go for the green one in the middle? Then we can both try the red one." He plucked a little calamari up and dipped it in the gold relish, tenderly bringing it up to his mouth for a bite. He sighed pleasantly. It held a tropical mango flavor that was entirely incredible with the warm, fresh seafood, seasoned with the sharp bite of an unidentifiable spice. Rei looked vaguely surprised by his and he asked of the brunet: "What's that? Is it good? Mine was mango - super tasty." Rei swallowed and replied,

"Lime. It's very good - you should try it."

"I will, but red one first, okay?" He snatched up another calamari and coated it in the red paste, and proceeded to munch at it. Unfortunately, he had to suppress a shudder at the taste - a hot taste was the first to register, followed by a sharp, leafy echo. He looked down at it - and as he suspected, it was made with peppers and onions.

"Oh, this is wonderful," Rei commented offhandedly before noticing the sour look upon his date's sweet face. "Is there something wrong?" he asked, voice rather taken aback.

"It has peppers and onions - two of my least favorites ever," he explained, rinsing his mouth out with a gulp of water and another bite of the mango sauce to erase the aftertaste. "Okay, I need to try the green one now. No onions in that one, right?"

"No onions," Rei confirmed with amusement as Nagisa swept up another, this time with the lime sauce.

They finished their appetizer in good time, Rei having to eat all of the peppery one on his own, while the blond took the edge off of his hunger. They maintained pleasant conversation throughout, discovering more of the basics: the brunet was a fan of seafood, he worked in a large building about a ten minute's walk from the coffee shop they often visited, and he owned an apartment in the city. His neighbors had a toddler and a new baby that were rather cute, he supposed, but could be incredibly loud, given the chance - which was quite often. Nagisa, on the other hand, spoke of the people he saw on his bus route and the driver, who he found rather endearing. He spoke briefly of his friends and described the charming house he was renting that was just big enough to throw a party he'd been planning for the end of the month.

Before either had really realized, their meals had come and gone, and their server, had handed them the dessert menus. Rei protested that he was full, but Nagisa was insistent upon a dessert - at least to share. The brunet indulged him and they ordered a dark chocolate cake, drizzled in strawberry sauce
with fresh fruit - likely the last of the season. Upon its arrival, the blond clapped exuberantly, eyes shining with complete and youthful delight so bright, that his date couldn't help but smile in return.

"Oh, this looks so good," he said, his mouth watering deliciously. His fork sunk into the cake softly, sliding along the moisturized surface with ease. When the first hint of a taste hit his tongue, he moaned passionately. "This is the best ever," he gushed with gusto.

"Let me have a bite," Rei requested. Thinking quickly, however, Nagisa didn't give him the other fork: he instead slipped his own in once more and held it out tantalizingly over the light of the candle for the brunet. His eyes, previously containing the glee of a child, now reflected a question that on the surface was innocence, but held strong undertones of an amorous air.

"Go ahead," he invited teasingly, reaching his foot over to the edge of Rei's pants again, repeating his earlier actions. Rei's face was a canvas for the florid color of embarrassment, not unlike a dozen roses for love. His eyebrows tucked in and with a tame tremble of the lips he clumsily leaned in, his eyes cast on the bite. He took it in his mouth and gave a firm tug to get it off of the utensil, awkwardly chewing and swallowing.

"'s quite good," he mumbled, face so warm that Nagisa could practically feel it from where he sat. The blond took another bite and hummed in satisfaction, both at the fact that Rei had taken the bait and that it was a delicious cake. He was uncharacteristically caught off guard however when, tentatively, the brunet raised his abashed head and muttered, "So sorry to bother... Um, might I have another bite?" He squirmed like a schoolboy in his chair and the blond used the situation to his advantage by enticingly laughing, drifting forward in his chair like the flutter of chiffon in the wind, and soundlessly holding another forkful of the chocolate cake. His foot now brushed the elder man's calf. His eyes daringly met Rei's and he nibbled at his plush lips. As Rei reached for it, the blond let his mouth part gingerly, with promise of a sweet intimation to stay cradled between the two of them. And though the brunet seemed rather daft when it came to romance, his date's radiant sensuality did not escape his notice.

These last few minutes in Amber Alley passed languidly, luxuriously behind the violet shade of the fabric, illuminated dimly by the rich gold of the candlelight. The blond was surprised that a small majority of the dessert was consumed by Rei, but being so close to him in and of itself was more enchanting than the meal. The brunet graciously paid for the meal when the time came, but neither one was quite ready to leave the other. And so, ever the cordial and proper gentleman, he allowed Nagisa to take his arm as they collected their belongings from the host and exited the restaurant for a stroll.

The chill of the night stung the blond's bare shoulders and he attempted to suppress a shiver as the water in the fountain before him glittered coldly, drops soaring to slap against his skin like translucent freckles.

"Haven't you got a coat?" Rei inquired incredulously, examining the state of his date. Nagisa shook his head, rolling his eyes at himself for not thinking to bring a shrug of some sort with him. "No matter," the brunet hummed, slipping his overcoat off, "this will do." And he took the large, woolen coat, and gently placed it upon the blond's shoulders, hands lingering there for quite some time. He grinning thankfully and wrapped his arms around Rei's.

"Should we take a walk?" he asked playfully, clinging to the older man's side. The man nodded affably and started off away from the fountain and towards the dark of the night. Stars spangled the sky, strung across like shimmering pearls. Even in this neighborhood, they seemed more elegant and distant than elsewhere: yet they remained beautiful. "Don't you think they're just gorgeous?" he sighed lovingly, gaze lost in the depths of the glistening light.
"They are," Rei settled softly. He swallowed and took a moment to collect himself and complimented stiffly, "But not so much as you." Nagisa dug his teeth into his lips to keep from laughing at the absurd formality, though his heart was absolutely tickled pink. He wouldn't have been surprised if the man had prepared that comment beforehand.

"Thank you," he replied, snuggling closer to him as a wind passed by. He lost a bit of his composure and allowed a wobbly, awkward smile. When his eyes, blue as the night, met Nagisa's, colored like the dawn, he found he could not look away. "You look really beautiful too," he reciprocated, placing a hand over his hot heart. His face grew colored like the sun kissing a cloud as it left, promising to return the next morn.

"Oh, well - I didn't make nearly as much as an effort as you," he deflected modestly. "I'm just another fellow in a three-piece suit, but you..." The blond followed his eyes as they caressed the curve of his hip, the soft ridge of his collarbone, and at last came to ponder his feathery, pink lips. "You truly are a wonder," he finished breathlessly, sounding endlessly more authentic than when he'd previously admired him. This time he was rendered quite speechless by the sincerity he revealed and his only response was to rest his head against his arm sweetly, simply for the sake of being close. Their conversation reached a lull, but Nagisa fathomed he'd never felt more comfortable with silence than he did at this point. They strolled pleasantly along the streets, the blushing red maples decorated in pretty lights along the way. He wasn't quite sure he knew where they were headed, but he was perfectly content to watch the path unfold before them. Under the dazzling stars and among the warm strings of lights, they were content and snug, despite the persisting chill of autumn.

They had walked a fair distance when Rei stopped and murmured, "My car's parked here. Do you need a ride home?"

"No, my friend said she'd come get me," he responded. Yet still, Nagisa didn't want to move away.

"I do have one last request, however," he proceeded formally, though timidity tainted his tone. The blond loosened his grip, but his hands only drifted downward and teased at Rei's fingers through the sleeve of the borrowed, woolly coat. The brunet, seizing his own opportunity in a rare show of confidence in his actions, firmly clasped his hand. Nagisa, like an easygoing wave, faced him, a delicate smile beginning to rise as he caught his date's eye. "I've been terribly selfish, whisking you to dinner so last minute," he reported, "but I hope you'll indulge my last whim - um, might it be all right - or rather... May I kiss you?"

"Okay," Nagisa consented, his creamy cheeks brushed by roses. Rei used his free arm to pull the little blond in close, but the younger man dropped his hand and caressed his neck, standing on the tip of his toes to reach him. With both hands free, the brunet was able to hold him in a tight embrace around the waist.

Their two lips met so tenderly halfway, but their bodies were locked in an electric shock as sharp as every star in the ink sky. They were chaste, but the kiss lasted so long, their faces hotter than any cup of coffee and Nagisa was convinced he could feel the rise of the heat on Rei's neck, but the other man could see his partner's pinkening ears, and they were delightful, under a blushing maple tree in the chill of an autumn night.
Nagisa awoke dazedly, a fine pink dust trembling warmly upon his shoulders and concealing the dot of his freckles. A fair light filtering in through the window caressed the air as little particles shivered through the room. The memory of firm arms graced his hips, and the whisper of lips brushed against his in sweet parting. His falling sheets exposed the curve of his collarbone as he rolled to one side in order to check the time on the clock at his bedside table. It was just barely past eight, and the moment was perfect to rise. He cast away his curtains and allowed the sun to leak in - the day promised to be the first beautiful one in a long while. Every ray of sunshine stroked starry dewdrops upon the grass and trees in front of his house. He sighed and leaned against the windowsill, basking in the memory of the night that had caused him to awake in a blush.

After the kiss, Rei refused to surrender Nagisa, let alone leave him there to await Hana on his own. He cited warmth as his reason, maintaining that it wouldn't do for his date to be cold, but they were both well aware that it was a flimsy lie at best. He allowed his hands to roam about the blond's hips experimentally while the smaller man explored the muscles of his arms through his fine coat. The gentle wind carried soft sweet-nothings upon it, murmurs that stopped only when they leaned in for another kiss. He would lean forward upon his toes and tentatively use his sumptuous lips to beg for something deeper: but Rei held out and kept them beautifully virtuous until at last, Nagisa abandoned the pursuit of running forward to simply savor the moment, the thick taste of wine and chocolate complimenting the mood.

Hana had been polite to honk blaringly as she pulled up to the curb, cutting the pair off from their intimate moments and whisked her friend away after a sorrowful, sweet kiss goodbye. The promise of return danced in the breeze. And so, Nagisa made his way home and collapsed in his bed, a chaste blush glowing from his sheets.

He pushed himself off of the sill and made his way to his floor, tossing this and that out of his way until he found his black and pink jogging shorts, printed V-neck shirt, and a light jacket from uni to wear for his morning jog. He felt he had the energy to go all the way to the coffee shop and back today without the aid of the city bus, but as he donned his clothes and stepped out the door, as per usual, he found himself starting off in the opposite direction. He bounded off to the left, away from his usual bus stop, and passed several single storey houses similar to his own. It never took him longer than five minutes to reach the two-storey area, mostly inhabited by middle-class families. After this, he passed a hedge that stood taller than himself, shielding a park from view. The entrance was at the end of the block. He stepped into the park, passing a few other runners on his way down the path and came to a creek, alongside which he jogged for about another five minutes before he approached a pedestrian bridge. He crossed it jauntily, and instead of turning this way or that, he ran straight forward to a brick driveway carved artfully through a manicured lawn. At the top of the slope stood a reserved brick building constructed traditionally with even lines of colorful flowers out front. A sign at the top of the drive read "St. Lucy’s Community Hospital: In-Patient Clinic". As confidently as if he himself resided there, Nagisa strode up and danced his way into the front hall.

St. Lucy's was an immaculate and quaint building, both inside and out. Within the main hall was a
fairly comfortable waiting area, dotted here and there with average chairs and an occasional couch, the scent of Purex slicing sharply as a scalpel through the room. The coffee tables held a multitude of medical magazines, all well-worn and out-dated by several months. Down either hall, were several examination rooms which remained consistent with the expected bed, sink, table, and mediocre art. Even from this level, the unsettling silence was interrupted intermittently only by the buzz of the lights and the echo of beeping machines down the clean, white halls.

He strolled away from the empty waiting area and leaned over the front desk at the nurse who'd taken over the receptionist job as well. He grinned at her, wiped a bit of sweat off his brow, and requested, "Could I get a visitor's pass, please?"

"Sure. Have a good visit," she replied, passing him a name tag with a room number assigned to it. The man waved at her as he turned down one of the halls to one of the doors leading out.

The facility was constructed in a typical horseshoe shape, hiding a pleasant courtyard in the back, away from any prying eyes. It featured bubbling fountains, along with a multitude of flowers, trees, and benches, creating a somewhat stereotypically peaceful area, meant for deep thoughts, rest, and relaxation.

He strolled down a long hall to the last room on the left. The faded fluorescent bulbs hummed from above. They reflected off of the sterile white-washed walls, leaving him with the feeling of being trapped in a suffocating world. And opening the door to that last room was no different.

Inside, the sunlight was weak, filtering through low linen curtains that were drawn shut. No lights were on. The room was cast in a dim, tired greyscale, the only colors coming from several months’ worth of fashion magazines stacked neatly in a shelf, each one organized by its date and worn through at the corners. Beside the window was a hunched, crippled silhouette with a gentle wave of wispy, misty hair, glittering sunset pill bottles surrounding the figure as though it were a still statue.

"Daddy?" Nagisa called tenderly into the room. A frail hand inched down a metal wheel and pivoted its chair slowly to face the boy in the room, tugging with what little strength its soldiering might had left to give. When the man completed the revolution, he sagged back into the wheelchair and flung open both arms with abandon, grinning a wistful grin. The blond brightened like the sun after a shower and dashed in, launching himself into his father's arms. "Daddy, how are you? I feel like I haven't seen you in forever - also it's a totally nice day, so I'm taking you out for a walk around the courtyard." He chuckled heartily, wrapping the skin of his arms around his son's back as he slid off of the elderly man's lap.

"Easy does it," Colonel Kenichi Hazuki of the British Army croaked, "it's only been a week and a few days, hasn't it?" Nagisa smiled apologetically, leaning over his father's embrace while simultaneously reaching over to his bed for a plain, worn throw. When that failed to work, he wriggled away from the colonel to toss the blanket over his legs.

"It's a little nippy out," he explained, standing fully on his own. "Besides, I usually visit at least twice a week - I can't just, like, not show up!" The brunet man's eyes drifted away like a wispy cloud as he eyed his closed curtains while Nagisa began pushing him from behind.

"Yes, but you've been working hard - didn't you say there was something going on? You seemed down last time. Is work okay?" Carefully, the blond bumped his chair over the edge of the door and out into the chilly, beautiful morning.

"Yeah," he began, working his way toward the shallow brook. "I was kind of sick of being an assistant, but it's all good - I finally got promoted!" He puffed up somewhat pompously and his father twisted in his chair to pat his driving hands. "I'm a columnist now," he explained cheerfully. "I get to
write the accessories column now - it's monthly! Also - the new issue is coming out next week - can you believe it? Now you actually have a reason to read all those magazines I bring you." The colonel murmured a laugh and replied mildly,

"I read them because you are proud of them, of your work, and so I am proud too. I read them all the time, but I haven't had the chance for a few days - Dr. Greene said that she feels I'm strong enough to leave the room now, so I've been going upstairs to pass the time lately." Nagisa beamed at his father, a million shades of gold from his hair, the sun, and his heart glittering along his face.

"Daddy, that's so great! You're getting better! You're really improving!" The man chuckled at his son's relentless praise at his progress, waving it off with a vein-stroked hand. Out the corner of his eye, the boy caught it and in turn rolled his own pretty hazel-red ones. "Don't give me that," he scolded with exasperation. "You've done really good, I mean it." They neared the creek and parked right beside a bench. Long leaves were webbed with mildew, partially soaked in the grey stream, with dots of dust resting on the dry areas. The blond tucked his legs under him and leaned off the edge to look at his father. He grunted in reply and did not settle down in contentment until he took his sun-bleached blanket and spread it over the both of them.

"Your legs are all bare, you oughta be freezing in those shorts."

"I'm fine, Daddy," he soothed, "I just jogged for like, 15 minutes. I came straight from home." He gave a miserly huff and the father and son cast their gazes into the brook. A breeze tickled the surface, grasses bowing and bothering the surface, and sent soft brushes of ripples outward from the eddies. Half-drowned, wet flowers slouched at the shores, disturbed by the round rocks of the stream. The pair was silent awhile, both captivated by their thoughts. Nagisa intuitively felt that his father did not want to chat away, hiding away his worries under the guise of pleasantries as he'd often did when his boy was young. So while the sunny son focused on the rising day, his father reflected the days leading to his current twilight. Hesitantly, his lips twitched and the blond attentively perked toward the colonel.

"How's Kathy?" he murmured, the wind rocking the wavering words away into the west. The boy flinched and in his heart, an old scar stretched widely enough to embrace his father's mirrored one.

"Um, I guess she's all right. But, um - well, we haven't really talked much recently," he admitted cautiously. His father nodded sadly at the growing distance.

"How about Emi? And Maki and Rika too? Are they doing well?" He pursued the topic despite Nagisa’s discomfort. "They must be very busy - it's been awhile since I've seen them. Are they working? You've spoken to them, right? They must be so successful." The blond's heart pulled itself thinly to both sides of his chest and drooped low like a wrinkly raindrop on a window pane.

"They're great, I heard," he lied whitely. "Emi's working a little ways from Essex - she's an officer now, but you know that. Maki, let's see, she's um... she's got a job with an architecture firm, and Rika... well, I'm not sure what she's been up to, it's been awhile, but she's doing something at a business firm. Travels a lot, too." In truth, he hadn't spoken to any of them in an incredibly long time - other than quick and awkward phone calls for birthdays, it had been over a year. He had the tendency to avoid that part of the family, for since their mother's marriage to Nathan Abbott, a horribly outspoken bigot-but-present family man that had won the hearts of all four women, he had not felt welcome. He had never come out to any of them, nor did he ever dress in a particularly feminine fashion when around, nor did he ever reveal his job beyond "writer for a magazine", yet somehow the man couldn't stand Nagisa's delicate demeanor. It may have been due to the photos of him as a child, dressed and painted by his sisters, or perhaps the fault of his caring, tender heart, but Nathan only ever saw fit to correct the blond boy's very existence on the planet. At first, when they
made up the very photograph of bliss, he hadn't minded, but the longer they carried on as a family, the more his mother - followed by his sisters - began questioning why he was so effeminate. It was that condition of their atrophic, blood-beating hearts that broke his softly expanding and retracting one and since, he had given them a wide berth.

"They'll come see me soon," the colonel assured himself, "just you wait and see." But Nagisa couldn't shake the feeling that the forlorn man spoke in vain. When their eyes next met each other, a flickering hum of warmth shone in their dark, honey depths like a semblance of hope and they couldn't help but smile at each other. The boy leaned over to hug his father and, swiftly certain, replied,

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll come soon." Now with less-heavy hearts, the man laughed and patted his son's curly locks.

"Enough about me, now, and enough about work - tell me how you've really been," he insisted brightly. The blond straightened and enthusiastically proceeded,

"My friend, Hana - you know, I told her about you, she was a photographer that went to France - she's back now! It's totally great to have her around. We went out drinking the other night, too, which was lots of fun. She doesn't really work next to me and Gou, but whatever - her work kind of coincides with ours a lot, so it's okay." A fine plum shimmer flushed his cheeks and his father observantly perked up. "And, well," he muttered in response to his father's expectant look, "last night I went on this really great date with this guy. Also - um, he's really great, he's not like the others. I mean, I know it was only one date, but he's like, a lawyer, and he's got a really good sense of right and wrong, and I dunno - I just like him a lot so far." Ken nodded understandingly.

"Well, be careful - don't want my princess getting too hurt." Nagisa rolled his eyes.

"I'll be fine, Daddy - besides, shouldn't you stop calling me princess? I'm not like, seven anymore." But the colonel shook his head as indignantly as his son spoke.

"If I didn't fight for my princess, I wouldn't have gone at all," he insisted, great dignity steeling itself in his voice. The younger man didn't let on that it pleased him still, as it had when he was a child.

Nagisa left a few hours later, relatively light-hearted. He had successfully avoided the topic of home life yet again. His mother, Kathy, had met Nathan ten years prior and their relationship progressed much more quickly than anyone had anticipated. The twins Maki and Rika, at that point both seventeen, had fallen in love with the idea of father to protect them from big, bad boys - a man who'd defend their innocence - and took to calling him "Dad" in the span of six months. The eldest, Emi, already having graduated from secondary school, never felt quite that close, but affectionately referred to him as "Nate". Nagisa himself had been open at first, but after one too many years of being told to man up, he froze in a passively frigid state, avoiding anything to do with him like he would the plague.

These thoughts clouded his cleared day as he proceeded jogging down a miscellaneous path rather than retracing his steps home. His eyes slipped like a raindrop to his feet, his troubled thoughts simmering around like a mist in the morning. He fathomed his fogged, dreamy mind wouldn't have noticed anyone other than those in his thoughts even if they hit him head on.

Of course, he'd been wrong about that.

Headfirst, he hurled himself into a solid, lean figure's chest and bounced right off, tripping away with a hand on his head. A set of glasses clattered on the ground beside him and a phone curled off into the grass by the creek bed. Nagisa stumbled up to right himself and instantaneously spouted,
"Bloody fuck - Jesus, I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention -"

"No, no, it was entirely my fault, I shouldn't have been staring at my phone -" They looked up to ensure the other's well-being, and even through unfocused, dewy eyes they recognized one another on the spot, their dreams and thoughts having been decorated with one another since the cover of the night. The blond snatched up the red glasses from the asphalt.

"Rei!" he exclaimed vivaciously, honeyed smile matching the sun like pure beauty. The man picked up his phone and grinned happily at the smaller man.

"Nagisa," he acknowledged, earnestness filling his voice, "what brings you here? Or," he paused, examining his attire and proceeded, "well, I suppose you're out jogging, aren't you? That was obvious, but um... Yes, hello." The blond's laugh twinkled through the air.

"Yeah, I jog out here when I have the day off. I didn't expect - well, you said you were in track, so I guess it makes sense." The brunet perked up hopefully.

"I was actually about to text you," he admitted sheepishly. "I wanted to know when I could see you again - but I guess we just answered that one." He shifted awkwardly, appearing as though he couldn't quite figure out what to say next. Nagisa mercifully took over and stated, "Well, we're both here, anyways - mind if I tag along wherever you're headed? I was just kind of wandering." Relieved, Rei gave a vigorous nod to demonstrate his utmost agreement.

"Certainly - I just do laps around the pond, though. Nothing really extravagant." The two of them fell into an easy jog together, without quite realizing they'd done it, proceeding in the direction from which Nagisa came.

"That's no short run," he huffed in response, thinking out the route in his head. They were on the west side of the pond now, though many yards up from it, beside the creek that ran into it. He assumed they'd turn back around on the other side of the pedestrian bridge, passing the picnic and children's area on the way, before coming up on the east edge of the pond. It was almost a kilometer all around, intermittently dotted with fountains and water fowl, but including the length they'd have to go to reach the bridge again on the opposite side, the entire path would be nearly two and a half kilometers - and it sounded as if Rei ran around it more than once. "You must be pretty dedicated," he commented.

"You're familiar with the area, then?" the taller man responded, glancing down at his companion. "It's one of my favorite places."

"Mine too!" Nagisa agreed delightedly. "I really love that place where the hill kind of slopes into the pond - you know, that area right before the sidewalk starts? There's this really weird maple tree there that's shaped all funny with a bench just right under it and oh - I just remembered, around this time, it gets really pretty and red and orange, like fire, but it's like, not." The brunet grinned at his enthusiasm.

"Yeah, I know where that is, but my favorite place is the bridge - when I first moved here, I used to toss breadcrumbs at the birds. Kind of silly, but even now, I love thinking there." As he spoke, they arrived to its edge and the man slowed, coming to a full stop at the edge. Nagisa's brows furrowed slightly.

"Why? I mean, like really - throwing crumbs to thinking deeply is kind of a jump. What makes you like to think so much here?" he inquired curiously, peering over Rei's shoulder at the gently flowing water below. The taller man leaned over the railing fondly, regarding the smaller man gently.
"That's a good question. I suppose feeding the ducks always made me feel better - like I was helping something at least. But - well, it sounds stupid out loud, but I always felt like the water was mirroring my thoughts. It would help me fix them up to run straight and clean." The blond observed the bridge, attempting to see it in a new light. It was dusted with brown and yellow leaves from the surrounding trees and the ivory paint was beginning to chip and peel at the edges. The sprinting water below was streaked occasionally with mud. He wrinkled his eyebrows, picking through the image and trying to construct beauty in place of what he saw. Rei laughed sincerely at his concentration and commented, "It's fine if you don't really understand. It does tend to look run down in this kind of weather. Honestly, I like it best in summer - those willows over there," he remarked, pointing off to the side while Nagisa approached and relaxed beside him, "they're really a splendid, rich green around that time. And the water is cleaner with less leaves and rain. And it's just - it's nice." The blond glanced at the smooth arch of the bridge and details in the railings, picturing it with ease when his companion's sweet, low murmur described it. He leaned pleasantly against Rei's arm.

"I get it," he replied comprehensively. "Plus this old bridge is kind of like, Victorian-looking. It must be really beautiful." Without thinking, he chuckled and remarked, "You're surprisingly romantic, huh?" Simultaneously they pulled away from the edge and the taller man rolled his eyes.

"Hardly!" he exclaimed incredulously. "People always say I'm the most logical person they've met." They continued past the bridge and trotted toward the south end of the park, but stubbornly, Nagisa persisted, "I don't believe it!" Rei grinned easily and rolled his eyes. "I can't exactly call you logical, either," he laughed.

"Oh, really now?" The brunet's question humorously invited an explanation.

"Well, for example, you wouldn't really say 'I'm not romantic' to someone you've been flirting with," he pointed out, eyes trained on his beaded face. The working flush grew into an embarrassed blush and he muttered some sort of scolding to himself.

"Sorry," he backtracked abashedly. "I don't mean to sound uninterested or prudish. I really am." The blond made a funny face at the comment and he hustled to correct himself. "Interested. I really am interested. Not prudish." But the younger man's laugh bubbled softly as a brook in place of the stream they left behind and Rei flowed back into a wondrous ease.

After jogging past the children's park, the pond came into view, sparkling with the light of a high noon sun. Across the way, they could see couples, parents, children, and simple people out and about to enjoy what could easily be the last of the sunlight for the year. Birdsong hummed through the air, accompanied by the clash of joyously barking dogs throughout; it was the image of peace.

"Look, Rei!" Nagisa cried happily, pointing rapidly at an oddly squat and spread out tree halfway around. "That's the tree I was talking about!" He perked up and with senselessly renewed energy dashed all the way around the shore in eager anticipation of sharing something precious with the man at his side. In spite of his longer legs, Rei fell behind his companion's ceaseless strides and arrived panting at its roots as Nagisa scrambled against the trunk, seeking purchase in its nooks and crannies.

"Nagisa," the brunet exclaimed quizzically, "what on earth are you doing?"

"I'm climbing!" he explained, gesturing toward the tree for pointless emphasis. "I used to do this all the time when I got here for uni, but I haven't been for forever!" He grappled around the base, standing on his toes in an attempt to reach the hollow where the branches spread out to tickle the sky. It had been much easier with his roommate's assistance. "Come help me up," he requested offhandedly. Hesitantly, Rei asked, "You're sure we're allowed?"

"Yeah," he replied easily, still struggling up. He glanced back playfully. "But then again, I've also
never been caught." Despite being entirely scandalized, the brunet came up behind him and blundered around with his hands a moment, uncertainly hovering near Nagisa's hips. He muttered to himself a few times, as though questioning how best to lift him, before decidedly settling on snatching him up at the waist and boosting him several inches off of the ground. The blond brushed his fingers against the older man's before reaching his hand up into the branches and hauling himself up a thick stick, inching over slightly to make room for the other. With a deep huff, Rei dragged his body to sit alongside the blond. Through the vibrant leaves, dusted in hues of toasted ambers and malleable golds, the turquoise sky shone hard like a gem. A breeze whispered to the trees, stirring the hot bronze fronds through the cold depth of the air.

"This is why I love it," he murmured, casting his gaze over the sidewalk. Under the metallic canopy, they were invisible, to be kept a sweet secret among the quietly dancing leaves. He swung a leg over and straddled the branch, beckoning the brunet closer until their foreheads tapped together, the champagne locks twining with the royal blue. In his ear, the little one hummed, "'Cause no one can see us."

Nagisa was the first to lean in, his softly pliable lips tugging at the edge of Rei's open mouth. He left a trail of butterfly touches, begging to be reciprocated and the older man hardly stood a chance - resistance was entirely futile. The following kisses were decorated with the softest notion of intimacy, hushed by the whisper of the wind through the leaves. They held each other comfortably, the strands of one another's hair brushing up against their cheeks, their little beads of sweat tickling their skin and mingling with the damp dribble of their lips. The blond whimpered silkily into the embrace when Rei stroked the hair away from his neck, leaving trails of dusty warmth wherever they graced. The touch was so compassionate; the two fit snugly against each other. They were sipping wetly at one another, neither one quite willing to enter the other, contenting themselves with the mild, warm vibrations from hums of pleasure. They let go simultaneously and, lips still grinding on one another's, Nagisa murmured, "Not romantic, huh?" Rei's chuckle brushed against the blond's mouth so beautifully and, hushed, he whispered back, "It's your fault, though." Yet even so, under the azure sky drifting though the gold leaves, they were both thrilled and delighted at this first intimation of affection.
Where everything began to wither and wane with the way of winter, Nagisa found that his relationship with Rei was blossoming as though it were spring. In the month that came, they most frequented the coffee shop around their lunch times where together they reviewed inconsequential details of their days and worked on their crossword puzzles, often having to work hard to find certain facts about themselves in connection with the words they wrote. On Wednesdays, a day off that they shared, they would meet in the park and jog together, lightly chit-chattering about more personal matters - the blond complained many days that he hadn't been grocery shopping in months, and Rei would notice that each week, he still wouldn't have done anything about it. Though tentative as the furl of the first spring flower, they were content with this easy progression.

By the end of October, they had encountered no serious problems beyond light bickering due to competitions in their crosswords, though much to Rei's chagrin, this seemed only to work to Nagisa's advantage, who used it as flirtatious tension. Not that it seemed the brunet particularly minded, though. In order to spare his patience, however, the younger man kept it light and teasing, if not with an edge of triumph. Rei very rarely got the upperhand in such arguments, and when he did, the poor blond was known to pout his way to a deceitful victory. Rei once told him that Nagisa would have made an outstanding defense attorney if he'd tried.

The day after such an argument - something that had to do with some rule at his workplace - Nagisa had remained as sullen and pouty as ever, and frankly, the older lawyer was beginning to feel concerned that he'd actually upset him. He was rather put off and considerably quieter than Rei was accustomed to as they jogged along. Just as they crossed the ivory bridge, with his voice picking up the edge of curiosity, he asked of Nagisa:

"Is something wrong? You're a little quiet today." The smaller man panted and rolled his pretty eyes, dancing nervously around in place as the brunet slowed to a stop. At this response, he perked up. If anything bothered him, the extroverted young man only needed the one question before, like a needle to a balloon, he would pour out all his emotions in a single round.

"You're going to make fun of me," he complained dramatically, halting himself abruptly by a bench to stretch - it was high time for a break, this being the beginning of their second lap around the pond. Rei copied his movements, huffing at the lack of his partner's willingness to divulge the problem. Occasionally this response was routine as well, and so he promised sincerely,

"I won't. If you talk about it, we can fix it, can't we? But if you don't, then we can't." His tone was systematic and efficient, though his heart uneasily dwelt on the idea of an angered little blond. To his increasing apprehension, this had no effect on the typically happy-go-lucky man, who sighed sensationally and collapsed climatically down upon the cold, metallic bench.

"No," he whined, "you're gonna think it's just ridiculous!" The brunet sat beside him, taking his legs into his lap, genuine worry beginning to shine in his eyes. But no matter, for Nagisa disregarded this. He was certain that he'd be mocked by his staunchly organized attorney.
"If something's really wrong, then I want you to feel as though you can talk with me," the brunet confessed, his voice sincerely tainted with concern. Thus far, he hadn't been faced with a blond that was unwilling and the little one sensed his confusion with precisely how to deal with these reactions. Chilly birds shook their feathers and chirped to fill the hesitant silence.

"Well," he began tentatively, "when you put it like that, I guess it doesn't sound so bad - but no laughing, 'kay?" Rei nodded seriously, eyes trained on him as he leaned up and scooted closer. "So, I told everyone at work that I'd throw a party and they all remembered that it's this Friday, but um... I didn't." The brunet's eyebrows shot up in shock but he was interrupted before he spoke. "I know, I know!" Nagisa groaned, his stress levels rising from the simple look. "It was stupid. But it's just, I have work tomorrow and Friday and I just don't have time to clean my house or to buy things 'cause everything I have is expired or to clean or anything."

"Why didn't you just do it today?" Rei interrogated as the little blond slid off of his thighs. His arms crossed shyly as he rolled his eyes melodramatically again and pointed out his obvious reason.

"Because I wanted to spend time with you! I can't just cancel all of a sudden!"

"I would've understood," he replied easily, standing and offering a chivalrous hand to Nagisa. He took it gratefully, a soft grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Besides," he continued, a voice painted with great amusement, "I think you're really just putting off having to clean and shop." The blond whipped his hand away and, ever impressive, gave a sassy flip of his hair and roll of his pretty eyes. Rei laughed at the display.

"You said you wouldn't make fun of me! I'm actually like, really stressed!" he accused petulantly, turning away from his snickering date.

"I'm sorry," he apologized cheerily, "but if you'd like, we can do it together." When Nagisa looked back, the man's eyes were warm, like a cloudless summer night. His heart gave a warm flip at the gentle, admiring expression and they reached for one another's hands at the same time.

"Well, okay, if you insist," he teased heartily, giving Rei's hand a gentle shake side-to-side. So hand-in-hand, they proceeded onward together.

Rei drove them to a grocery store in a practical black sedan that Nagisa pinpointed to be several years old - perhaps a 2010 model at the latest, but he couldn't be too sure. It was appropriately and apparently well-used, but had been clearly been pristinely cared for so that it shone in a pleasantly good condition.

"Do you have a shopping list?" Rei asked him as they pulled out onto the street.

"Nope!" Nagisa admitted. "I usually just improvise based on my budget." The attorney slammed his brake slightly too hard at the red light, causing the car to lurch forward. Startled, the blond met the horrified gaze of his partner.

"You improvise? Based on your budget?" he repeated. Confused, the writer nodded. "Goodness gracious, I can’t imagine a worse way to save money, or go shopping for that matter. No wonder everything in your fridge is expired. We’re making a list. Right now."

"Right now?"

"Yes." With a snort, Nagisa reluctantly pulled out his phone and opened a new note.

"Well, my milk’s expired. And I think I’m out of orange juice. Oh, I don’t have any eggs, and the state of my bread is absolutely concerning at this point, to be honest,” he rambled, adding things to
his list as they came to him. Rei nodded with satisfaction.

“I’m glad you’re thinking about it, at least. Anything in particular you want for your party? You should add that to your list.”

“Booze, gotcha. And sweets too, but I doubt I can find exactly what I want,” he sighed. “I wish there was a Booths around.” It was the store he’d grown up around: their attitude was friendly both towards their customers and their farmers, but they unfortunately operated only in the north. He’d been reduced to scouring these shelves for the best products he could afford at Sainsbury’s or Tesco.

"What about Waitrose? If you’re concerned about price, I can help you pay," Rei offered.

"Waitrose is way too expensive. And it's for snobs anyhow."

"But I shop there," the brunet stated mildly, pulling into a Tesco parking lot nonetheless.

"Exactly," the blond countered sassily, wringing a sharp laugh from the attorney, but still he offered up a charming smile to show that there was no harm meant in his comments.

Once they pulled into the parking lot of the towering supermarket, Rei was ever the gentleman, opening and closing the car door for Nagisa. The latter was adamant about searching for his childhood candies, to the point where the attorney couldn’t convince him to at least find the items on his actual list. He was reduced to watching his younger date crawl along his hands and knees to search the bottom-most shelf.

"Get up off the floor, you look ridiculous," he pleaded, his cheeks dusted with an embarrassed blush. He glanced around to check if anyone was eyeing them oddly, but Nagisa was already aware that their aisle was empty. Not that it mattered, anyhow. He'd be doing this regardless and so in reply, the blond shook his head vigorously.

"I need to see if they have the same kind of candy like at Booths!" he protested, scanning each item thoroughly. He sighed in frustration and stood, not having found anything worth buying, save for a few miscellaneous bags of candy corns. It was nearing Halloween after all, why not add in some festivity?

"All right then, can we get back to your list? We could do to buy something actually healthy," he reminded his date.

"Okay, okay," he hummed contentedly, scanning it over. They collected fresh milk, bread, and half a dozen eggs. Rei had been sweetly conscious of his date's lesser budget all the while and, though he'd offered to help pay here as well, respected Nagisa's wishes in purchasing it himself. The little blond had begun to grow quite fond of him.

"Oh! I should get pecans and almonds for the party," he exclaimed, turning back to Rei. "I'm gonna roast them. My roommate in uni did that for me once - his family always sent him nuts 'round this time, so I figured I'd try," he explained delightedly, the recollection of toasty, sweet warmth buttered his heart even on the coldest of nights. "I mean, I'm not doing it today," he carried on, "'cause we like, have to clean and stuff, so I'll probably leave it for Thursday." Rei frowned.

"Don't put it off too long," he warned, passing the trolley off to Nagisa.

"Only if you don't be such a worrywart," he teased in a sing-song voice, taking a running start and pushing off childishly. He shot down to the end of the aisle, attempting to hum inconsequentially, pretending to ignore Rei's scandalized scolding. He giggled through his music regardless.
"Hey!" the brunet called, dashing down the aisle after him. "If you're going to do that, then be careful!" The blond's honey-sweet laughter, having overflowed through his faked negligence of his date's presence, danced back to him delicately. As he caught up to the slowing cart, they stumbled to an easier pace. The pair reached the snack aisle, clumsily snickering to each other, though a lower voice added in his chiming chides. They scanned the shelves, and the blond cautiously checked the prices, decidedly tossing the cheapest bags of nuts in the cart. "Now, wait a moment," the attorney scolded gently, examining the bags. "How much do you need?"

"I was gonna use about three cups each," he replied, curiously examining his date. "Why?"

"Well," he began thoughtfully, pushing his apple red glasses up the bridge of his nose, "if you do the math properly, you can save more money." He picked up one of the bundles and read the information thoroughly. "The almonds have about three and a half cups, and the pecans..." He pulled them out. "The pecans have five." Glancing analytically back at the shelves, the brunet easily calculated the prices. "These almonds," he commented, pointing to a higher shelf, "sell more for what would be less. There are, oh, perhaps six cups or so, so it'll save you money in the long run. Besides, what would you do with a half cup, anyhow?" He grinned impressively at Nagisa, eyes shining with the hope of praise, and the blond did smile, but shook his head.

"I would use it. The amount doesn't matter that much, you know." Taken aback, Rei's eyebrows creased like hands on a clock and, to the blond's great amusement, he practically whined, "I don't understand. With the candy, you were so specific, and you positively insisted on the prices that would save you the most money, but all of a sudden, you're tossing all of the detail around." Nagisa shot him a disbelieving glance.

"You really think I'm detail-oriented?" he inquired ironically, leaning against the trolley and observing the flustered man at his side. He had yet to take his finger down from where he pointed at the almonds.

"Well - I mean, I suppose I noticed - it's not that I assumed -" he stuttered, pulling away his hand to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "But whatever suits you, I suppose," he proceeded, his skin red with humiliation. Nagisa had won this round, it seemed, but his date's pride took a few hits. Nagisa sighed with a familiar gentle humor, and continued more sweetly,

"Thank you. The candy thing is more of a sentimentality than anything else - emotions trump everything with me, pretty much, and I'm a bit of a starving writer. I have to be picky with prices." The attorney removed his hands from his face as its color had gone down - save his ears, but the columnist wouldn't remind him of that fact. "Besides," he hummed funnily, "you missed one glaring fact, Mr. Lawyer." Never one to back down from the baiting of the blond, he demanded desperately, "And what's that?" Nagisa grinned.

"The three and a half cups are still cheaper." He rolled his violet eyes, perhaps in imitation of the younger man, and stalked off with the cart, claiming that it was high time they moved on, if they wanted to use their time efficiently. The snickers of his date trailed behind him teasingly.

Their shopping continued without a hint of a ceasefire between them, but as they drove past the park and into a small, suburban neighborhood, the backseat laden with groceries, Nagisa was well aware that no amount of his teasing would lead to victory. Rei parked along the drive.

"This is it, right?" he inquired, scrutinizing the one-storey structure intensely. Nagisa popped out of the car, suddenly nervous by the other man's relentless scanning. Uncertainly, he wondered how his house would appear in the brunet's eyes, who had been far more successful from an earlier age and, as he had come to learn, had been blessed with more privilege as he grew.
Nagisa supposed he'd found a nice place, what with his budget. It was nearly classic, but had taken on some of his charm, so to speak, despite not owning it himself. There was a short sidewalk leading up to an off-center door on the left, and, hidden by a row of unruly flowers right beside it, were rectangular windows with diamond panes. In the sunlight, they glittered prettily - they had been what first caught his eye when he toured the house two years ago. On its immediate right, a bit farther out from door, were two plainer windows. Were his curtains ever open, they'd reveal the little bedroom inside. The house itself was an unremarkable brick construction, made unique by a smattering of wildflowers in front. Overall, with his subpar gardening skills, it appeared as though a child had taken a handful of crayons and colored all over a classic painting. Rei blinked at it a few times, decidedly both under- and over-whelmed by its appearance, and his date hustled to the porch.

"Ahh, come right in!" He invited hurriedly, cheeks a rosy red, as it had been impolite of him to stand there gawking at his own house. The brunet thanked him and following his lead naturally, removed his shoes at the door. "So, erm - what do you think?" When Rei turned his neutrally analytic gaze to Nagisa, the blond found himself jumping to say, "I mean, it's definitely small and I'm not too great at keeping the flowers in tact - I mean, I don't even own this house - but it's got an okay yard in case I'd erm... want a dog or something." He'd finished off lamely, rubbing at the back of his neck and chewing on his lip slightly, and the brunet gave an amused huff.

"I'm not sure what I was expecting," he explained, "but I think it suits you, really." There was a brief moment in which Nagisa relaxed, but it didn't take the infallibly efficient man a second to proceed, "So what do we need to do first? After we put away the groceries, of course." Right. The outside may have charmed his date, but from here on out, the poor writer didn't stand a chance to win any praise. Without waiting for acknowledgement, he approached the tiny kitchen to the side and swung the refrigerator door open. His face curdled like the milk Nagisa had yet to throw out and he gagged slightly while tossing it shut once more. His watering eyes found the young man rubbing at the back of his neck and his eyebrows ticked inward. "We have our work cut out for us," he stated, flat and plain as day. The blond shrugged halfheartedly.

They started by pulling everything out of the fridge - empty eggshells were tossed in the compost, spoiled milk was thrown in the outdoor trash, and it was apparent that very little was salvageable. Just as well, too, for Nagisa was sure he needed a fresh start. He searched through the damp area beneath the sink ("A plumber will have to look at that eventually," Rei had commented) and pulled out his cleaning materials triumphantly.

"Found 'em!" he chirped delightedly, waving a blue bottle at the brunet.

"Excellent," he praised, tossing a rag from the bathroom at Nagisa. "You can get started on wiping down the shelves, and I'll get started cleaning out the pantry. When you're done, start putting away what we bought, all right?" His partner nodded, squirting an excess of the product on the towel - he was sure to need it - and slapped it down on the uppermost shelf, standing on his toes in order to reach the back with his fresh, soapy hands. He ran it under the sink when he'd finished with that level, unusually pleased with himself for his work. True, he was being helped and he hadn't instigated anything, but it relieved him to finally be getting his chores done, rather than simply remarking on it with each passing day. And, he noting with a glance at his hardworking date, he was happy to be working with Rei, the clatters of groceries, ceramic plates, and squeaking rags filling the silence as opposed to his own aimless chatter. All the talk could frankly be exhausting, though he enjoyed the lawyer's company thoroughly, and this day of work had been quite the blessing. The blond grinned pleasurably as he dumped more blue cleaning soap onto his towel and began work on the second level, now able to lower himself from his toes.

"Do you want me to get that top shelf for you?" Rei asked, glancing over from where he was pulling out a stale, two-year-old cereal box and some jam he had yet to open.
"Nope!" Nagisa hummed, capably adding, "I already got it!" They caught one another's eyes and smiled. "Thanks though! You're really the best!"

"No problem," Rei offered quietly, pausing in his work as he watched his earnest partner work. His excitable face brought an easy, comfortable grin to Rei's face and before he realized it, the blond had finished.

"Huh? What're you looking at, Rei?" he addressed him, causing the attorney to pop out of his trance.

"Oh! Nothing, I just took a break," he defended, flustered that he was caught in the act of staring. Nagisa pouted, his eyebrows astoundingly mirroring the funny twitch that the brunet himself was known to have.

"Not fair!" the blond whined, reaching a hand into the grocery bag and beginning to restock his refrigerator. "Look at how much work I did while you just sat around and watched!" he joked, causing his date to jump up, all bothered by the accusation, and work twice as fast as he had before, grumbling lowly at the 'preposterous allegation' Nagisa had so offended him with.

They worked peacefully on the kitchen for the remainder of the hour and the bathroom certainly didn't take long - aside from organizing Nagisa's jewelry drawers and makeup, it was spic and span. They'd elected to leave the living room for last, and so what remained was the blond's disastrous bedroom.

"How on earth do you even sleep in here?" Rei mused aloud, staring at the base of the mountainous clothing pile that stood as high as the bed. The floor couldn't even be seen for sweaters and boots and jeans alike. The open closet was empty, barren hangers twitching darkly from side-to-side while opposite from it, the curtains whipped in the half-open window.

"Funny you mention," Nagisa began to reply queasily, meeting the man's dumbstruck blue eyes, "I've been sleeping on the couch lately. Just most of the time, though. Sometimes I sleep here. Occasionally."

"I can't believe you," he exclaimed, throwing his arms up in a gesture of surrender. "Your refrigerator, your kitchen, your bathroom - those were doable, but you've allowed this - this monstrosity to take over your room! It's forced you out of your own bed!"

"All right now, that's enough of your drama," Nagisa retorted testily, bending over by the door frame to begin picking up clothes. "Just knock everything onto the floor and then on the pillows, we'll stack pants, in the middle, we'll do skirts and dresses, and on either side of the end, we'll do blouses and cardigans. Got it?" Rei nodded, rolling up his falling sleeves, as they leaned down to sort through the clothing.

"Shouldn't we be washing these?" he asked after a lapse of silence.

"I'll be the judge of what's dirty and what's not," he maintained, though only to avoid the fact that he'd forgotten to buy more laundry detergent.

They spent nearly three hours fighting their way through the dark jungle of chic clothes. All that littered the floor now were measly, weak corpses of long-forgotten accessories (Nagisa had wondered where that scarf went!). Rei halfheartedly suggested that while they were working so hard, they might as well deal with what was left, but, exhausted, the blond waved him off and they stumbled to the living room, collapsing upon the couch. After checking the time on the mantle, the writer rolled himself off of the couch and stretched.
"It's about time for a bit of tea, isn't it?" he commented, strolling tiredly to the stove and filling the kettle with water. He opened one of his cupboards and glanced through his selection. "Let's see... I've only got black and green. What would you like?"

"Black's fine," Rei replied, softly adding, "Thank you, Nagisa." The little blond smiled.

"It's not a problem."

They lapsed into a tired silence, shadows of the diamond panes falling past the kitchen and spreading out over the living room, scattering glittering gold jewels across the floor. Dust drowsily faded in and out of the yellowed sunset. Where he awaited the water's boil, Nagisa's hair was set an astounding rich flame, like a flickering beacon in an otherwise still painting, brushstrokes faded over time. His cloud-like, rosy eyes sought Rei. The attorney was completely still upon the couch, where he was bent over something - perhaps a book - and the only sign of life was the dust that fell away around him. The shadow of his fingers hesitated upon a page, quivering with a sort of question. Ivory light danced off his glasses and he blinked, offering the only movement that suggested he was not in an age-old photograph.

"Is this your father?" he murmured, fingers shyly brushing an old memory. Nagisa stepped forth, into shadow, and his light faded. The book in Rei's hand was a photo album. He turned each page of the past with a gentle hand and a want of understanding and the photos, years old, were tinted golden with age. Nagisa returned to the brunet's side and crossed his legs behind him, nestling himself beside the man.

The attorney had found the picture that captured what was perhaps one of the more profound moments of the blond's life. The polaroid contained a boy, at around thirteen years old, with an awkward grin displaying glistening braces and a shiny chin, and wide, bright eyes framed by a hoop of wavy yellow locks that could only be described as "2002". The flash had made him appear rather startled and distinctly uncomfortable. At his side was a salt-and-peppered man, bent forward at the knees, smiling in a resigned fashion as he gripped his son's shoulders. He was dressed in a military uniform. The surface of the photo was quite odd, but the memory accompanying it still choked the boy as well as a large, dry pill. At last, in reply, Nagisa affirmed Rei's suspicions.

"Yeah. That's me he's got in his death grip." As though he'd received some sort of permission, the brunet lowered his fingers to brush the surface of the photo.

"You look so young," he whispered. "You can't've been more than twelve here, right?"

"Just turned thirteen, actually. It was taken in September of 2002." Rei's brows twitched in concentration and his eyes narrowed, as though a closer look would somehow discern everything that meant about his date's childhood, rather than just asking the boy himself. The writer took it upon himself to explain. "It was the day he was deployed to Afghanistan." He cast his eyes away from the picture and focused on everything else in the room - anything to keep him away from the memory. He found cinder-strewn logs in his fireplace, glowing chrome with the last light and proceeded: "He gave me a really nice gold necklace right before that was taken - I'm wearing it in the picture, you know. He shouldn't have bought it, he really couldn't afford it, but he did anyways. I still have it. Wear it all the time." When Rei again examined the picture, he noted reddening eyes, wide and glimmering with held-back tears, and a forced, painful smile. His cheeks and chin were wet.

"I see," he hummed sympathetically. He allowed Nagisa a moment and remarked, "Most of these pictures are just of you and your father. Why aren't your sisters in any of them? You mentioned that you had three. And your mother?" From across the room, a shrill whistle sounded, indicating a boil, and Nagisa rose, snorting with bitter laughter.
"My parents got divorced a long time ago." He hustled over to the kettle and removed the top, pouring a couple cups as the last of the orange glow gave way to grey. "Mum and Dad used to live close together, but Dad was always in the military so when he had to move to Japan, I went with him. Mum didn't even care." He poured the remainder of the scalding water down the drain without a moment's thought that they might need more later and tipped some sour lemon into both cups. "Then, after a few years, we came back to the U.K. and all of a sudden, the attacks in the U.S. happen and by the next year, he was off to Afghanistan. Then two years later, Mum gets remarried to a real piece of work, and give another two years, I run off to uni," he explained, a pain beginning to needle his throat, as he set the cups of tea down, allowing them to clatter against his coffee table gracelessly. "And just last year -" But he cut himself off, folded his arms with a huff, and dumped the boiling black tea down his scorching throat, in hopes it might soothe his unshed tears.

"What?" Rei pressed gently, wrapping his fingers around his cup. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Nagisa mumbled, angry that he'd gone and spoken so much. "Just drop it." In the ashy fireplace, he could imagine the proud, gleaming flame. Surely it too was ashamed of what it had left behind, a shell of its former self. His father could not endure that humiliation in front of Nagisa, let alone anyone he loved, and so his son fought hard to spare him from it and Rei, taken aback at the boy's harsh tone, pulled his hand away from the photograph. With a quietly safe edge of humor, he replied:

"What, the tea you've made for me? I would never." And Nagisa gratefully clung to his arm, ignoring the echoes in his memory of 'don't go, Daddy' that sounded thunderously after the photo's flash.
A hot, roasting aroma wafted mouth-wateringly through the Hazuki house, warmly splashing against the fogged windows like seafoam, and settling steamily in the five o'clock sunshine of October 31st. Sugar sparkled along the countertop, in the fine dips between tiles, and in its tray beside the windowsill, soft, molten butter lapped against the ridges of its container. The oven released an orange glow, though it was obstructed by the tray of gradually toasting pecans, glazed with a sweet sauce recipe that Nagisa had received from his roommate many years ago. The young man himself was too preoccupied, however, to take note of the blissful autumn surroundings.

"Rei," he sighed into the phone tucked between his ear and neck, "everything's going fine. Of course, I haven't put anything off." He caught a whiff of the sweet, burnt smell and popped off of the couch. "Shit, they're burning," he muttered, and his partner caught it.

"I told you not to procrastinate," came the brunet's staticky voice from the wobbling phone. Nagisa rolled his eyes.

"And I told you not to worry about it," was his sassy reply. Without allowing the lawyer to point anything else out about their joint preparations, he interjected, "See you later!" and effectively cut him off by hanging up. He dashed over to the oven and, without a second thought, shoved his hands in and grabbed at the pan. A most unwise idea, he was sure Rei would think. He dropped it like it was hot and whipped his stinging fingers away. "Fuck!" he howled, hopping over to the sink and flicking the cold water on. Instinctively, he withdrew at first, but forced them to stay under as the icy water faded from painful to soothing. Patting his hands dry, he forced himself away, slipped a pair of oven mitts on, and pulled out the roasted, if not slightly burnt, nuts from the oven, frowning down at them in an irritable manner. He left the rattled tray upon the unused stove to cool, cheap little jam jars sparkling emptily beside and waiting to be filled, while he checked on his drinks in the refrigerator.

Nagisa had forgotten until the last minute that it happened to be Halloween, tossing together a black tulle skirt, popped-collared white shirt, and orange corset ensemble, completed with a candy-corn colored witch's hat. It had been a simple, last minute idea of his, as most of his party had been.

A knock on the door sounded, and he danced over to open it, perfectly aware that it wouldn’t be any kids. He was greeted with a rowdy, "Trick or treat!" and, alcohol in hand, Gou and Hana tripped into his house.

"You guys are early," he informed them critically, though he had a watery smile. Gou, who looked like she’d already had a bit to drink (and judging by the fact that only Hana’s Prius was outside, planned on more), shrugged and joked, "Be grateful we brought booze." While his friends made themselves at home, Nagisa took the drinks and set them on the counter before turning to pour cups of the booze and setting them out beside the wine, from Gou, and an absurdly large bottle of pricey whisky liqueur from Hana. As he was finalizing his preparations, he took the time to admire Hana’s masterfully crafted stapled paper Wonder Woman crown. Nagisa and Gou turned to each other to share a grimace as she took an impressive swig of some whisky.
"At least my hair's down," Hana stated unenthusiastically before either had a chance to speak. They giggled appreciatively.

In fifteen minutes' time, Ms. Amakata and her fiance, Goro Sasabe, a businessman specializing in marketing (a happy accident for the magazine, for when they met it had been young in the country, struggling amid popular names such as Vogue and Elle, bringing with them cute hors d'oeuvres. He, however, turned to the door and eagerly awaited the arrival of Rei. His heart thumped against his bound-in-black chest, causing his ribs to turn sore. Within the office only Gou had caught a glimpse of him, but she hadn't had the chance to speak to him. He was certain beyond any doubt that his friends would adore him. The blond hoped he'd arrive soon - Rei was hesitant to accept the invitation, even when the blond promised he could bring a friend. Maybe he didn't have any?

Nagisa hardly had the time to think about it, however, as more and more people from the office flooded in, treats and alcohol mostly in hand, as Gou found his speakers and plugged in her iPod, fully stocked with dance music. He attempted to wait by the door, but ended up getting pulled away to chat with Goro, then Ms. Amakata, then Michael from public relations, then a tipsy Hana herself, who had decided she was quite fond of Michael tonight and had her arm in his, though he now seemed quite baffled. Every now and then, he glanced apprehensively at the clock.

Finally, at 8:30 on the dot, precisely when the party was scheduled to begin, a firm knock sounded over the festive din. The writer dashed to the door, leaving behind a winded Ami and Rachel, two fellow columnists, and tossed open the door with a bang. Just as he'd thought, it was Rei!

It was Rei dressed in a suit gray enough to rival the morning's sky. He raised an eyebrow. But of course, it was also Rei holding a bouquet with autumn flowers, and it was this that made him huff and smile.

"Am I, erm... late at all?" he asked, uncertainly glancing over the blond's downy head at the full house.

"You're right on time!" the writer replied enthusiastically, wrapping his arms around the tall brunet. He was beginning to think he wasn't going to come, but it was so like him to arrive exactly on time. He was just beginning to relax into Rei's arms when from behind the pair came a politely gentle cough - and Nagisa remembered that he'd let Rei invite someone. He leapt back from the lawyer, grabbing his hand instead and refocused his attention on the guest.

Immediately, the blond wondered how he hadn't noticed him straight away. He was several centimeters taller, broad-shouldered, and had a pretty pair of green eyes. He wore a white-button down, but the jeans he chose to accompany it gave him a considerably more casual look than Rei's. Finally, he had somewhat of a messy, bedhead hairstyle in a lovely shade of brown. With his sweet smile, he was positively, adorably handsome.

"Sorry!" he apologized, his voice soft and his grin easy, "I just wanted to introduce myself." He reached out a hand to a dumbstruck Nagisa who barely remembered in time to grab it. Rei spoke next, reminded of his own manners.

"Nagisa, this is Makoto Tachibana - he works in the office next to mine. Makoto, this is Nagisa Hazuki," he continued, absurdly formal in his speech, "my -" And for just a moment, he paused, catching himself. It was just enough time to make the blond wonder just what exactly they were to one another. He'd always been okay with casual relationships that ran their own courses, never quite garnering a label, but the thought of a break-up only caused him to cling to Rei's large hand tightly.

"Boyfriend," he supplied determinedly. It didn't matter if they hadn't talked about it - clearly, it was what the brunet had intended to say. Besides, they'd been dating since the beginning of September,
for nearly two months now, and there hadn't been an inkling of a problem between the two of them.

"Right," he agreed quickly, giving Nagisa's left hand, the one he'd been holding, a thankful squeeze.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Makoto said, kindly refraining from mentioning the awkward pause.
"Actually," he laughed handsomely, and Nagisa wondered what type of fairy tale prince he was dealing with exactly, and continued, "we've met before."

"We have?" he questioned, releasing Makoto's hand. He nodded, a gentle blush crawling onto the bridge of his nose.

"I accidentally called you after that meeting," he admitted with embarrassment as the trio walked into the house.

"You're the one that talked about overfishing?" Nagisa giggled and the tall man nodded. "Well, let me introduce Rei to some people so he can entertain himself and then you and I can chat a bit, okay? I'm interested in what you were talking about," he continued charismatically. "I'll just be a second." And mercilessly, he grabbed his introverted partner and tugged him to the thankfully sobered-up Gou. "Gou! This is Rei, my boyfriend!" She rapidly downed a drink - maybe not so sober as he'd hoped - and stuck out her hand.

"Charmed!" she chirped happily over the sounds of Coldplay’s “Ink”.

"Gou works for the magazine's blog," he informed the man, copying his style of introduction, "she does stuff like... social media and stuff, right?" The redhead waved him off.

"Close enough." Rei took her hand and gave it a properly firm shake.

"I'm happy to meet you. I work as a lawyer -"

"For murder cases and whatever, right? Nagisa never shuts up about how impressive you are." For a moment Rei was taken aback, but he cracked a wobbly smile, pleased with the attention and the blond grew hotter than his burnt almonds in the face. Rei gave a chuckle as Nagisa rolled his eyes, too happy and eager to pursue the topic. The blond located the significantly drunk Hana and now incredibly bemused Michael in a corner.

"Hana!" he called out. She lifted a glass and, at last releasing her prey, trotted up to her friend.

"Who this?" she asked, straightening herself to her full height. In those heels, she was almost as tall as the brunet. The fact that she could stand on them was stunning enough.

"This is my boyfr-" Nagisa began, but she held up a manicured hand instead.

"Nevermind, don't finish - I'm gettin' some wader, meet ya lader, kay? Kay." And she whirled away to sober herself up. Rei glanced at Nagisa with confusion.

"Well, that was Hana," he stated. "She's a photographer for the magazine, but on special occasions, she gets kind of... excitable. Don't worry though, she gets herself under control pretty quick. And this poor fellow is Michael, from publishing. Well, I'll go put these in a vase." He kissed Rei on the cheek and waved to his coworker. "I'll leave you two to one another!" he announced with a happy-go-lucky turn. He pranced to the kitchen, leaving the awkward pair behind, pouring water into a particularly tall cup (close enough to a vase, right?), and let the flowers rest beside a cup of nuts. The blond noted with pleasure that his homemade treats were fast disappearing. After a moment of admiring his work, he at last dashed back to Makoto Tachibana, who awkwardly shifted his feet side to side near the door. "Sorry I took so long!" he said, dancing up to his side. "I'm gonna make this
quick - are you straight?" Taken aback, he glanced over to Rei, who chatted lightly with Michael, and replied, "Well, no, but erm - I don't think - I mean, you're with Rei -" Nagisa was confused and nodded lightly, eyes narrowing, before he understood exactly what the gentle man was trying to say.

"Oh no, no that's not what I meant at all, it's just that you're just my friend Gou's type, but I guess if you're not straight, then forget about it - you're handsome and all, but you're definitely not the kind of guy I go after. Sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

"I didn't mean to misunderstand!" he apologized, tangling a hand in his hair. "Shoot, I always mess up when I meet someone that Rei likes. I get nervous!" Nagisa laughed and proceeded, "Well, since that's out of the way, what is it that you do exactly, again?" Makoto relaxed visibly, searching the counters and checking the labels of the copious amounts of alcohol. "Oh, the soda's not alcoholic. You probably have to drive, right?" The blond handed him a cup and the taller man gave him a thankful smile.

"I'm an animal rights lawyer," he informed the writer, rubbing his neck in a rather silly manner. "A lot of people think it's not a really important thing, but..."

"I think that's really cool!" Nagisa cut in quickly. It explained why he asked about the fish, at least. Encouraged, the other man continued,

"I also do environmental law, too - I'm actually working on a big case right now! We're having trouble finding witnesses, though. Ones that have actually seen crimes happening in the past couple of years that are willing to come forward. It's a pity, too - this case is why I was transferred to London." The blond murmured his sympathies before inquiring curiously;

"Transferred? Where from?"

"Barcelona - I'm actually from Seville, though." That explained his well-tanned face, at least, but the columnist hadn't noticed an accent! As he continued, however, he picked up a lovely lilt in his deep, musical voice. "I was assigned to work on a case against large fisheries primarily associated with cosmetics - their overfishing has caused severe damage to the ecosystem, particularly concerning their natural predators, dolphins and whales. It's been going on a few years now. I've been in London for that time. I'm glad I found a job so soon after graduating!" For a moment his green eyes softened even more so than they had been. "Rei's been a big help. He did extra research on his days off a lot - since animal law is very particular, it's likened to criminal law a lot, which is Rei's practice. But frankly, I've been worried about his workaholic tendencies!" he rambled peacefully. At mention of his concern, however, Nagisa perked up and, ready to ask if he could help, was cut off by the brunet's voice. "I'm really glad he met you, though - he's finally using his days off and his lunch breaks and sometimes leaves work early!" Makoto laughed. "I couldn't believe when he actually made me cancel our dinner meeting last month! He was so frantic, I've never seen anything like it!"

"He made you not go?" the blond interrupted incredulously. Rei had told him that 'his colleague had to cancel'.

"You didn't know?" Makoto asked with concern. "Maybe I shouldn't have said..."

"No, no!" Nagisa laughed, "He told me you cancelled! That's funny, the image of him all bothered like that - I wish I could have seen!"

"I think he was kind of desperate for a break without realizing it," Makoto said with a sympathetic grin. They both glanced at their subject, who had somehow managed to land himself between a more or less sober Hana and Michael. "I'm glad you met him when you did." Nagisa felt himself relax into an easy, sweet grin. He felt fortunate, holding the affections of such a well-loved and respected man.
"I am too," he agreed contently. "He's been so great." He was certainly the diligent type, it seemed, even now holding his own in a conversation between a half-drunk woman and an almost silent man. "But God, what a dork. I hope you'll excuse me - he needs some rescuing. You should go talk to Gou over there, though. See her, with the red hair? She's a friend of mine. Careful, though, you're her type. Break it to her early on." And so, the host dashed off once more to valiantly save his hard-working boyfriend. Not before dropping by his restroom to grab a little something, though...

"Being as its Halloween," the blond stepped in, resting his hands on Rei's high shoulders, "there's way you're gonna be in my house without having a little fun." And from behind him he plucked out some devil horns on a headband that had originally come with his skirt, and shoved them onto Rei's short, inky hair.

"Nagisa!" he protested, a red blush matching the crimson horns quite well spreading all over his face. "These are completely ridiculous!" He attempted to take them off, but with a playful grab at his wrists, the blond prevented him from it.

"Nu-uh, I don't think so! You wanna stay, you have to wear them!" He tossed his arms around Rei's neck and though his hands were now free, Rei now wrapped them around his boyfriend's waist.

"I don't think you'd kick me out, but I'll go along with it," he informed him with a scolding tone.

"Well, now that I've got you back, I have some more people for you to talk with, come on!" He tugged Rei away, though the other man stuttered in protest, gesturing to the pair behind them. "They'll be fine," Nagisa stated.

"All right, but let me have a breather first, before you drag me off to talk to more people. I'm not nearly as social as you." He flicked his wrist away from the blond's grip and leaned against the wall in the hallway, taking a deep breath. He seemed slightly irritable, so he took one of Rei's hands in both of his own, rubbing it with his thumb.

"Sorry," he said sincerely, kissing the top of his hand.

"It's fine. I wouldn't want to ruin your party." Nagisa leaned against the wall opposite of him.

"No way! You made it a hundred times better!" Rei flashed him a grateful smile and for a minute, they sat in the relative quiet, excusing the hum of chatter and the gentle clink of glasses.

"So," the brunet began peacefully, "boyfriend?" Sensing the reference to the earlier introduction to Makoto, Nagisa grinned bashfully.

"That kind of looked like what you wanted to say. I don't know, though - do you want to be that committed? I'm okay without a label." Rei shrugged.

"I prefer to know where I'm headed," he told Nagisa in his usual systematic tone. "To be honest, I'd been wanting to ask about it for a while now, but I guess I was worried that you wouldn't feel the same." They smiled at one another.

"I don't really plan on letting you go any time soon." Rei flashed him a grin and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Neither do I." After a heartbeat more of comfortable quiet, the brunet proceeded, "So you and Makoto got along, did you?" The blond nodded enthusiastically.

"I like him! He's kind of like, too handsome to be true though, to be honest." Rei rolled his eyes.
"I was worried you'd think that. Forgive me if I felt a little jealous." The writer pushed himself off of the wall and directly into the brunet's arms, kissing him somewhat sloppily on the mouth.

"Nah, you're much more my type. I feel sorry for Gou, though, I saw her checking him out. You haven't got any straight friends that look like that, do you?" Rei gave a wry grin.

"Afraid not. I'll ask my brother if anyone on the basketball team is interested." They laughed together, emerging from the corner arm-in-arm. They chatted happily for a moment until -

"Oh you've got to be kidding me, Gou," Nagisa moaned as lo and behold some song he didn't know evolved into 'Spooky Scary Skeletons'. The redhead, who'd been wrapped in pleasant conversation with Makoto, whipped around sassily, drink in hand, and dramatically sighed, "Oh, my poor Nagisa - it's vintage," came her voice through the crowd. She placed her drink on a nearby table and, too quietly for the writer to hear from his distance, asked something of Makoto. He gave his handsome chuckle and took her kindly by the waist in the standard position for a dance. Beside him, Rei murmured, 'She's right, you know. The original was made in 1929.' He gave what was likely his most impressive pout yet and released his boyfriend, one hand on either of his hips now, proud, and mockingly an irritated expression.

"You're taking her side now?" he protested in a whine, hoping to get some sort of placating gesture from the tall brunet. He was never one to pass up the opportunity for a tease.

"Now, now," Rei muttered in an attempt to calm him, "don't be childish about it." He took the young man up gradually in his arms, holding him as Makoto did Gou, in the standard ballroom position. "You see, it actually makes quite the fun dance, and what's a get together without one of those?" The blond took liberty enough to snuggle considerably closer than the nearby platonic couple and hummed his agreement. Around them a few others joined - Ms. Amakata with Goro, Hana with Michael, and a handful of others - with varying degrees of seriousness. The brunet held him well, keeping the dance nothing short of proper, but his boyfriend rolled his shoulders and spun to the xylophone. It was a short dance, anyhow; more for fun than anything of any consequence. Rei begrudgingly allowed himself to have a little fun - maybe it was the alcohol; the blond thought he'd seen at least one drink go down the hatch. After the few minutes spent dancing, the writer's boss approached, her fiance having gone off to talk with a couple other columnists.

"You must be Nagisa's new beau," she began, holding a poised hand out for a shake. The lawyer accepted it gladly, Nagisa swinging over to his side.

"That I am. My name is Rei Ryugazaki," he introduced himself, his voice crisp and kind. He took her hand.

"I'm Miho Amakata. Do take of him, he does his best work when he's happy." And with a mutual smile and wave, they parted, the older woman grabbing ahold of her fiancee before saying a goodbye to her employee. Booze began to run low and cabs were called as gradually, the party began to dissipate. Hana and a significantly drunken Gou being the last pair to leave - save for Rei and Makoto. The three of them sat and, for a half hour, shared a drink and an easy chat, ending when Makoto yawned and announced that he had a big day of work to follow. His colleague and newfound friend both accompanied him to the door and, like a gentleman, he disappeared 'round the corner to 'bring the car from around the block', leaving the pair with a few moments alone. The clock struck 11 inside and the lovers stood under the doorframe.

"Thank you for inviting me," Rei began quietly, keeping a tight hold on his boyfriend's hand. "I really enjoyed myself - as did Makoto, I'm sure." Sympathetically, his hand brushed golden bangs away from Nagisa's face. "I'm sorry to leave so soon." The writer, sensing his chance, wrapped
either arm around Rei's neck in thanks. The brunet patted his head and used a free hand to place upon the small of his back. They shared a long kiss and when they broke apart, the blond whispered in his ear:

"Makoto drove you, right? You're welcome to stay, you know, we could, ah, have another drink, just us two." The attorney leaned away slightly, looking the smaller man in the eye through his red-framed glasses. His navy-as-the-sky eyes analyzed Nagisa's so seriously that he found his heart beating deep and achingly within his chest and his breath hitched unevenly.

Rei stepped away. "No... No, I don't believe I can. Not now." And when Makoto brought the car around, the brunet got in it and they drove away together.

Nagisa was irate. The following days, whenever he though of the incident, his cheeks pricked hotly with crimson humiliation while his contrasting heart grew cold and cringed like a brown, fallen leaf. He'd been as clear as a cloudless winter day when he spoke, and his newly dubbed boyfriend hadn't had any justification for rejecting him like that. He'd even worn his cutest undies, suffering through itches all through the night. It was clear to him at least - though he'd never admit it - that he was channeling all of his embarrassment and anxiety about the rejection into misconstrued anger toward the one who caused him harm.

While the blond had been left with plenty of alcohol, his supply was fast dwindling due to the incident. His friends seemed uncertain as well. While the problem didn't seem to be affecting his work life this time, they urged him to talk about it with Rei for the sake of his emotional well-being. Every time he brought it up they would do this and, soon growing tired of hearing the sensible action to take, he began eating lunch alone instead.

All the while, he'd been spending less and less time with Rei, inventing excuses for not meeting on weekends, jogging later in the day, and remaining quiet - if not slightly rushed - while they had coffee and finished crosswords together. The blond noticed with great annoyance that this seemed to suit the eternally busy attorney anyhow. He certainly didn't make any move to start a conversation, seeming to prefer sitting there in the relative silence, completely content to ignore his huffy boyfriend. When they did speak, it was never about themselves, but about their friends. He made it a point to discuss that handsome and gentle Makoto, and it gratified him when the brunet's feathers were clearly ruffled by jealousy. He could endure that discomfort, as the writer coped with his humiliation in kind. Apparently, a little sympathy was too much to ask for, even from his father.

"Princess," the colonel started uneasily, "hasn't it been nearly two weeks since that incident?" The blond was sitting in a chair beside the bed within his room, watching the November rain patter along the windows. His shoulders sagged dead and limply, and his rosy eyes were shadowed by lifeless purple circles underneath them. His temple throbbed like an eternal hangover and Ken Hazuki guessed that, judging from the vague smear of eyeliner and sparkle of mascara on his cheek, it had been a mixture of tears and no sleep more than alcohol. His throat tightened in sympathy. So the phrase went: love is a battlefield.

"So?" he answered dully, his eyebrows creasing and his chin dimpling slightly. "It's him that isn't talking to me. It's not like I'm avoiding him." Lie. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father give him a pitying glance.

"Please speak with him," his father requested softly, rolling his chair beside Nagisa and placing a hand on his shoulder. He ignored it in favor of staring at the raindrops on the sill. Ken removed his hand.

"I ought to have that closed," he rumbled absently. "Do you mind?" The blond complied, almost
slamming the jammed thing shut. His father regarded him cautiously, not wanting to set him off or cause him to leave, but this loneliness he displayed was uncharacteristic and worrisome. "You know, your mother and I used to fight all the time," he began, assessing Nagisa's reaction.

"You guys got divorced," he pointed out dryly, but Ken proceeded. The blond tilted his head slightly towards his father, trying to appear disinterested, but it didn't quite work.

"I remember in the early years of our marriage, she only wanted one kid, but I wanted at least three! We compromised on two, but our second turned out to be twins! What a surprise. And then," he spun to face Nagisa taking his soft cheek and pinching it. "And then, you came along. Kathy compromised then, too - she knew how much I'd wanted a little boy." His voice faded and with the next heartbeat, the blond recalled something he thought he would have forgotten a long, long time ago.

Once, when he was no older than three or four, his father took him shopping for a new toy. They were holding hands and as Ken picked up a toy bat and ball, Nagisa, with all the might in his little body, reached to the very tip of his fingers for the pink baby doll on the shelf. His father faced him, loosening his hold, and the little boy dashed over and picked it up.

"Is that what you want?" his father had asked, his voice fading wistfully like something lost. The boy glanced up and shyly nodded, but all the same those grabby, chubby fingers began to replace it. He didn't know it then, but when he looked into his father's face next, he witnessed a deliberate decision. As unconditional as the sun shone at dawn, the man smiled, took up the frilly doll and stated simply, "Then that's the one we'll get."

Ken's gentle chuckle pulled him away from the memory and he placed a calloused, war-torn hand upon Nagisa's plump cheek. The rough fingers brushed against his eyelashes and absentely, he realized he must have been crying. "And you're the best son I could have asked for," he stated simply. The blond looked into his father's eyes, searching for something, but what he found was that same easy smile from that memory so long ago. Whatever he looked for, he was glad not to have found it. "You still have plenty to learn, though. I made the mistake of ignoring a problem like that, thinking it would just disappear, and look where I am now. I'll be damned before I see my son break his heart the same way." Nagisa sniffled slightly and said to his father half-heartedly:

"Thanks for listening. And being, you know, concerned and all." He huffed and lied, "I'll try to work it out. But I gotta go now." He leaned over the colonel's chair, kissed his forehead, and left him looking after his son with worry.

As he stepped out of the building, he put his hood up, and, as a chilly wind blew, thanked his lucky stars that he thought to buy some jogging pants while he'd been out last week. He checked his watch - it read eleven in the morning - and, as he pushed off of the front step and began a brisk jog, he hoped he wouldn't run into Rei. He seemed like an early riser, anyways. Not that he knew, of course, he remarked bitterly.

He was lucky. The rain pelted his jacket noisily, cold, thin drops slapped his face, but he did not run into his boyfriend. He stopped on the bridge, recalling that the brunet had been so fond of it, and glanced down into the turbulent, swelling water. Its color was murky and dark, its movements, rapid. So much for a reflection of calm thoughts. Nagisa spurned it, running on and stubbornly wishing that Rei was feeling the same way that the creek looked. The more he thought of it, the harder he slammed his aching feet onto the ground, the anger spurring him forward through the park until at last he came to the tree he liked so much. Seeing it just made him think of the damned attorney and that day they made out in its now-naked branches, but all the same he stopped at the bench in front of it and stretched his sore, pained leg muscles.
Nagisa thought he was alone, but as the rain eased up, he could hear the soft kiss of feet upon the damp ground. He dared not look up lest it be the man he was dreading, and focused instead on really stretching those thighs as he bent over them, one leg on the bench. The pose was attractive and just to spite him, he made it deliberately moreso, arching his back downward at the same time. The steps continued and did not stop until they were directly behind him. The blond bit his lip, sagging downward in a resigned fashion and waited for him to speak. The body behind his bent over until its lips were at his ear and he could feel the warmth upon his wet back.

"Nice ass," whispered the distinctly American, sharply disinterested voice of his university roommate, Haruka Nanase. The blond flew up like a bird, hitting the other man's torso in the process, and spun like a dancer into Haruka's arms. His nails dug deeply into his cotton hoodie and he buried his raining eyes into his chest. Startled by the passionate reaction, the black-haired boy did nothing at first, surprise only registering as the blink of an almond eye, but ever so gradually patted his head, then his back, and then loosely wrapped himself around Nagisa, burying his face in the crook of his neck. He had no way of knowing that he'd come just in time to comfort the lonesome blond, but he was glad he managed it somehow. The writer did not let go, preferring to quietly choke and snot on the American's clothes instead. That was so until an uncomfortable, uncertain voice rang out behind the pair.

"Erm, Nagisa? What - what are you doing?"

It was Rei.
Americano

Nagisa cautiously stepped away from Haruka's warm, safe embrace and faced Rei head-on, raising his hands in a placating gesture. The brunet looked wounded, like a festering cut that had turned green and sticky with infection. Were it not for the slightly red eyes, the blond would have thought that to be rain upon his cheek. Sensing the tense mood, the foreigner took a step back, giving his friend an encouraging pat onward.

"Rei, um, this really wasn't what it looked like," Nagisa began, uncharacteristically awkward. He crossed an arm defensively across his stomach, grabbing onto his sleeve. "This is Haruka," he continued into the strangely silent park. The rain had ceased, the park was empty, and somehow in the midst of the city, no cars seemed to pass. "He's my old roommate from uni. You know, the one I've been telling you about - the tree and the nuts and all..." His voice trailed off like a gradient, lost in the mist. Visibly, the brunet forced himself to relax, dropping his arm and approaching gradually. He took his time regaining his composure, straightened himself, and offered his hand.

"I do apologize for the misunderstanding. I'm Nagisa's boyfriend, Rei Ryugazaki," he introduced himself, taking special care to wedge himself slightly closer to the blond than was necessary. For a long while, nobody moved. The grey of the day surrounded the other man grimly as he evaluated Rei's possessive posture and forced grin. The air around them became awkwardly still and stale. Only when the attorney began to put his hand down did Nagisa's friend take it up limply.

"Haruka Nanase," he deadpanned, light blue eyes boring through the misty air. He held a disinterested look about him, in the way all Americans did, somehow casual despite the regal air. When they had first met while unpacking in the dorm, Nagisa was reminded of a Siamese cat toying with a fish, two glittering indigo irises focusing sharply upon its prey in the water, but never once making a move. It was as alluring then as it was in this moment.

"Well!" Nagisa's hands clapped like thunder and he recalled that he was mad at Rei. "It's been awhile since I've seen Haru and we were just heading out for coffee. I hope you don't mind, but I'm sure you two can talk more another time," he prompted his boyfriend, awaiting his departure.

"I actually was rather hoping that... er, well, that we could talk." Nagisa looked into his eyes - this guy was so useless at taking a hint - and gave him a rather pitying look and a slight shake of his head.

"Rei, not now," he muttered, slightly exasperated, but feeling rather blue in his heart.

"Oh," he mumbled, his voice a bit higher than usual. He gave a sad wave. "Well, I - I guess I'll... talk to you later, then. Goodbye. Have a good time." He turned the way he came and jogged off, quite faster than usual. Haruka raised an eyebrow, glanced pointedly at his friend, and was met with a groan.

"Don't look at me like that," he snapped, beckoning the man to walk in the opposite direction with him. "Let's just go." He complied silently, eyes pinned upon the blond, who took the cue to spill his entire story of the past several years as they wandered together in an unknown direction.

Haruka left the university the year after General Ken Hazuki returned from the war, paralyzed from the waist down after shrapnel from a land mine pierced his spine, hounded by nightmares and a completely changed lifestyle. At first, Nagisa spent his last year living with his father, using his pension to help pay rent and using odds and ends for utilities. The boy helped him frequently in the middle of the night, but the accidents, the catheter, the bathing, took its toll on his studies and his
father knew. When first he was offered the internship with Elite, the general knew that he must take his leave for the sake of his suffering son, and took up residency in a retirement home.

After a while, Nagisa was notified that his father would have to be transferred to a different facility due to an unexpected accident that left him in need of correctional surgeries and more detailed care. He was transferred to St. Lucy’s where more than a year later, he still resided. With the help of doctors, medication, and therapy, his recovery was steady - as were the painful expenses. The woman Nagisa interned for - Miho Amakata - took pity on him and hired him as an assistant, a position that occupied him for a number of years.

Between university expenses, his father’s medical bills, and his own cost of living, Nagisa was trapped in what soon could have become crippling debt, but dodged it with his graduation, thankfully on track due to his desperate work. It was around this time that he met the “love of his life” James and out of the spring of infatuation began one of his few long-term relationships. Like father, like son, so the saying went, and after moving in together, the relationship began to crumble.

Nagisa spent many nights away without presenting any logical reason to his beau - he found at this point that he simply couldn’t humiliate the proud man he called father by speaking of his injuries and so, he kept his visits a secret. He had truly loved James, and in retrospect he knew the man didn’t deserve such treatment, and so when the time came that he was fed up and left, the blond was unsurprised and despite the grey of winter becoming spring’s painted lady, he found himself unable to begin afresh as regret haunted his conscience.

Here and there over the summer, he struck up several flings, but found few fulfilling and so focused on his work with the magazine. Hana was long gone, not scheduled to return until later that fall and so he and Gou grew close through many pity-parties involving far too much wine to be healthy.

Time passed naturally, but the summer days were dull and lonesome with the ache of routine, but come autumn he received his promotion, along with a raise, and met Rei in its earlier months. Things had bloomed beautifully between the lawyer and the columnist until the Halloween party not two weeks back, during which his advances were rejected and he failed to understand why.

“You’re joking,” Haruka stated, seated at a table across from his friend, hand wrapped around a steaming cup of black coffee. He and Nagisa sat across one another in a cafe along a busy road, watching as cars split puddles like seas as they sped by, the rain sadly drizzling the window panes. The blond had just finished his tale as they’d approached a coffee shop (not just any, he’d realized bitterly, for this was the one in which he’d met Rei in the first place) and, as the rain worsened, they’d ducked in together for some shelter. Nagisa raised his head up off the wooden table and sent a pout to the American.

“What on earth makes you think I’m kidding about this?” he demanded, tangling his wet hands into his sharp, golden locks. Haruka continued as if he hadn’t heard.

“This is about sex. That tense, depressing conversation was about sex.” His incredulous blue eyes seared through the blond’s weak shelter of his folded arms.

“Don’t say that so loud!” he complained. “And essentially, yes, but it’s more than -”

“No, not ‘essentially’. That’s literally it.” Haruka raised an eyebrow and the unhappy Yorkshire native sighed dramatically. The brunet clearly disapproved, but it wasn’t because he was prudish (after living with him for two years, Nagisa would certainly know). As he placed a snow-white hand upon his friend’s leaning shoulder in a silent gesture of comfort, he knew that what displeased him most was that the columnist was in fact making life difficult for himself. He was an extrovert; he knew how to communicate. He hadn’t any excuse for making both his and Rei’s lives harder than
they need be. He was well aware of what needed to happen if he wanted to keep his young relationship afloat, but not desiring to think upon it, he shook it off and said curiously to Haruka:

“How have your few years been? You dropped out of uni and went back to America, but you didn’t keep in touch.” The brunet shrugged, but as a writer, the little blond was persistent. “What have you been doing? Did you get a job without a uni degree?” he pried.

“Went back to Mohawk for a bit,” he admitted after a moment. “Mom and Dad wanted help on the orchard.” After a few years of living together, Nagisa had garnered some information about his home life. Haruka was born to a Native American mother and a Japanese father that had been a first-generation immigrant. His father, he was aware, had been sent to New York city for work, but discovered his passion in the countryside and environment. During a vacation to the ever-so-small town of Mohawk, he fell in love, got married, and began a local pecan and almond business. Haruka was their only son. Though born in early summer, they had chosen the kanji “haru”, meaning spring, and “ka” for flower. They’d forgotten that when combined, the two characters usually meant “distant”. Nagisa supposed that became a self-fulfilling prophecy. With that in mind, the blond humorously pursued.

“You never stay in one place too long. What about after?” Haruka furrowed his brow, coming off as slightly annoyed, but continued nonetheless after a short sip of coffee.

“Touk some biking trips through the U.S. Found some natural hot springs. Swam.” He’d been on the university’s swimming team, but Nagisa knew the man hadn’t been very fond of structure. Hearing about his friend’s trip didn’t surprise him much, for he was very keen on nature.

“Did you work at all?” the columnist pried, leaning toward his friend with interest. It was hard to get the man talking, but Haruka was truly interesting once he did. He was taken aback, however, when he snorted noisily, cast a powerful glare out the window, and pressed his lips into a thin, irritated line. The response was oddly passionate for the apathetic man and immediately, he became concerned.

“What?” he asked hurriedly. “What happened?”

“Yeah, I got a job,” he stated bitterly, slamming his coffee down on the table. His eyes were clear and angry, like a sharp, blue flame. “I worked for a fishery based between the U.S. and Japan for a year.” Remembering his conversation with Makoto, Nagisa felt his interest being piqued. For once, he did not have to prompt his stoic friend to continue. “They completely mistreat marine life. I worked as a permanent translator while I was there - did some swimming to help with the nets and stuff. I just - I can’t explain it but it made me so angry!” He was shocked at the tone of obvious frustration for he’d never known his former roommate to react in such a manner. Upon the table, his hands were cringing into fists, nearly trembling with rage, and his jaw locked shut. Nagisa could hear his teeth grinding against one another. He set his problem with Rei aside and, now hopeful despite this chill, and said determinedly,

“I think I can help you.”

When Nagisa and Haruka arrived at the former’s house, one Makoto Tachibana was already awaiting them at the porch. He certainly did come running at the mention of a witness for his case. The pair jogged up through the rain to greet him.

“Sorry we’re late!” Nagisa gasped, unlocking the door and ushering his friends inside.

“Don’t be,” Makoto urged, sliding out of his damp blazer. Nagisa automatically took it and hung it up beside the door. He helped Haruka out of his and placed his own to dry. The blond then hustled back to the awkward pair of guests and introduced them with as much grace as he could muster in this situation.
“Makoto, this is Haruka Nanase, my old roommate from university. He worked for some fishery this past year and recently quit. Haru,” heturned to his friend, “this is Makoto Tachibana. He’s an environmental and animal lawyer that’s currently working on a case against just that.” He clapped his hands together pleasantly, stood straight, and left the pair at the couch. “You two have fun chatting now, I’ll go put on some water for tea.” Before either really had a chance to protest, he was off.

Nagisa set the kettle up for a boil and, reading the atmosphere and figuring that the situation was a confidential one, scurried off to his bedroom to change.

For once in his life, he felt that he didn’t really have the energy to invest in looking nice. He tossed on a tank, some dry jeans, and his favorite university pull-over before collapsing flat upon the bed. Through his closed door, he could make out the indistinct muffle of voices and was faintly surprised when here and there, Makoto’s handsome laughter dotted the conversation, accompanied pleasantly by the breathless huffs of Haruka’s. Absently, he noted that despite the business of law, the unlikely pair seemed to be getting along well. To think a free spirit and a straight-laced lawyer could go so well together... He placed a hand over his numbed eyes as the rain tapping the glass blurred with the voices and the dark day faded behind his wet lashes.

Faintly through the deep veil of sleep, a warm body pressed up against his, and he was taken up into someone’s arms. Through the disorienting din of light peering through a crack in the room, he caught the blot of inky hair and tender blue eyes, and was that perhaps a grey suit...?

“It’s fine, you can go,” came a faded, dim voice and the blonde loosely clung to the soft fabric of the other man’s shirt. “I’ll look after him,” he insisted. From elsewhere came the sound of assent and the body put him down properly in the center of the bed, protected from the cold by a blanket.

“Rei, dun go...” Nagisa murmured, half-asleep and desperately reaching for those long, pale fingers that left him behind. A long, sympathetic silence followed his declaration, and no one replied. He rolled over and fell unconscious almost immediately, his mind vanishing into a black water that would leave him barely remembering the exchange.

He awoke in a dream, wearing a sleeveless grey ballgown, and running along a path of sepia squares. A huge, black pen was chasing him along and he could barely keep the frills from the violent point. Salty, cold tears of water flicked at him from stone fountains swirling with muddy whirlpools on either side of him, churning with malleable, blond leaves. He was terribly frightened, but he kept sprinting straight as an arrow, trusting that it would lead him to safety, but he led himself to an intersection, leaving with the choice to go left, right, or dead on as he had been. At the end of the crossroads before him stood Rei and try as he might to call out, Nagisa could not speak.

Behind him echoed the thud of the pen and he tripped forward, running to his beau. As he passed the man on the right, the brunet turned left in the opposite direction to glance behind him and Nagisa despaired with the knowledge that if only he’d waited a moment longer, Rei would have met him there halfway. His path became blurred by an ashy city swirled with saline tears and alone, Nagisa fell down into the colorless grey.

The blond awoke halfway through the next morning, having slept more than 14 hours with a distinct sense of guilt surrounding him. He’d been so stupid to overreact as he had, so soon after the promise of commitment and, recalling the the instinct he’d had to hold Rei tighter at the thought of a split, realized that this was no proper way to start a long-term relationship.

He pushed himself out of bed, still wearing his jeans from the previous day, accompanied by his university pullover sweater. He didn’t bother changing as he abandoned his cold bed and shuffled down the hall and into the kitchen, completely dazed.

“Morning, sleeping beauty,” greeted the emotionless voice of Haruka. Nagisa’s heart swelled with
tender hurt for some reason he didn’t recognize and the cold blue eyes softened with unmistakable empathy. He’d helped himself to some coffee. As the blond collapsed into the chair across from his, he rose to the kitchen, pouring the remainder for his friend. The poor writer had collapsed in on himself, elbows upon the table, fingers tangled in his dull, yellowed hair.

“I’m going out,” he muttered thickly, leaving the beverage behind. Unshed tears of regret were audible in his tightness of his voice.

Nagisa left without even having changed into his jogging clothes; he hadn’t the energy to do anything other than trudge the darkened, wet streets, dragging his feet along the pavement. He’d even committed what he considered a cardinal sin of fashion - sneakers and jeans - but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He just hoped that there was a way to rectify the situation and he prayed that somehow, somewhere, he’d run into Rei again. Any sort of coincidence would do, just as they’d had in the beginning. He’d wait all day in the rain if he had to - he only wanted to apologize to Rei and go back to the love he’d felt before. He was sick of this conflict and if he had to face his demons head on, he would force his way through it, hard as it may be. He would wait for the brunet at the crossroads until he was good and ready to turn around and meet him there, so that they may proceed together.

Naturally, he elected to go where he’d last seen Rei, and found himself picking up speed as the thought entered his mind that he might miss his boyfriend’s run around the park. He arrived panting at the bench beneath the naked oak, breathless and anxious as he took a seat upon the cold metal. Nagisa waited for more than an hour but Rei never did show up. The more time that passed, the heavier his shoulders felt, and the farther down he leaned into himself until, in a mirror image of how he’d looked earlier, the blond fell into his own arms. He had been sitting like that for 10 minutes before the burning, odd stares forced him to pick up and leave. Ever lost, he wandered the park with blurry, glittering lashes, until an odd thought struck him like thunder. Perhaps he’d be one to hide under the all-encompassing branches of the tree, but Rei... He was another matter. Energy renewed by desperation, Nagisa turned tail and ran not towards the exit that led to his home, but veered off to the left to a painted bridge over a swirl of dark water.

Just as he’d assumed, the broken man leaned over the railing, handsome face obscured by his hands, not unlike Nagisa had been only a few minutes before. He slowed to a walk and, tentative as a butterfly, approached his partner. Unable to resist, the blond wrapped his arms around Rei’s strong torso, burrowing his shamefal face into the back of his coat instead of announcing his presence. He felt the attorney start out of his trance and for a minute, everything was still as the man decided whether or not to push him away. The writer’s aching heart beat like a drum and, feeling this, the brunet covered Nagisa’s hands with his own, rubbing the backs with his thumb.

“I’m so, so sorry, Rei,” he choked out, tightening his grip as his chin dimpled with oncoming tears.

“Oh please don’t cry, Nagisa,” he replied breathlessly, moving his hands away and turning to face the smaller man. “I don’t think I could stand seeing it,” he confessed, pulling him into a proper embrace.

“But it’s all my fault,” he whined into Rei’s coat, a cold trail of snot dripping onto the man’s shirt. The attorney didn’t even seem to mind how disgusting he was. He felt as though two stones were grinding against each other in his throat, but he forced himself to speak despite it. “I mean, like, sex is important to me and all, but we didn’t even talk about it, so I shouldn’t have expected any different. And it’s just that - we had just started and I really, really don’t want you to leave me!” he cried into Rei’s chest, clinging to him for all that he was worth - which at this point, he assumed was next to nothing. “And I totally made a fool of myself, this is no way to start a long-term relationship and it’s
just like as soon as I say I want to be committed, I completely fuck it up by pushing you away! And to me, being a boyfriend, it like means that we work to fix this kind of thing, not just ignore it like I’ve been doing.”

“Nagisa, darling, please calm down,” Rei soothed, rocking him gently from one side to another. “It’s all right, I’ve no intention to leave you. We’ll fix this, I promise.” The small blond hiccupped against his shirt, at last pulling away. The attorney wiped off his tears, gazing gently into his eyes. There was no revulsion at his puffy, tear-strewn face, at his horrible outfit, or his two-day old makeup, just deep concern and a sort of resolve behind it. He allowed himself a moment of admiration, but the lawyer straightened himself squeezed Nagisa’s hand reassuringly, and efficiently stated, “Well, there’s no time like the present. We ought to talk about it. You, erm... you said something about sex?” He nodded desperately, thankful for a starting point and ever-glad that his boyfriend was the type to get things done, unlike himself.

“You remember the Halloween party? How I was coming onto you? It was just that when you rejected me, I was so embarrassed and I was worried that you didn’t find me - well, sexy. Or hot. That you didn’t want me like I want you. I just let my wounded ego get in the way and I started talking less and less to you and you seemed like you liked it that way, with me being quiet and I just channeled all my humiliation into being angry at you,” he confessed, ashamed of his petulant actions, and feeling younger than ever he had before in Rei’s presence. He was so immature, it was a wonder someone as together as the brunet even liked him.

His boyfriend sighed, rubbing his hand between Nagisa’s shoulder blades, and replied, “I honestly feel like a prize idiot, hearing that. I knew something was wrong, but I just didn’t ask about it. I thought you wanted to be left alone because that’s what I like. I was treating you like me, but you aren’t like me at all, and that’s why I lo - like you.” Though Nagisa felt his heart flush, he didn’t pursue the correction, perhaps out of consideration for Rei. He was well aware of what he almost said, but the blond knew that he didn’t really act on his emotions immediately and he’d promised himself that he’d wait for Rei. His first instinct may have been disappointment, he couldn’t help but feel a wave of relief. He honestly wasn’t sure what he’d say back if he’d received a confession.

“Anyways,” Nagisa continued, letting the hiccup in speech pass, “what do you think about sex? I get a little... hot and bothered around you. Do you even find me attractive?” he prodded, looking earnestly into Rei’s eyes. The man colored rose, glancing away and muttering,

“Of course I do, you’re beautiful. It’s just -” and he cut himself off. Nagisa opened his mouth slightly, leaning in with a curious, beggling look on his plump lips, and forced Rei to meet his eye. “What?” he whispered sweetly, the barest hint of intimacy in the rush of his voice. The brunet was enthralled for a moment, but ever gently pushed Nagisa off of him and stood straight.

“I’m not ready to talk about it,” he confided awkwardly, turning away to face the muddy waters. For a moment, nothing but shock registered within the writer. But like the flood of water upon the grassy banks, anger and hurt washed through his veins.

“Are you kidding me?” he blurted furiously. The lawyer flinched away and groaned to himself. He pursued relentlessly. “I just poured all my heart out to you, you know. I just told you all of what I’ve been feeling these past few weeks with no hesitations or reservations. I confessed to acting like a bitchy little kid, and you won’t even tell me why the hell you said no in the first place?” With each word, his voice grew slightly louder, slightly more frantic like high tide coming in. “Being an introvert is no excuse not to pull your weight in a relationship or own up to your mistakes.”

“I know,” Rei sighed, frustration tingling his voice, “you’re absolutely right, but I just - I’m not ready to talk about it with you. I’m sorry.” He smacked his forehead against the wood, and an audible thud
sounded. Nagisa rolled his eyes.

“Whatever,” he sighed, resting a hand against his temple and taking a deep breath. The anger gradually dissipated, and he leaned against the rail. “I forgive you - for now, I won’t let it get in the way of us, okay? But make no mistake, you’re gonna have to tell me about it eventually - I won’t wait forever. I’m pissed and you definitely have quite a ways to go if you wanna make it up to me without actually telling me what the problem is.” Rei sighed, perhaps out of relief for being let off the hook, and leaned in for a kiss, but was met with Nagisa’s cheek - not exactly where he’d been aiming. He lingered a moment more, regretful, before pulling away.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he promised earnestly. “Thank you.” The blonde crossed his arms, but offered a small grin.

“Don’t mention it.” He was about to turn away and head home alone, but just as desperate and wanting as the blond had been, Rei reached out for his hand and cried,

“Wait!” The writer glanced back, his small and tender hand still in the brunet’s. “Please... Won’t you walk with me? I don’t want you to go yet.” And, as soft and warm as the morning glory, he held Rei’s hand tighter and they walked onward, leaving those lonesome weeks behind them.
Scolding Rei as he'd done had clearly been the right choice. Throughout the month of November, the lawyer had treated Nagisa like a god, serving him at his every whim and fancy, practically kissing the very ground upon which he'd walked. Though the topic of sex was still a sore point in his mind, the blond certainly didn't protest all this extra attention he'd been receiving. They were spending more time together than ever before and though less and less of their time was spent under the veil of infatuation, though their make-out sessions had practically dwindled to nothing, they were happier than ever. Rei and Nagisa both felt that they could at last claim to be a couple as what began as a crush faded into a genuine friendship. Though they hadn't had sex, they often spent the gradually cooling nights cuddling on Nagisa's couch with hot chocolate, a blanket, and a movie until they fell asleep in each other's arms. That Friday night, however, the blond knew that nothing of the sort would be happening.

At least, not on his couch anyways.

The writer was rapidly rolling his fingers upon his desk, shifting his weight constantly, and flicking his gaze between his laptop and the already black sky outside. Rei was working on a particularly difficult case and currently was in court giving his closing statements and wouldn't come to pick up Nagisa for another two hours. It would be the first time he'd ever seen his boyfriend's apartment and damn him if he wasn't more excited than he'd ever been about such a thing - especially knowing that there wouldn't be any sex whatsoever. He wondered if his eagerness was unwarranted, but who could blame him for being curious about the lawyer's lifestyle?

"Oh my God, calm down," Gou instructed, peering over the screen of her computer. "You're just a ball of nerves tonight. You said so yourself that you aren't even gonna have sex."

"Aw, Gou," Nagisa teased, grateful for a chance at being distracted, "are you jealous?"

"Shut up." She rolled her eyes, slamming her laptop closed and shoving it into her bag. He'd struck a nerve. Nagisa grimaced.

"Don't worry about it," she said before he had the chance to say anything, "I have to go anyways." He waved her off apologetically, and her shrug told him that she wouldn't hold it against him. Besides, her brother was single; they planned to spend the holidays drinking their sorrows away with one another while their mother wasn't looking like they had every year. He was aware that she'd lost her father in an accident many years ago - it was a situation that very well could have been his own, and he thanked his lucky stars for it. He could empathize with her, though, and she with him. Sobered slightly by the thought, he buckled down and refocused himself on his work.

The November column had been written on handbags after October's scarves, but December was a special holiday issue - he'd been working on an all-encompassing jewelry column. It'd taken Ms. Amakata some convincing to write about earrings, bracelets, and necklaces in one column, but his holiday party argument was a sound one - what with Hanukkah, Christmas, and then the New Year, it would be a perfect guide. After seeing the first draft, the boss was feeling delighted with the idea as a whole! She'd only just paid him the compliment earlier this morning, so Rei didn't know yet, but the need to tell him only added to his impatience.

"Nagisa!" came a bright, excitable cry. He was jolted out of his work and glanced up to see
Momotarou Mikoshiba, Ms. Amakata's new assistant, coming towards him while brandishing a formidable folder. The bright boy was certainly quite a sight. One minute, the post was empty and the next, everyone knew about Momo the secretarial wonder. He was young, only around 19, and much like Nagisa was a student at a nearby university - his alma mater, in fact. The ginger and the blond became fast friends. He was glad of having another young man around like himself - they both had quite the liking for women's fashion, among other things. Hana and Gou were great friends of his and all, but he felt a sort of camaraderie with Momo that he hadn't quite shared with the other girls. "These are the reviews for your November article," the assistant stated, handing off the folder to Nagisa. "Ms. Amakata is really happy!" The blond smiled at him, took it, and waved him off.

"Thanks, Momo!" he said happily, "Have a good evening!" The ginger said his goodbyes, gathered his stuff and took his leave as the clock struck five. Most everyone was heading home, leaving the office dark save his lamp and a light at the end of the hall - Ms. Amakata was usually the last to leave. Feeling impatient and perhaps a tad nostalgic, he shut his laptop and made his way to her glass-paneled office. He knocked twice, pulling her out of a trance, and she waved him in.

"Yes, Nagisa?" she asked him, turning her chair to face her visitor. For a moment, he felt rather shy - she had done so much for him in his early years of working here, and now Momo had replaced him. It wasn't as though he felt special or anything in particular, he just supposed he felt grateful to her for caring for him.

"It's nothing, I just wondered if there was anything I could do for you," he replied politely, straightening up as though he were still a 20-year-old intern. She grinned wryly at him, taking off her reading glasses and leaning back.

"Mikoshiba got you feeling reminiscent?" she inferred, grinning at him warmly. He gave a bit of a snort and informed her:

"A combination of that and boredom, I suppose." She laughed, gesturing to the seat opposite of hers, and he sat down.

"Of course - it's the talk of the office, you're going to your boyfriend's place tonight." He colored pink - the talk of the office? It was embarrassing that his boss knew! She chuckled at his reaction and continued, "Gou let it slip when I asked why you looked so impatient. I imagine he's picking you up soon? You haven't got a car, after all." He nodded earnestly and she grinned. It was an admirable trait of hers, her attention to others. Some would call her a gossip, especially considering her field, but she was kind and caring more than anything else. She tapped a pen on her desk, staring thoughtfully at the illuminated exit sign where her intern had left not long ago. Abruptly, she wondered aloud, "Do you think Mikoshiba's settling in well?" Surprised, Nagisa glanced up and shot a glance that way as well.

"Yeah, I think so. He gets along well with Gou, but I think Hana’s a little annoyed by him. Everyone annoys her, though - she kind of treats him like a little brother," he reported. The woman frowned and shook out her hair a little, her pearl necklace rattling pleasantly.

"Keep an eye on him for me. He looks up to you." The blond beamed at the compliment her words carried, but in his pocket his phone buzzed, and immediately the thought of anything else flew out the window. He checked the message and was delighted to see a text from Rei.

From: Rei Ryugazaki

Court got out early. I'm on my way.

Nagisa grinned like an idiot, to which the brunet woman raised a brow and waved him off, and
jogged to his computer. He saved the draft, shut it down, and began packing his things hurriedly.

Nagisa used the mirrors in the elevator to ensure his physical appearance was perfect. It was good that he did - he was an absolute mess after the whole day of work. He knew nothing was going to happen, but he simply couldn't help wanting to show himself off for Rei. It was a special occasion anyhow, wasn't it?

When he stepped outside, it wasn't raining but the frosty wind bit at him violently. Through his faux-fur lined aviator jacket, he shuddered, wondering if in fact his outfit wasn't a bit impractical. Rei was rubbing off on him. But he couldn't help it - his camel, off-the-shoulder sweater with its trendy, ivory Nordic pattern was to die for! And of course, his favorite dark wash jeans and English riding style boots were the perfect accents. So what if the burgundy scarf was thinly woven? It looked great, it was just what he wrote about in his column. Nonetheless, when he saw Rei's car pull over for him, he whispered a quick "oh thank God" and hopped in as fast as he could. Rei opened his mouth, a tiny smirk on his face, but Nagisa wouldn't let him have it.

"Don't you dare!" he warned jokingly as Rei put on his turn signal and pulled back into traffic. He shoved his aching, pink fingers into the heaters.

"Now, don't be rude," he chastised humorously in reply, turning on the seat warmer for his chilled boyfriend. "I texted you this morning to tell you that a frost was coming and to dress warm, didn't I?"

The blond pouted and shook out his cool hair.

"So? It was your fault for being late. And here I was, thinking you were a gentleman, but you left me waiting out there for forever!" he declared dramatically. Rei, having grown used to his jokes, glanced over in his amusement.

"I was here early?" he prompted the blond, who rolled his eyes at the chuckle that followed. They ceased their bickering and Nagisa peered curiously at the window - he didn't even know the remote location of his boyfriend's residence. It could be any one of the little side streets tucked in the city of London. The sky outside held that peculiar cast of violet clouds, low and dark, reflecting the yellow-orange light of the city below. It was the color of a held breath; the shade of that tenderness of heart that came with the winter season where people were most content despite the dark. The blond snuggled against the window, eyes glittering with the reflection of the decorations that had only been put up the night before, all over the city. Every now and then, Rei glanced his way, pleased with the childish delight in his eyes. Unable to help himself, he asked of his boyfriend, "Are you excited?"

Nagisa shifted his gaze back to him.

"Of course I am," he replied. "Besides, I'm sick of you nagging me to clean my house." The lawyer fixed his attention to the road, making a turn down the busy A201. They passed their coffee shop, both smiling fondly at it. He was expecting it to take them out of the inner city, but was rather surprised when he turned onto The Victoria Embankment along the River Thames, leading them further in. They drove straight through the Buckingham Palace Gardens, then wove through Park Lane and onto Baywater Road. Nagisa didn't know the area particularly well, but he would've been half mad if he didn't recognize it as Hyde Park - and he was certainly convinced Rei was crazy when he went down another little street called Palace Court and parked along the curb. The blond figured his beau lived a high class lifestyle, but this exceeded all rational thought - he was only a hop, skip, and a jump away from Buckingham Palace on one side, and not five minutes' walk to Kensington Palace on the other! Piccadilly Circus was a stone’s throw away and the bigger roads were decorated with flags signifying embassies all around. While Nagisa sat enthralled in the car, the attorney made his way around and opened the passenger side door for him.

"You coming?" he prompted, taking his dainty hand to help him out. The blond nodded, for once
rendered speechless by the splendor. "It's actually a bit farther down, but I couldn’t see any parking there. It'll be a bit of a chilly walk." Regaining his composure, he slipped an arm through Rei’s, cuddling up to the warm man in his woolen coat. Charismatically, the blond insisted, "An autumn stroll is so sweet, though!" His boyfriend chuckled, patting his hand kindly.

"You'll make a romantic of me yet if you keep on using these little moments as opportunities," he informed the shorter one, proceeding in the direction they’d been driving in. The only response Nagisa saw fit to give was pressing himself even closer than he’d been before.

The street was relatively narrow, as many were in London, but made more so by the towering, five-storey apartments and cars crammed on either side in parking. The street was dominated by Regency style architecture, layered with flower boxes and faded brick. They walked along the row from 1 Palace Court, closest to the gardens, until the street came to a T and ended at Moscow Road (Rei informed him it was named so because of the nearby Russian Embassy). Looming nobly across the way was a six-storey terraced apartment complex, likely having been an entire mansion at one point, made with clean red and yellow stone and beautiful white windows. The front face was guarded by an imposing wrought-iron gate, in which the building dipped to a U-shape to allow room for a small courtyard set in flagstone.

The lawyer strode purposefully across Moscow Street, dragging his awestruck companion with him, and pulled a set of keys out by the fence, swinging the heavy, black gate open for Nagisa. He made no move to enter the enclosed garden, instead eyeing Rei incredulously.

“You’re joking,” he protested, gesturing half-heartedly to the powerful home. The man rolled his eyes and made reply:

“Of course not, don’t be silly. Besides,” he pointed out rationally, laying a hand on the blond’s back to urge him inside, “I wouldn’t have the key otherwise.” At last convinced, he shyly allowed himself to be ushered through the gate and into the gentrified complex.

There were three doors embedded in the round face of the building, each of them black and identical, and set in round, white frames. Rei brought his boyfriend to the one on the far right, where the lights still shone on the first level. Before he reached the porch, the heavy door groggily swung open, revealing a rather imposing doorman.

“Welcome back, Mr. Ryugazaki,” he greeted, standing aside to allow him through. Confidently, the brunet dragged his frozen date through the doorway, nodding to the man at his side. The door was shut quietly behind the couple as they came in. Nagisa thought it seemed absurdly formal, like some hotel in an overdone movie. He couldn’t help staring even as Rei led him to a set of wide stairs. He expected the man to bring him to one of the set of doors around here, but the night was full of surprises it seemed, and the attorney only brought him farther up to the third storey. They turned right down a hall and Rei pulled out a set of keys to the farthest door down.

“I have four neighbors,” he explained as he opened the door for his boyfriend and ushered him in, “the family I told you about earlier, a musician that owns the three floors below, and an older, retired couple next door to her. I think the wife is an author and the husband is an artist. They sell books together, but I haven’t talked with them much.” The younger man made the assumption that the other two sections of the building were divided up likewise and he was impressed that so many people could afford such upscale living.

The brunet flicked the lights on to reveal a classic facade decorated with surprisingly sleek and modern furniture as a complement. The walls were all white and would have been plain were it not for the depth and interest of the moulding all around. The windows were of course as old as they looked but offset by monochrome-patterned silk curtains dropping like a thin sheet of steel. There
was an ornate, gold-painted fireplace in the wall to his left and a seafoam and gold accented sofa - modern as the curtains - faced it. A sleek television hung above it. The kitchen was to his right - probably where the front of the building was - and a dining area was right beside it, including a breakfast nook by the corner, where windows on either side met.

“Whoa,” he concluded simply, stepping into the warm light of the house. Rei slipped his coat and shoes off by the door and Nagisa copied him politely, noting the sparse collection his boyfriend had, and allowed his feet to sink into the plush carpet. He removed his scarf as well, leaving him in just his jeans and his pretty camel sweater.

“You look lovely,” Rei complimented. Nagisa was about to blush until the man proceeded, “Even if it’s an impractical outfit.” He rolled his eyes instead.

“Would it kill you to give me a straight compliment every now and then?” he protested, swaggering toward the couch with a hand on his hip. He was being dramatic, he knew, but when he asked, Rei could really lay it on thick.

“I was so sure that you knew,” the attorney muttered, loosening his tie and undoing the button the button at his throat. He approached the pouty boy and wrapped his arms around his waist, his blue eyes glowing warmly and informed him, “I think that you’re the most beautiful, sophisticated, and complex man I have ever met.” His each successive word, he kissed the blond somewhere new - on the left cheek, then the right, and finally on his forehead. “Now,” he proceeded with the utmost efficiency, having burned out his supply of pointless affections, “what do you want for dinner? I don’t suppose you’d want to do anything too fancy, and I’m not much of a cook, anyhow.” Nagisa shrugged the comment off.

“We can just order take-out, right?” Rei looked positively affronted at the suggestion and he amended, “But whatever you have is good, too!”

“Well, if you insist that’s fine, then so be it,” he grumbled. The blond laughed at him - it was his fault for not planning ahead! His giggles faded, though - he knew that Rei must have been looking forward to it if he’d forgotten something stupid enough like feeding him. It was interesting, too, as Nagisa realized the both of them likely relied on leftovers. Well, at least the blond did when he had some. Rei walked over to his fridge, rolling his sleeves up to his elbows, and brushed a few things aside. Gentle clinks of glass came from his direction and Nagisa daintily sat himself at a counter, wondering just what it was Rei liked. On their first date, he once said he’d liked seafood, but they’d never actually asked about meals much beyond that. What a strange thing not to know!

The lawyer set a green paste on the counter before systematically working his way over to the pantry. Nagisa examined it: he might have guessed it was wasabi were it not for the oily substance coating it in various places and... were those onions? “Don’t worry,” Rei soothed without looking back, “there aren’t very many in there.”

“What is it?” The writer asked curiously, dipping a pinkie in to taste it. It was a little like hummus, he thought, but he couldn’t quite place the flavor.

“It’s called muzawwarat.” He snorted and shook his head. It wasn’t bad by any means, but it was quite cold from being stored away. His boyfriend popped something in his microwave and came back over to the blond.

“That told me nothing,” he replied sassily, placing a finger in. Rei flicked it out and made a scolding gesture before turning back once the beep sounded and collecting the mystery food. At least it was recognizable - warm, steaming pita bread!
“It’s an Arab dish. I made it for my mother a few weeks ago - it’s one of her favorite dishes. She always told me they made it often when she lived in Lebanon.” Awestruck, the younger man brightened curiously and asked,

“She used to live in Lebanon? That’s amazing! Does she speak another language?” Rei scoffed, tearing off a piece of the bread and dipping it in the mixture.

“Of course - we speak Arabic. Well - my mother and brother and I do, at least. My father’s tried for many years, but he’s still terrible.” Nagisa blinked, taken aback by the information, and tilted his head to the side quizzically. Rei, noticing his darling’s reaction, questioned, “I haven’t told you that I’m Arab?”

“No!” Nagisa exclaimed emphatically. “That’s so cool! You speak three languages - you know three alphabets! You’re amazing, Rei!” Thinking on it, he wasn’t fully surprised. The man had a natural, deep tan that he’d never have gotten from his Japanese heritage or the abundant English sunshine. The blond eagerly grabbed at the food and tried it - the chilled *muzawwarat* went perfectly with the hot, dusty pita. More than onions, he could taste a delicate mixture of olives and beans with a surprising bite of lemon. “It’s good,” he informed Rei gratefully as the grinning lawyer grabbed another dish from the fridge and tossed it into the microwave. He busied himself with grabbing a couple dishes from the cupboards, handing his young partner a plate for his pita and a fork for whatever else he was cooking. Graciously, he set out wine glasses as well - no dinner would be complete without that, of course. He pulled out nothing other than a California Syrah, pouring his boyfriend a bit to taste first. “I trust your judgement, dish it up,” the blond joked. He sipped daintily at the edge; it was a full, fruity flavor, and he was glad to know how quickly Rei picked up on his tastes. The man poured himself a glass as well and set a place beside Nagisa before collecting the main course.

“Couscous,” he told his boyfriend. “Not exactly Lebanese, but I’ve always liked it nonetheless.” He dished up a portion for the blond - he spied a bit of chicken, several types of vegetables, and was certain there were at least five spices - and for himself, then sat down beside him. “I made it myself a few days ago - it tastes fine cold, but I thought you’d like something to warm you up.”

“How considerate,” he replied thankfully, shoveling some of the home-made cooking into his mouth. He was surprised that it was quite good - Rei underestimated his cooking ability. He was about to say so before the man cut him off.

“Don’t compliment it, my mother had to fix it after she tried it.” He let out an impressive snort, accidentally spitting some of the couscous out, and the quiet room rang with his beautiful laughter.

The rest of the meal continued in a similar fashion, with the blond taking every chance he could to make a jab at the lawyer and the latter accepting it with incredible grace - he wouldn’t have said so out loud, but he would do anything to keep those pretty giggles filling the silence of his home. When they finished, Nagisa insisted on helping Rei with the dishes, though the brunet was the one to load and start the washer. They left the wine glasses out and shared another round while the older man turned a large stereo on to play quiet Christmas tunes. For a moment, he left the boy to change into his pajamas - the blond kept his sweater on, but switched his jeans out for striped long johns instead. When the attorney returned, he wore a fitted, long sleeved shirt rolled up to his elbows and plaid pants.

“And here I thought everything you owned was grey,” the little one snickered, commenting on their red color.

“Don’t be such a grinch,” Rei retorted as the very song came over the speakers. Easily, they
approached each other, the writer wrapping a hand over one of the taller man’s shoulders while the other firmly hooked his partner’s waist with an arm. They clasped their free hands together and in a moment, playfully swayed with one another across the plush living room carpet.

“You’re calling me a grouchy grinch?” he protested, looking up into the brunet’s soft, dark eyes. He’d taken off his glasses, and Nagisa swore he saw stars in their lovely night depths. His plump lips parted gently and his boyfriend smiled tenderly, seeing the dawn in his gaze. He leaned down and met his mouth in a delicate kiss, allowing his lips to dance across Nagisa’s face - his cheeks, his jaw, his neck- as they themselves danced across the room. He thought that they would stop dancing, but Rei kept him drifting in that warm embrace, hiding his bare face in the crook of his sweetheart’s shoulder. The songs ranged from Charlie Brown to Bing Crosby to the Sussex Carol, but for the longest time, neither would let go. His cheeks had reddened like holly, and there was a warm desperation ringing in his chest. He wanted to whisper, “I love you, Rei,” but he had promised to wait until the man himself was ready to say it too. His nightmare still haunted him; he did not want to lose the man here in his arms.

After what turned out to be well over an hour, their tired legs tripped onto the couch in synch, still not releasing one another. The lawyer turned on the TV on to the 1947 movie, Miracle on 34th Street and though Nagisa hadn’t ever been particularly fond of old, black and white movies, he was enchanted by the fact that Rei had an odd affinity for them.

“They’re like wine,” he insisted about 15 minutes into the movie, having pulled a comfortable throw over them (Nagisa had realized that the apartment was subtly decorated for Christmas - the blanket was ivory with light brown reindeer on it - simple and classy). “They get better with age.” At this point, Rei had really stopped paying much attention to his boyfriend and was entirely focused on the movie, but the blond didn’t really mind. Occasionally, he’d flick his gaze over the television and watch a bit, but for the majority of the time, he was examining the room curiously. There wasn’t much out, but he did decorate a staircase with garlands and holly and there was a plain tree in the far corner. He guessed that he must’ve just got it. After all, December had barely begun.

He was jostled slightly out of his thoughts when Rei - subconsciously, it appeared - draped an arm around Nagisa’s waist and tugged him closer. The writer obligingly snuggled into his boyfriend’s side before looking at the rest of it. The fireplace was lit with a cheery warmth and through the curtains was a dim, yellow glow - most of the apartment itself had been darkened at this point.

The younger man’s head thunked pleasantly against the lawyer’s shoulder and he responded in kind by rubbing his thumb absently over his hips. Again, the soft words of affection tickled the blond’s lips like feathers, but he held back. To distract himself, he glanced out the window - drowsily, snow had begun to fall, white until it hit the golden-lit streets. For a moment, he was gently delighted, and the warm coupled with the soft sounds of the movie led him to sleep there upon Rei’s shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

edit: changed the ethnicity from iraqi to lebanese bc of a happy accident later in the story that happens to be a lebanese tradition lol
Nagisa woke up in the manner of a dream - slowly, bathed in warmth, and covered by a thin layer of light. His hands were folded under his head and he was curled up at the edge of the couch. He was vaguely surprised that he hadn’t fallen off, but with a berry red blush, he realized that he hadn’t because draped possessively over his waist was Rei’s arm. The older man was on his side, trapped between his boyfriend and the back of the couch, his head weakly propped up by the hand that didn’t claim the blond. He was still sleeping.

In the silence of the morning, the young man reflected on the evening they’d had together. It had been comfortable, but somehow nowhere near as friendly as the nights they’d spent at his own house. Rather, it had left the impact of ardent affection and warmth born from the outside chill. Twice he had almost confessed to Rei and frankly, waiting was becoming hard for him. In previous relationships, he’d acted as soon as he felt the first whisper of love in his heart, but he simply couldn’t rush the brunet into anything - not after their fight spanning nearly all of November. But at the same time... Rei deserved to know. In fact, the blond felt, he needed to know that there was someone new that loved him. Nagisa sighed, blowing out all sense of fear. He’d find a way to tell his boyfriend today. When he woke up, in fact!

Beside him, there was a soft grumble and a stir as the attorney awoke. He took a deep breath that stirred the hairs on the writer’s neck and he was sure he felt his eyelashes brush against him as he blinked sleep away. He glanced behind him at the drowsy man.

“Nagisa?” Rei questioned tiredly. “You’re awake first?” Even this early in the morning, he couldn’t hide his incredulity. “That’s a surprise,” he murmured, readjusting his position and burying his face into his darling’s neck. “Meant to have you sleep in the guest bedroom,” he admitted quietly, closing his eyes once more. “This is a better idea.”

“You’re surprisingly honest in the mornings, huh?” Nagisa shot back, scooting back into Rei’s hug. He snorted and kissed the pale shoulder before him.

“Hush. You’ve had the time to enjoy this, now let me.” He giggled sweetly and for a few minutes, they remained in a quiet embrace. The brunet was surprisingly reluctant to rise!

At long last, the lawyer forced himself up, kicking back the blanket and causing the blond to give a gentle shiver. He protested, “Hey!” but received no pity.

“I ought to get dressed - what do you want to do today?” The blond jumped at his reply and exclaimed, “Shopping! We’re going shopping!” Horrified, Rei glanced back with an uneasy look about him.

“Yes, I’m absolutely, positively sure. Go get dressed, I’m excited now!” He bounced up on the couch and reluctantly, Rei turned away.

As he heard the shower turn on in another room, he busied himself with preparing hot chocolate (he
was surprised he’d even found hot cocoa powder, but considering he’d told Rei he liked it and it hadn’t been opened, he had to assume his boyfriend bought it special for him). He poured some milk into a pot and turned on the stove to let it heat (but not boil). While that started, the blond figured he’d check around for peppermint sticks.

He found candy canes in a jar that he’d assumed was for decorative purposes and some mugs in a cupboard he’d had to climb on a counter to reach. By the time Rei came out, his hair still dripping a little and embarrassingly dressed in a work suit, Nagisa had prepared two cups of steaming hot chocolate (with extra chocolate), and peppermint sticks, set out in the breakfast nook, with all the curtains open. He’d slapped together some quick eggs and toast as well.

The brunet approached the scene with a cocked eyebrow and commented, “You learn the lay of the land quickly, don’t you?” The blond rolled his eyes.

“I was trying to be romantic. Sit down and drink your cocoa.” The lawyer laughed a little, joining his beau at the round table. Said beau immediately went pink and attempted to build up the courage to say his three cents, as it were. His lips parted and he eyed Rei sweetly, but with a quizzical look, he was interrupted.

“My, my, it’s snowed, hasn’t it?” Mug in hand, he rose and examined the streets from outside his window. Though the day was overcast, the room was brightened by its white glow. “Doesn’t look bad enough to interrupt our plans, thankfully.” He gave Nagisa a handsome smile and he nervously grinned back. “You should be getting dressed as well, come to think.”

“You could at least let me finish breakfast with you,” he huffed, pointedly sipping his hot chocolate. Rei rolled his eyes in reply.

“This is hardly a nutritious breakfast, Nagisa,” he scolded the man.

“That’s the thanks I get for all my hard work?”

“The thanks for using my milk and eggs, yes.” They laughed at each other and the younger man finished off his breakfast. “The bathroom is upstairs and down the hall to the right. It’s the second door,” he informed the blond as he stood up and collected his bag, “I’ll take care of your dishes.”

Nagisa followed Rei’s directions down the hall and found himself in a room the size of his living room. He gave a low, impressed whistle at the size, and curiously peeked at the entire space. The walls were patterned with, of course, white wallpaper with shining regency motifs. The floor, slightly wet from Rei’s shower still, was decorative marble. One wall was curved to the outside slightly, paneled with diamond-shaped mirrors, and hugged by a row of countertops. There were two sinks, both with elegant faucets, and clearer, unbroken mirrors hanging above them. Across the way was the shower, with glass doors and tiled walls, but even more impressive was where the room met the windows. There was a huge tub, large enough to fit three people he’d imagine, polished white as a cloud and set deep enough that it had a step to get in. This wasn’t a bathroom, Nagisa concluded - it was a spa.

Stunned by the absurd luxury, he dropped his stuff on the counter and approached the shower, shaking his head a little. He shimmied out of his clothes, folding them and leaving them on the counter. The fragmented reflection of his pale body shone back at him from the diamond mirrors. He examined his naked form for a moment, from the dip of his waist into the curve of his hips to his round, supple bottom. The memory of his boyfriend’s warmth in the morning returned to him and he turned rose from his cheeks to his shoulders as he imagined it against him.

Nagisa had to shake himself of his thoughts and he turned the shower on to a warm temperature. He
jumped back though, because of course, there wasn’t a showerhead - the water fell from the ceiling instead. After recovering from the shock of that, he hopped in, sighing deeply. He rested his forehead against the black tiled wall, feeling around for shampoo and conditioner rather than looking around. He cleaned himself up, slapping his two cheeks every time he conveniently recalled that he was in Rei’s house, completely naked, and forcing his reddening body to cool.

The blond successfully returned himself to normal by the time he got out, though he was still floored by his boyfriend’s incredible lifestyle. He found towels underneath one of the cupboards by the mirrored wall and rubbed himself dry. Out of his bag he pulled a fresh pair of underwear - ruffled pink boyshorts with ivory polka dots. He didn’t put his clothes on beyond that - he had to do makeup first and the room was still steamed up from the warmth of the shower.

He got as far as dusting his face with foundation before the door swung open and a sweet, low voice began, “Nagisa, do you wa-” He whirled around and came face to face with a red-speckled Rei, who, mouth half open, was staring at the ruffled panties on his beau’s pale body. His eyebrows ticked like they were affronted and those sharp, analytical blue eyes blinked a few times. After a hasty glance full of realization to the blond’s face, he jumped out of the room and practically slammed the door right in his face. “Sorry!” came the muffled shout through the door. Nagisa couldn’t help it - he broke out into mirthful laughter, clutching at his naked sides, and leaning against the closed door.

“Good lord, Rei!” he called out, pretending that his face wasn’t pink as the panties, “What sort of nerd are you that you can’t even look at another man without a shirt?” There was a thud, and the door shuddered. Nagisa thought the attorney had leaned against the door on the other side. He made a strangled, dampened sound, and the blond laughed harder. Out of pity for the poor man, he dug around in his bag and put on his tights and last night’s shirt before opening it to greet the wounded creature.

Rei had scooted aside and sat against the wall, burying his colored face into his hands.

“I’m sorry, I should have knocked,” he apologized, whacking a fist against his forehead. Nagisa giggled and brushed it off.

“Don’t worry about it. What did you need?” When the lawyer glanced up, Nagisa offered him a hand up and he took it gratefully.

“I just wondered if you wanted anything else for breakfast,” he mumbled abashedly, attempting to hide his face by messing around with his glasses. He pushed them up the bridge of his nose, then took them off to wipe on his shirt, then put them back on again.

“I’m all right, but thank you.” Sweetly, he leaned in and kissed Rei’s cheek before returning to the task at hand. After foundation, he needed a bit of blush, bronzer, and luminizer. He tended not to use eyeshadow for the casual look he was aiming for, but did use thin, brown eyeliner and swept some mascara over his eyes. All the while, the brunet did not leave, but chose to watch his partner curiously, leaning against the doorframe. After having calmed himself down, he questioned the boy,

“Why do you do all of that? It seems like it takes a lot of effort.” Nagisa fished through his bag and pulled out an ivory tulle skirt, knee-length with a wide matching ribbon, and slipped it on while considering Rei’s question. It was high-waisted, snugly fitting, and complimented his camel sweater with Nordic designs well. His tights were similarly patterned, but brought more color into the mixture with the addition of a dim red. He added a fake-ruby necklace as the finishing touch.

“Because I like to look nice,” Nagisa concluded, twirling towards Rei in the lovely skirt. He’d made it himself because the pattern had been so easy, but the prices in stores were outrageous. “For myself,
and for you. Simple as that!” Rei shrugged to hide his red cheeks and offered his arm.

“Then shall we go?” he asked politely.

“Nope!” he replied cheerfully, “Not while you’re wearing that outfit!” The attorney gave an incredulous look to his young partner.

“What’s wrong with this?” he interrogated, examining his dark suit self-consciously.

“You look like you’re going to work, not like you’re going on a date,” he protested, “so tell me where your closet it.” Helplessly, Rei gestured to the door next to bathroom. With a happy skip, he realized he’d see his boyfriend’s room for the first time.

All in all, it was as fancy as the rest of the home. The bed matched the regency theme, but the drapes over the window matched the ones in the living room, with their modern chrome patterns. The walls were done up in a high contrast gold pattern that reflected the natural light. The closet, in the right corner of the room, was large, but even so Nagisa wanted to cry from frustration.

Literally everything was grey. Despairingly, he faced his boyfriend who had slunk in ashamedly behind him.

“Why?” he inquired, sending a weak gesture to the closet. “You have to have something colorful in here, right? Buried deep in there, you’ve got some color…” The brunet’s uncertainty scared him. In a desperate fit, the writer dived in, pulling out chrome suit after chrome suit, leaving their owner to catch them behind him.

“Nagisa, please be careful!” he called, but the blond refused to listen. But in the corner of his eye… Could it be? Like claws, the young man’s fingers sunk into their soft, cashmere prey and violently, he pulled out a lovely dark blue sweater. Across the chest was a lighter argyle pattern - subtle, modern, but beyond a doubt, classy. He could barely believe that amidst this monochromatic ocean, he’d found such a gem!

“Look at this!” he gushed to Rei, delightedly holding out the sweater. The other man was considerably less pleased and in fact, appearing slightly disgusted. “What’s the matter?” his young boyfriend pressed, holding the sweater like it was a lifeline.

“My mother got that for me several years ago for Christmas. You couldn’t honestly expect me to wear an ugly sweater, could you?”

“Just because you got it as a Christmas gift,” Nagisa insisted, “does not mean it is ugly. Yes, I do. Put it on over a white button down. Jeans would be ideal bottoms, but if you must, then grey trousers will do. I’ll look for a scarf.” Rei sighed in defeat, removing his blazer, and slipped it on over his shirt - he was already wearing the pants, it seemed. Meanwhile, equally as far buried, he found what he was looking for - a pale blue scarf with a few black and white stripes going across the short way. He suspected his mother had bought it to go with the sweater. Curiously, he checked the label - Burberry. Ah. He should have known by the high quality of the fabric.

When he looked behind him, the sweet blond found his boyfriend with a disgruntled blush and a handsomely well-fitted sweater. The pants matched perfectly already - no need to step in there - and his red glasses were rather charming. He sighed happily.

“Oh, Rei!” he enthused, using the scarf as a hook to bring him closer. “You look amazing! Your mother really has good style.” He finished tossing the scarf on and placed his hands at the tuck of his boyfriend’s waist. The older man kissed him gently on the lips.
“Thank you, I suppose, but I feel a little foolish,” he confessed. The blond gave an encouraging smile.

“When people switch up their style, they can feel like that sometimes,” he told the lawyer, stepping back. Automatically, he offered up his arm and Nagisa took it thankfully. They walked down the stairs and began to leave, but they stopped at a mirror by the door. Sweetly, the blond finished, “You’re really handsome.” Taken aback, the brunet examined himself more closely. The sweater hugged his masculine chest nicely and the straight, tailored pants fell with a neat crease from his hips. The scarf, its pale color sharp in contrast to the dark sweater, was haphazardly shoved around his neck, giving the pristine outfit a casual edge. The colors all together gave his eyes the loveliest violet glow Nagisa had ever seen and made his inky black hair shine like the deepest blue night. But he had to giggle at the dumbfounded, goofy look on the man’s face. Consequently, he had to kiss his boyfriend’s cheek.

“I suppose it’s not so bad once it’s on,” he allowed, opening the door with a shy grin. It was well past 10 in the morning already, so once they had made it down to the first floor, the doorman was there to greet the couple, opening the door for their way out.

“Let’s walk to the city,” the writer pressed as the fresh snow crunched pleasantly under his boots. His arm was snugly tucked through Rei’s. His sweetheart gave him a rather stunned look. “Well,” Nagisa defended, “we’re not jogging today, after all.”

“All right,” Rei conceded, “since you insist. But I’ll not hear a word of you complaining about the cold. Where do you want to go?”

“Debenhams, I think. I always find good deals there, especially ‘round this time of year.” Well, that prospect certainly excited Rei. It seemed being quite wealthy didn’t stop him from being a penny pincher in the slightest.

Every now and then, they’d stroll across a park, covered by a thin layer of snow, where children and teenagers played around and adults grumped about, or they’d pass through a street where some of the older buildings were dressed up in the sparkling white powder, untouched on their highest tops. The edges of the street may have been soaked in a grey sludge, but London was the image of serenity apart.

Well, to Nagisa it was anyways. When the couple stumbled into Debenhams, Rei was quite disgruntled at having to shake himself free of the offensive weather.

“Good lord,” he remarked, “it’s freezing out there!” He glanced his boyfriend up and down and, not without a hint of blame, complained, “You’re even wearing a skirt! What sort of daft idea was this?” His boyfriend leaned up on tiptoes and kissed the tip of the brunet’s frosty nose, chuckling slightly.

“What was that about no complaints?” he reminded the lawyer, pulling him into the warmth of the store. All around them rose racks of clothes like towers on a castle. Immediately, he saw fit to release Rei into the wild as he began navigating the racks on his own. The poor man kept Nagisa at arm’s length, however, and simply wouldn’t enjoy himself. “Don’t you have anyone you might need to shop for?” he pressed when he realized that the lawyer really didn’t intend to shop on his own.

“Well,” he began hesitantly, rubbing at the back of his neck, “my mother and sister-in-law, I suppose…”

“Go on, then,” the blond encouraged. Rei was a thoughtful man - surely gift shopping couldn’t be that hard, right? When the man still didn’t leave, he asked, “What did you get them last year?”
“Scarves,” he replied awkwardly, “I get them scarves every year, but the thing is... The never wear them.”

“Really?” Nagisa snickered, much to Rei’s chagrin. He could just imagine the man picking a few out and remarking how practical and warm they were. “I’ll bet you bought them solid winter ones,” he guessed with a giggle. The brunet rolled his eyes, confirming his suspicions. He took his boyfriend’s hand kindly and guided him to the accessories section. “You need to think ahead,” he educated the attorney, “not about what they are wearing, but what they will wear.” He approached a random rack in the designer section - he supposed Rei could afford it - and began to swipe through. “Think silks and florals for spring trends. This year, really bold florals will be in - it was just on fashion week.” Uncertainly, he glanced through the selection, occasionally picking up one or two to examine them closely. After a few minutes, Nagisa couldn’t help but wander through the area. He amused himself in the jewelry section, playing around with shiny gold cuffs (he’d write about those in the winter article - they were going to become incredibly popular for the season). For a moment he played with the idea of a pearl headband that reminded him of the clip he’d worn on his first date with Rei. If only he had the money!

“Nagisa?” Rei called, interrupting a fantasy in which the blond was decorated in opulent jewelry (all paid for by his beau, how sweet). Hastily, he shoved the expensive bracelets off and placed them back, turning to face the brunet. “What do you think of these? I couldn’t quite decide.” On one hand was a black scarf with bold lines of pink, green, and orange flowers. The colors themselves were pastel, but the design made up for it. The other was silky, fluttering prettily in his arms, and was white, grey, and rosy in watercolors. It too was reminiscent of spring (to be honest, the blond was surprised - Rei had followed his instructions quite well).

“They’re both lovely!” he enthused, examining them closer. “Couldn’t you just give one to each?” The lawyer shrugged.

“Neither one seems like my mother would like it. I was thinking of Satsuki - you remind me of her.” The writer inferred that Satsuki must have been his brother’s wife. “She’s quite stylish, so I thought I should ask you instead of deciding on my own.”

“It wouldn’t be special if I chose,” he protested, strolling back to Rei’s side. “You want them to open them on Christmas and smile with the purest joy you’ve ever seen, not like they’re trying to force a grin.”

“I have to ship it to Japan, actually,” the man informed him. “My parents are visiting my brother and aunt, so I’m on my own.” Glancing at the scarves, he dragged himself to the front to pay for both, leaving his laughing partner to trail behind him. Outside, the snow had started once more and neither had thought to bring an umbrella. They weren’t exactly to eager to leave and so they’d wandered a few floors up to the men’s section. The younger one tried to keep an eye out for what he imagined would look best on Rei - he intended to get a gift for his boyfriend, after all. Besides, he’d need to revolutionize that wardrobe sooner or later. The lawyer didn’t seem to favor any particular thing, however - in fact, he was positively distracted for once in his life, only able to focus on the man at his side every now and then.

“Is something wrong?” the blond had to ask eventually, slipping his fingers into his boyfriend’s. They turned and began to work their way back outside, despite the greater chill.

“I just - I was was wondering, I suppose...” He trailed off, looking Nagisa in the eye and he felt his heart skip a beat at the intimacy, his heart warming despite the cold flush of wind as they exited the department store. “Since my family won’t be around, I wanted to ask if you’d like to spend Christmas with me.”
Nagisa’s face drained completely. Oh, how he wanted to say yes, but he knew he couldn’t - if he just left his father alone...

“Oh, Rei,” he sighed. Before he had the chance to continue, the older man groaned loudly.

“Nevermind,” he muttered, releasing the blond’s chilly hand, “forget I brought it up.”

“Rei,” Nagisa whined, insistently tugging at his black, woolly sleeve, “it really isn’t you, it’s just that my family is still around and all and it’s just, they’re rather stingy with guests...”

“You don’t even get along with your family,” he accused petulantly, turning up his nose and pulling his arm away from his grip. Nagisa was about to protest indignantly, even snap, but instead he planted his feet and didn’t go after him until Rei turned, realizing that his boyfriend was not following. He whirled around, approaching the blond, and was entirely prepared to hear any excuse that the man had to offer. His eyebrows ticked down in displeasure. But instead, Nagisa told him,

“Let me show you.”

Nagisa had the route well-memorized. The bus ride to Poplar’s St. Lucy’s Community Hospital was short, but the tension between the couple stretched it out like a sore muscle. The blond kept himself rigidly silent to any and all questions, afraid that if he spoke, he’d be cross with Rei and in this season, he honestly didn’t want that.

Well, Rei was by all means confused when they emerged in their park and when the suddenly silenced blond brought him around their regular route. He kept quiet at well, stiff with stubborn frigidity, not unlike a child. The writer didn’t mind, though - in fact, he found it rather familiar. It was a bittersweet thought.

The lawyer’s huffiness quieted as he saw the sign that read “in-patient clinic”. A fog rolled through Nagisa’s mind as his partner was checked in - what was he thinking, exposing his father to such a shock with no warning, what was he thinking, shattering his pride like this. Yet still, he guided them along to the Colonel’s room. Quietly, Nagisa opened the door.

The couple found the man wistfully watching the snow build a drift upon the sill, his orange bottles casting a strange hue about the room. There was a meager effort at decorating, and a small fake pine tree sat on the sill. When a creak broke the silence, the man pivoted his chair with his abandoned, shaky smile.

“Daddy,” Nagisa greeted, wrapping his arms around that sad, old man. With great strength, he gripped his son back. “Daddy,” and he pulled away, “I brought someone special to meet you.” The colonel’s eyes refocused behind him and the young man pulled away, gesturing to his boyfriend standing awkwardly across the way.

“Oh,” he chuckled heartily, “there’s no need to tell me. Rei Ryuugazaki,” he saluted. “Colonel Ken Hazuki, at your service.” The man swayed at the door a moment more, quite shocked at the situation, before he was able to shake it off and approach.

“S-sir!” he stuttered. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir!” He faltered, unsure whether to shake the elder’s hand or salute back, and the father and son laughed at his visible hesitation. He was humbled slightly, and his shoulders fell away from their rigid position. The old man had a warm laugh with a way of embracing the room like birdsong. Rei had heard that trill before. Ken offered his hand for a shake and, bending slightly, the attorney gladly took it.

“Pleased to meet you as well. You’ve completely commandeered my princess, you know. He talks
about you so often!” The man gave an abashed smile and confessed, “My family’s been saying that
he’s all I ever talk about these days as well.”

“This room is disgraceful, you know. Where are your decorations at? It’s nearly empty in here! And
no lights!” the boy informed his father, after sharing a gentle laugh between the three of them.

“Now, now, Nagisa,” the attorney soothed with a shake of his head, “what’s here is plenty adequate
for a celebration.” The blond shot him a dirty look.

“You have no right to talk Rei,” he replied sassily. “Your house makes a funeral look like a party.”
Of course, the brunet took great offense at this and asked the colonel if he could demonstrate his
decorating prowess to the princess - and he was careful to use that word, much to his boyfriend’s
embarrassment. In the corner of the room, there was a box with dusty old baubles and strings. Nagisa
jumped at the ornaments, his father chose the nativity scene, and the devious Hazukis left poor Rei
with the lights! Though the blond knew he was being quite cruel, it was necessary to punish the man
with some good-humored fun every now and then. The couple practically fell all over one another to
get to the tree, each one swearing that they’d decorate it best, while the father watched the childish
display with great amusement and made perfect the nativity.

The sky had begun to grow dark by the time they’d declared Colonel Hazuki the victor. His tree had
become a glowing mess in front of the dark window sill, but it was made with love and so was
already precious.

As the couple prepared to leave, Rei promised, “We’ll see each other again soon, I’m sure. We ought
to all have dinner together before Christmas, if you’d like.”

“I would enjoy that very much, young man,” the colonel affirmed, sending him a shining smile,
though to him nothing was more filling than his son’s loving smile as, arm-in-arm, they said their
goodbyes, and were off on their way in the winter snow.

For a long time, Rei and Nagisa circled the park, tickled here and there by a stray flake, neither one
quite sure what to say. The older man rubbed his thumb across the back of his sweetheart’s hand,
thoughts deeper than the yellow clouds above. The blond was quiet as well, but he only wondered
on his boyfriend’s judgement. The man had accepted the shocking situation with such grace, but had
kept his thoughts solidly to himself, almost entirely unflinching. Even now, he was solitary and
silent, and Nagisa wondered just how much time introverts needed to think these things through.

At last, they came to a stop at the blond’s bench. Rei sat directly on the undisturbed snow, guiding
his beau to the area beside him (though he had the sense to brush his seat off). For a while, there was
nothing aside from the street lamp’s golden glow touching the branches of the sprawling maple.
Upon them blue shadows fell on the pristine snow. Sleepy flakes danced down from the sky like a
sigh.

“That was very hard for you, wasn’t it?” the brunet questioned at last, keeping his eyes pinned
forward. Nagisa, for a moment, could not say whether it had been more or less than he anticipated:
but upon reflecting, he thought of a teary-eyed boy in university awoken by a teary-eyed man in his
bed, with no help in sight.

“Yes,” he choked out, “yes, it has been.” His pretty eyes coated themselves, but Rei placed a warm
hand upon his thigh and rubbed it softly. He did not cry. In a heartbeat, their eyes met, and, the blue
sweeter and more intimate than the night, he murmured to the sniffing man, “I love you, you know.
Very much.” And like the softly falling snow, with cheeks red like holly, Nagisa replied in kind,

“I love you too.”
It was strange how before they were said, three such simple words had such a big impact. Since the
day the attorney met the writer, the words had been growing in their fertile hearts like red river lilies.
The roots had become tangled all throughout the surface, but neither could think of what to call it.
The desire to acknowledge it without seeming a fool to the other tore through the watery veins, but
as fate would have it, no sooner than the words came did their hearts become a garden in spring,
warm and sweet.

Touching as the moment may have been, their relationship fell back into a regular routine only
minutes later. They had given their feelings a name, not created new ones in an instant.

“I cannot believe,” Rei moaned, “you talked me into walking.” The snow had of course continued to
fall. There couldn’t have been more than ten centimeters and the buses had practically shut down in
Poplar, where they’d been stranded after the confession. It would take forty minutes to get to the
lawyer’s house by car, Nagisa estimated, and they were stranded on foot.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” the blond chided cheerily, cozily snuggled up to his lover. The brunet gave
him a hopeless look. “The way I see it, we’ve got two choices,” he offered, “we can walk to my
house or we can walk to the underground. They’re probably equal distance.”

“I should probably go home on my own,” Rei told him apologetically. “I wanted to visit my client
tomorrow and prepare her for the verdict. It should come Monday, but I wanted part of my day to be
cleared.” Well, the blond was slightly disappointed, but shrugged nonetheless and kissed the corner
of his boyfriend’s mouth.

“That’s fine, then. I’ll go home. You can get to the station all right on your own?” He nodded
confidently, shaking his glasses a little, and kissed the younger man firmly on the lips.

“I’ll see you for lunch on Monday.” The writer nodded his confirmation. Then, sweet and clear as
the first time, Rei told him: “I love you, Nagisa.”

“I love you too!” he hummed happily, parting ways with him after one last close hug. The warmth
followed him all the way home, so much that even when he realized he’d left yesterday’s outfit at his
boyfriend’s, he couldn’t bring himself to care. It was an excuse to visit him again, after all!

His house was warm and well-lit when he returned, and the blond was pleasantly surprised to see
some of his long-lost Christmas decor put up. He suspected Haruka must have done it. Since his
return, the enigmatic American had been hopping between motels to stay in, having put a bit of a
strain on his savings, so Nagisa had offered to let him stay as a roommate. Though there were many
nights where he stayed elsewhere (Nagisa couldn’t imagine why, though), the arrangement was
working out well - he’d found a job at a zoo and was currently going through the lengthy process of
getting his visa changed to permit work. The handsome Makoto Tachibana had been ever so helpful,
arguing that Haruka was a pivotal witness to his case to the embassy and doing research in his spare
time for ways that he might extend his visa.

“Welcome home,” the stoic man greeted as Nagisa twirled happily inside. “Did you fuck?” The blond couldn’t even bring himself to shoot a scolding glance for his joy.

“He loves me,” he sighed to his friend, “he said so.” The black-haired boy subtly switched his tone from crude to congratulatory and buried his hands in his sweatpants pockets.

“That’s nice,” he remarked. It might not have been much, but his clear blue eyes told the truth - he was pleased for Nagisa. Or, he would be for as long as the blond wasn’t annoying about the ordeal. He was an expert at stretching out the time it took for Haru to be annoyed, however, and interrupted his pleasure for a question.

“How are things going with Mr. Makoto?” he inquired teasingly, slipping onto the couch and crossing his legs. His eyes were playful - surely everyone was as happy as he was in this moment!

“The case is going well,” the young man informed him, pulling out a pot for spaghetti - he had guessed that neither had eaten yet, it appeared. “He says my testimony will be important, but we just need a bit more incriminating evidence. He wants to go through some of the company’s pictures of me in the water with the nets, but they aren’t giving in. He’ll need to subpoena it.” Try as he might to throw the blond off his trail by responding sensibly, Haru would never be able to evade him.

“You certainly like to talk a lot about the case and Makoto, don’t you?” he pointed out teasingly. The brunet did not speak with him for the rest of the night.

Once Monday rolled around, all of Nagisa’s friends were eager to hear about the time he’d spent with Rei. At least, he’d liked to think they were. They were all honestly happy for him, but they spent as much time as possible attempting to derail him. Especially poor Gou, who had to bear the brunt of the burden, as her desk was right beside the excitable blond’s.

“And then, I was practically bawling in his arms,” he exaggerated, leaning over the desk to chat with the redhead, “and he tilted up my chin, looked into my eyes, and said in the most serious tone I’ve ever heard him use, ‘I love you, Nagisa, and I always will’. It was terribly romantic.”

“Mmhmm,” Gou nodded, eyes glued to her computer screen. “I’ll bet he swung you up into his arms and made love to you right there in the snow.” The blond quieted, sending her a sassy glare, but Momo, who had been listening, cut in.

“I think that’s amazing!” he enthused to the writers brightly. “I hope something like that happens to me sometime! In uni, everyone’s so focused on messing around, it’s hard to find something like that!”

“Finding someone like Rei is hardly common, Momo,” Gou protested, “otherwise, I’d already be in the arms of some handsome lord from Italy or Spain or something, and be able to toss all my worries away while spending every last pound I have.”

“You’re just being pessimistic ‘cause you’ve been single so long,” Nagisa informed her.

“You should date my brother!” Momo offered, pulling out his cellphone. The woman sighed deeply, slightly annoyed with the two men.

“I’ve already said no, I don’t care what he looks like. I need to focus on work for now. When someone comes around, I’ll know, all right?” They smiled and, when Ms. Amakata called for her secretary, all returned to their tasks. After a while, the lady turned to her friend and asked, “Hey, you’re going out to photograph jewelry displays today, right? Could you do me a favor?” The blond
checked the time - he’d need to be leaving soon for it, come to think.

“Sure,” he replied easily, shutting his laptop and placing his borrowed camera in his purse.

“Can you find a display with midriff-baring formal wear? I need it for today’s post.”

“Sure, that shouldn’t be too hard,” he told her. Gou’s posts were usually weekly, but like the blond, she had taken on a holiday challenge - 25 posts, one each day, in the form of an outfit Advent calendar. It was one of the cutest things he’d seen! She had also spotted a new formal wear trend before the other magazines - Ms. Amakata had been extremely happy with her.

Nagisa slung his bag over his shoulder and left the office behind, waving to his friends as he made his way (he kept some gossip tidbits as well - Hana and Michael were sharing quite the cute laugh by the water cooler). He was ahead of schedule for once, so when he came across a glittering Swarovski crystal jewelry display, gleaming in all shades of dark blue, he was careful to snap a shot. And were those cufflinks he saw? They would look lovely on Rei...

Intrigued, the writer popped into the shop and glanced through their selections. It was a fine store; he did not recognize it as a chain, but it was obviously stocked with accessories for the high class. Not a few minutes had he been there than did an employee approach him, inquiring about his camera.

“I’m a writer for the fashion magazine, Elite,” he explained, handing the man a business card. “May I speak with your manager about featuring that jewelry display in our monthly accessories column?” He was quick to set up his feature with the higher-ups, but before he left, he had to ask... “Excuse me? How much are these cufflinks?” The employee told him and of course, the answer was way too much. The blond wanted to buy his boyfriend something nice for Christmas, though he needed something at least affordable. He glanced through his other selections before his eyes found something beyond a doubt entirely beautiful and perfect. From a display off to the side, he lifted a silk lavender tie and matching pocket square. And better yet - they were far cheaper than the luxury crystal cufflinks. Besides, he rationed as he paid for the gift and slipped it into his bag, the light purple would really bring out Rei’s lovely blue eyes - they were almost violet themselves - and would match the grey while bringing color to his wardrobe. And what was more usable and practical than a tie? Perhaps the pocket square was just for looking nice, but it added a touch of personality as well. And the color worked for winter and spring!

What with his distraction, Nagisa was about five minutes late, as per usual. He found Rei sitting at a counter with his usual order (and the blond’s as well), glancing through a crossword puzzle. With easy routine, the younger man slipped into the chair beside him and immediately leaned over his shoulder to read what he had.

“What are you stuck on?” he pressed, not bothering to give a proper greeting. They’d been at it for too long to bother much with such chit-chat these days and he found Rei didn’t mind his eagerly jumping in. Polite as he may be, he did not care for small-talk, especially when he was focused.

“Twenty-one across, to start,” the attorney reported. “The given clue is ‘skirt waistband’. Right up your alley.”

“Yoke,” the blond told him in an instant. “I’ve sewed skirts before. I made the tulle one I wore on Saturday,” he informed him, keeping up with their game.

“Really?” Rei asked incredulously. “It looked beautiful, I never would have guessed you made it yourself.” The young man beamed at him and said a quick thank you. He was surprised, however, when the brunet folded the newspaper and placed it back in his briefcase. “I wanted to speak with you about your father,” he explained, handing the blond his coffee. Curious, he sipped and waited
for his lover to continue on his own. “I’ve been thinking about Christmas and I would like you to spend Christmas Eve at my house and stay over. If you’re comfortable with it, I would also like to join you and him at the hospital to spend the rest of the day. Does that work for you?” Dark though the day may have been, Nagisa was brighter than the sun. He flung his arms around his boyfriend and with an emphatic, ‘I love you!’, he agreed.

“My sisters aren’t ever around and I told Mum I was too busy with work to come ‘round this year, anyways, so it’ll be nice to actually celebrate Christmas, you know?” he explained to a flustered Rei. “Plus,” he confessed, “it’s nice not having to choose between you and my dad - I love you both, after all!” With an abashed grin, the brunet told him, “I love you too. We ought to make plans before Christmas as well.”

“Like what?” he asked, drinking some of his coffee and tearing off a part of Rei’s scone. The attorney shrugged.

“A date of some sort. I’d like to take you and your father out to dinner one of these nights to tell him about the plans for Christmas, but that aside, having time with just the two of us would be nice. You’re better at thinking of these romantic things, what do you want to do?” Nagisa pursed his lips slightly.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Give some time to think and I’ll text you. What were you thinking for dinner?”

“A sushi restaurant?” his beau suggested. Nagisa nodded his approval - he and his father both adored sushi. “Good. Does this Friday at seven work?”

“Fine by me!” Rei gave a quick nod, whipping out his phone to record the date, before setting business aside and relaxing slightly. Their eyes met and they smiled in the quiet for a moment, enjoying one another. The writer leaned into his boyfriend, who placed a gentle, massaging hand on his knee. “How did the case turn out?” he asked politely.

“We won. It wasn’t an unexpected outcome. The defendant had two counts of first-degree murder, after all.” The man brushed it off like it was dull, but his little lover grinned happily at him.

“Congratulations! I’m really proud of you!” he enthused. The older man kissed him lightly.

“Thank you,” he replied, patting his knee comfortably. “I ought to be going now - you too. Didn’t you say you had photography to do today?” He rolled his eyes and informed his boyfriend,

“That generally means I have more time to spend with you.” They stood nonetheless - he may have had the extra time, but that didn’t mean the same for the attorney. Before parting ways, however, the brunet was careful to grab him and give him a proper goodbye for once. He took the blond’s chubby cheeks in his hands, rubbing his thumb under his lower lashes and focusing on those pretty sunrise eyes. Nagisa had gone entirely pink - passersby were staring - and after a long, rib-aching heartbeat, he leaned in and delivered a hard, passionate kiss that was much too short for the blond’s liking.

“I love you,” he repeated, embracing him tenderly about the neck. A little baffled, but joyously nonetheless, he reciprocated his boyfriend.

“I love you too, Rei.”

The young man spent the rest of the day wondering exactly what that episode had been about. It was unlike the lawyer to be liberal or spontaneous with his affections, especially in public. The combination of all three had left him in quite the daze and he was thankful that his photography
didn’t require nearly as much focus as his writing did - otherwise, he’d have had a tough time returning to work. His boyfriend had run so deep into his mind that when he came across a white-gold and diamond jewelry display modeled after ice and snowflakes, his first thought was far from his article. In fact, he tugged his phone out of his pocket and sent a text to the older man as soon as he saw it.

To: Rei Ryugazaki

Lets go iceskating!!! we can go to winter wonderland!

There certainly was no conquest more romantic than skating under the stars (or clouds, as it were). Every year, Hyde Park was dolled up in the loveliest lights and fixed up with a festival to celebrate Christmas. With it was London’s largest outdoor ice rink. He’d taken lessons in skating when he was younger and he could imagine nothing sweeter than his boyfriend falling all over him as he unsteadily scooted along!

Rei replied a few minutes later with an affirmation - he offered to schedule it himself as well. With that, the blond found fit to return to the office and give the formatting department his photos and gave Gou her few photos for the blog.

Nothing particularly noteworthy went on for the remainder of the week. Rei told him that he’d gotten a reservation for their skating session on Saturday at nine in the evening, leaving them with the final time for the night. He also informed his beau that he planned to take half of Friday off, partly for work, and partly to spend a bit of the afternoon with the colonel. The blond agreed that he would too, but to make up for it, he’d had to work Wednesday and cancel their jogging. He complained about it when he next saw Rei for lunch on Thursday.

“I’m going to get fat,” he whined dramatically, using that as his fact in conjunction with the crossword puzzle (the word had been ‘phospholipid’). “Then you’ll never want me!” Rei huffed, kissing his hand lightly.

“Even if you get fat, I love you and think you’re beautiful,” he insisted. He placed his hands on the younger man’s cheeks, pinching them slightly - he certainly had been awfully affectionate with the boy as of late. “That aside, your cheeks are cute when they’re chubby.” His pretty, pale face flushed cherry pink and he glanced away without protesting. The direction in which he’d happened to look, however, held a very interesting sight with quite a familiar face. Sensing his lover’s distraction, Rei released him. “What’s the matter?” he inquired.

“That’s Momo,” he stated, having spied his friend across the shop from them. “I think he’s with someone... He looks familiar, but I can’t place his face, you know?” Absently, he commented, “He’s hot.” The brunet raised an eyebrow and gave him a slightly incredulous look at his boldness, but he wasn’t really concerned until he spouted, “Oh my God! That must be Momo’s brother! He wasn’t kidding about him being attractive.”

“I beg your pardon?” the attorney protested, straightening himself and reexamining the man with a dash of jealousy.

“Don’t be stupid,” Nagisa chastised him humorously. “Momo’s been trying to set him up with Gou, so he must be straight.” The attorney didn’t reply and when he glanced over his shoulder, he had his eyes trained on the casually stylish man.

They watched the pair quietly for a few minutes - nothing much of interest happened, but it was clear they were related - before Rei murmured an excuse to go. Concerned, the blond followed him out the
“Is there something wrong?” he asked, pulling him to the side so as not to be in the way of others. The brunet hesitated, casting his gaze away, before regarding his partner uncertainly.

“Do you... find me attractive?” Baffled, Nagisa nodded.

“Of course I do, you’re adorable!” he stated, giving his boyfriend a sunny smile. The older man huffed impatiently and replied, “Not like that,” he protested, “I mean physically - or well, that is to say... I suppose, am I hot to you too?” He tripped over the words a little, but he guessed that more than jealous, Rei had felt insecure. It was an odd emotion for the man, and like all times when he was bothered, his eyebrows ticked down under his glasses.

“Oh, Rei,” the blond sighed, “you could never be so simple.” He shot over a questioning look, needing an answer, and the younger man took his hand and led him into the alley beside their coffee shop, leaning against a wall and pulling his beau in for a deep embrace. “You’re handsome,” he complimented, kissing his neck, “and warm and charming.” He’d intended to leave it at that, but apparently, the brunet was demanding when he needed reassurance. He took the blond’s chin in his fingers, hovering over him in the shadows, the whole of his face cast in dark shadow. For a long while those dark sky eyes had Nagisa pinned and his heart fluttered like the last leaf in the wind, trembling like it had upon their first kiss. The lawyer leaned in, hot and heavy upon him, and shoved their lips together, trapping his little shivering bird in that alleyway.

The kiss was hard and warm, but bitterly short and not a moment later, he pulled away, his face colored high with embarrassment.

“I do apologize,” he muttered, “I didn’t mean - that was completely inappropriate - should have asked...” After a hasty goodbye, he left the younger boy there shuddering against the cold wall, confused, but high in color and heartbeat. He most certainly had not been scared, but that was most surprising - and, frankly, sexy. He’d never pegged Rei as the type to shove someone against a wall and kiss them like that. He wondered all the way back to work if that’s what the lawyer had been intending to prove, but he’d looked so guilty after the fact that he couldn’t be sure.

Though he texted the man to check up on him several times throughout the course of that day and the next, he never received a reply, which was notably out of character for Rei. When Friday afternoon came, he wasn’t even sure if he could still expect him to show up at the hospital for their plans with the colonel.

As he was walking up the drive to St. Lucy’s that day, Nagisa found his boyfriend waiting for him by the door, looking slightly apologetic with a poinsettia in his hands. The blond brightened immediately and jogged the rest of the way up, shouting a friendly greeting at him.

“I got these for your father,” he informed the writer, shaking the flower slightly. Coloring and not able to fully meet his eye, he proceeded, “I am sorry for how I acted the other day - I shouldn’t have just left like that, and being so forceful in public... How humiliating.”

“It’s all right,” the younger man soothed with a giggle. “I actually found it really hot.” He let the cherry-red lawyer follow in step behind him as he confidently pranced up the steps and into the hospital. The blond led the way to his father’s room and was pleased to see that the lights Rei had strung, though messy in his haste, lit up the area prettily. The colonel himself was as cheerful and bright at the prospect of leaving his room to go to a restaurant - the doctor had said exercise would do him good.

“Pleasure to see you again so soon!” he greeted his son’s boyfriend, giving his hand a firm shake.
“Hope you’re here to help finish what you’ve started!” The room had become rather cramped; around the floors were cardboard boxes with old decorations, but the only ones out were the nativity, tree, and ornaments they’d put up previously.

“Of course!” Nagisa enthused, grabbing the first one he could find and messing around with its contents. Rei placed the poinsettia flower on the coffee table.

“I’ll fix up this mess,” he offered, already buckling down to work on the disaster they’d created last weekend. The blond had found the stockings - there were only six of them. One had belonged to each of the children in his family and two for the parents. Originally, there had been an extra as well, but they’d never used it.

“I remember these!” he enthused warmly, picking the one that had been traditionally his from the stack. All of them were finely embroidered with various Christmas themes. His had been the one with a nighttime scene of a ballerina dancing in the snow, much to his mother’s chagrin. Her skirt was covered with glass beads, spiraling toward the bodice, an image inspired by The Nutcracker. His father had bought it as a bit of a consolation prize - when he did a recital of the popular ballet, he was cast as the nutcracker, not Clara. His mother had been mad enough about the stocking, but goodness, was she furious when one of the gifts he’d received that year was his very own sparkling tutu!

Nagisa glanced through the others. His oldest sister, Emi, had one somewhat similar to his, at least in setting. Instead of a dancer, she had a deer with a crown of antlers and holly around his neck, the berries having been done in red beads. Hana and Rika, the twins, had images that matched closely - one with a rocking horse under a tree and another with a teddy bear. His father had a classic image of Santa Claus himself, merrily sitting on a roof with a golden glow from a village below.

The last of the six in the box was not his mother’s, but the extra they’d never used. It was a Christmas tree, bright and sparkling with hundreds of beads for ornaments, and gifts underneath. He didn’t ask what happened to the other one, but instead used the seventh, his father’s, and his own to decorate, hanging the three just beside the window sill.

“This one’s for you, Rei,” he informed his boyfriend, pointing to the stocking with the tree. The man colored, masking his embarrassment with an expression of complete focus, burying himself in the task at hand, though the tree had already been fixed.

“I don’t really need one, Nagisa,” he insisted, straightening the already-perfect star atop the tree. The colonel protested before his son could.

“Nonsense, you’re coming over, after all. You need one as well.” The brunet opened his mouth to protest once more, but the young writer cut him off.

“There’s really no use trying, there are two Hazukis here.” He gave a quick snort of a laugh and stated bluntly, “Of course. I should save my breath.” They chuckled at him and each returned to their work. In his box, the blond found some old Christmas photos (including one of him in his new tutu, which the lawyer took a hearty chuckle at) and a surprising group of recipes he’d forgotten about long ago. The colonel entrusted them to the young couple with the promise that they’d make something Christmas day to share with him.

“Rei, my boy,” called the old colonel from his box while the blond reminisced through the recipes, “could you hang this up, right around the coffee table?”

“Absolutely.” The man stood, dragging a chair beside Nagisa, and used some tape to put up a bit more decor about the room before breaking to sit beside the young man. “Don’t get distracted,” he chided his boyfriend as he glanced through the old keepsakes. The younger man stuck out his tongue
in reply and just as the brunet was about to bicker, there was a light cackle from the corner where Colonel Ken had wheeled himself. The son sent a scolding glance to his father - laughing at an arguing couple, the nerve - but he just pointed up. The younger men looked there, then to each other. Oh, Nagisa thought, mistletoe. That’s what Rei had taped to the ceiling, though the dork himself had seemingly forgotten (or perhaps hadn’t noticed in the first place).

“Well?” the blond prompted with a pout on his plump lips. Rei muttered a sad excuse about silly traditions, why must he be the one to follow them, but smiled shyly and, with a tremble, leaned in to give his boyfriend the coveted mistletoe kiss. Giggle sweetly, his smaller partner flung his arms around his neck with abandon, keeping himself enthusiastic but chaste. Through his romantic daze, he heard the creak of the door, and lightly one of his eyes opened.

He shoved Rei away as soon as possible, scrambling back with his heart hitting his ribs like a hammer.

Emi stood in the doorway, her hazel eyes incredulous. Across from him, the attorney appeared slightly hurt, but more confused than anything else. He examined the woman in the doorway, finding her heart-shaped face and mess of curls inexcusably familiar.

“Emi,” Nagisa breathed, shakily standing up, “what on earth are you doing here?” Her eyes flickered between the dumbstruck lawyer and her panicky brother, then at last fixed upon her father in some silent question.

“Well, I came to visit Dad,” she began uncertainly, “but, erm... Who’s this?” She gestured to the brunet sitting opposite them and before he himself could reply, her brother cut in.

“My friend,” he informed her hastily, sending Rei a begging, apologetic look.

“But you were just -”

“It was a joke!” he insisted, pointing to the dastardly plant above them. “Just a Christmas joke, but why are you here? What about Essex? Why aren’t you there?” She stayed quiet a moment longer, analyzing the stranger in her midst, and at last turned and approached her father. He welcomed her with open arms, hugging her tight.

“My fiance and I broke up,” she informed her family. “It was awhile ago, but I thought it was about time I focused on family a bit more, so I found a job in London. I meant this to be a nice surprise, but you don’t seem very pleased,” she accused the young man. He crossed his arms.

“Well, considering how you completely abandoned us years ago, it’s no shock we aren’t happy about it!” he snapped, tossing her stocking into the empty box. She recoiled from the accusation, her face contorting into what appeared an angry expression, but after many years, he recognized that it meant she was going to cry.

“No. In fact, I think it’s time I go.” And with that, he whirled around, stalking out of the room furiously. He didn’t say goodbye or collect his coat from the rack - he was too angry. He stomped out into the biting, harsh cold, all the way to that damn bridge of Rei’s (though it wasn’t actually far), if it was so useful for helping thoughts. The water was unmoving, frozen over, and dark, and with frustration, he kicked at the railing.
“Nagisa,” called a gentle voice from behind him some time later. He shuddered, half in cold, half in rage, and refused to turn around and look at his boyfriend. His wet tears pattered down to the ice below. A warm set of hands placed a grey, woollen coat over his shoulders. “Come on, now,” he urged quietly, “why don’t you look at me?”

“No,” he protested petulantly, closing his eyes just in case he’d glance Rei’s way. The attorney embraced him from behind, putting his head on his shoulder.

“Now, don’t be childish,” he scolding softly, rubbing his two arms up and down in a gesture of comfort. They stayed silent for awhile longer until the younger man’s tears faced to chilly sniffles. Then, the lawyer informed him, “She came to apologize, you know.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you,” he told his boyfriend. “They all completely left us alone for seven entire years. I had to take care of it all myself, you know. The waste bags, the doctors appointments, the medical bills... I couldn’t even go to graduate school. She can’t just show up all this time later and claim to love us now that it’s easy.” Rei carefully considered his next words.

“I think,” he began, “that she wants to share the burden. You two are adults, and I know you love her anyways - it hurts, I know, but it’s about time to move on from it.” He was about to protest once more, but the brunet spoke over him. “That doesn’t mean forgive her right now. It just means giving her another chance to be a part of your lives and another try at having your trust.” The man kissed the blond’s chilled ear. “I told them I’d bring you back. Why don’t we head over?” The blond relaxed his stiff muscles tiredly, leaning back into the older man’s chest. Faithfully, he supported his small boyfriend until the writer saw it fit to leave.

They held hands during the slow trudge back to the hospital, both thoughtful and uncertain. Before they went back inside, Nagisa turned to his partner and kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry I told her you were my friend,” he apologized, “it’s just that she doesn’t know. Not her, or my mom, or my other sisters, or my step-father. I only told Daddy.”

“That’s what I thought,” he replied, stroking his candle-light blond hair. “We’ll work it out with your family together, because I love you, and I won’t leave you to do it alone.” The writer took a deep breath, untying the knot in his heart, and breathed out a soft, billowy cloud.

“Thank you, Rei. That’s really the nicest thing anyone’s done for me.” The lawyer huffed at the boy, as if asking what else he expected him to do, and without letting go of one another, they entered the building and began strolling back to the room. The pair walked in and, with a little regret in the air, released one another before entering the room to greet the younger man’s family.

Emi was sitting on the ground at the coffee table, pensively searching through the photos, but looked up and stood when her brother entered.

“Listen, Nagisa,” she began, sounding as though she’d rehearsed in his absence, “I’m sorry about these past few years. You’ve had to grow a lot in a short amount of time, I know. You’re really not the little brother I remember, so I’d really like to be a part of your life again.” Hopelessly she shrugged, and pushed her black hair back nervously. “I’ve been so obsessed with work and my life that I didn’t even notice you had one, too.”

“It’s okay,” Nagisa told her, “you’re here now and trying, I guess.” She strolled up to him, swinging an arm around him in a hug and he replied in kind, digging his fingers into her coat. For a moment, the sister of his memories was there - the one who’d scared off bullies with her softball bat in hand, or by kicking a football in their direction, but who teased him relentlessly herself and used all the make-up their mother bought her on him instead. “I missed you,” he confessed.
“I missed you too.” They separated, giving a tentative grin of goodwill, and she faced the attorney. “You must be the ‘special’ friend,” she stated, swinging a hand out for a shake as her brother gave out a cry in embarrassment. “Oh, relax, Nagisa, Dad told me while you were out throwing a tantrum. I’m not that surprised anyways.” Rei took her hand, giving it a firm shake, and introduced himself.

“Rei Ryugazaki, attorney at law,” he said officially, adjusting his glasses with his left hand.

“Chief Inspector Emi Hazuki,” she replied with an edge of pride which all the Hazukis held - the blond guessed she’d been recently promoted to that position, whatever it meant. At his side, Rei looked considerably impressed by the rank.

“I hope we can work together in the future,” he said, releasing her hand, “I prosecute criminal cases, after all.” She gave him a wry smile and nodded.

“I’m glad to hear you’re not in defense. You seem competent - couldn’t have you getting criminals off.” He chuckled, thanking her, and placed a hand on the small of Nagisa’s back - it seemed she’d figured out the ‘big secret’ anyhow.

“We were going to get sushi,” Rei told her. “It’s not far, if you’d care to join us for dinner.” He arched his brow and gave Nagisa a nudge.

“... I’d like it if you came, to be honest,” he confessed. His father nodded at his side, and again Emi made a haughty face that said she could cry. She offered to push her father along, which the blond was glad of - it could get heavy at times.

As they strolled along, their chatter was light and pleasant. Gradually, the young man continued to warm up to his sister once more, to the point where he even insisted she sit next to him at the restaurant like she used to.

The place had a modern feeling to it. Most of the furniture was dark, highlighted by the traditional decor with off-white backgrounds. There was a bar towards the front, illuminated in pink and yellow light, with a long painting stretched out behind it - an image of spring flowers on a cherry tree. It was in a quieter area of town, not far from the park, but a ways from the blond’s house.

Rei greeted a hostess in Japanese and like a switch, the Hazukis switched easily into the language themselves. The woman working in the bar waved to the man as they passed and sat in a corner nearby, the hostess politely removing a chair for the colonel and adding a set of silverware.

“This is such a nice place!” the blond enthused in Japanese, smiling to his boyfriend. “How did you find it?”

“My father invested in it when it was a small start up in Essex, so we’ve known the head chef since I was young. We were lucky - it’s become a very successful business. The crew in both locations are quite talented.” The brunet wasn’t one to praise things without cause and so the blond paid close attention to what was on the menu. It was rather basic at the heart of things, but there were interesting twists to many of the dishes that made his mouth water. When the waiter came by to take their order, they decided on getting several large dishes to share (though Nagisa made sure to order his own miso soup). As they were waiting, however, Emi made it her business to get to know her brother once again - and she started with the obvious.

“So... how long have you two been together now?” she wondered awkwardly, glancing between her brother and his beau. The blond shrugged.

“At the while now, I guess.” The woman made an annoyed face, one that was incredibly similar to Rei’s,
and the brunet himself rolled his eyes and replied,

“We met in late September, but we really started dating early October.” She nodded, satisfied, before continuing with her questioning.

“Erm... What is it you two do together exactly?” It was the brother’s turn to be slightly vexed.

“The same thing straight couples do, I reckon,” he stated matter-of-factly, sipping at his drink and haughtily refusing to look at her.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she grumbled, “I was wondering about your lifestyle. Honestly, you take things so personally.”

“We go jogging every Wednesday,” Rei supplied to stop the bickering siblings, “and we usually have lunch together a couple days out of the week, if we’re not too busy.”

“There’s a coffee shop we go to,” he agreed, “where we met. We were both doing crosswords and now we do them all the time together.”

“That’s nice,” Emi stated. Their food came around then causing a lull in the conversation for a while beyond standard praise. “What do you do now, Nagisa?” she pressed. He supposed it was the investigator in her that made her feel like she needed to know absolutely everything about him (or the Hazuki - he was inquisitive himself).

“I write for Elite, the fashion magazine - I have a monthly column.” She blinked, taken aback, and ate a roll.

“That’s impressive,” she praised around a mouthful of food. The younger boy took a bite of rice.

“I know,” he mumbled around the food. “It’s a lot of fun. It’s about accessories. You should think about taking my advice.” Rei looked offended on behalf of the woman, but she nodded with considerable gusto (a competent woman she may have been, but she was a Hazuki first and foremost and that came with an inability to be insulted when she knew she deserved it).

All in all, it was a pleasant evening for the family. As they made their way home, Rei and Emi enjoyed themselves with a discussion of the law - she was interested in the most recent case he’d done. Nagisa had already heard about it, so he hung back with the colonel, quietly chatting about how nice the night had been for them. The old man was brimming with happiness at having left the hospital for a spell. In the end, he supposed dinner was the best gift he and Rei could have given him.

Chapter End Notes

giving poinsettias to friends/fam on/around christmas is a lebanese tradition
lol i was at a con yesterday and i have a midterm tomorrow rip espressourself

The next day was filled with anticipation of Rei and Nagisa's date. Haruka was absolutely annoyed at the younger man's outfit-apprehension.

“Good God,” the American snapped, “he thinks you’re hot anyways, relax about your damn clothes.”

“But I want to look nice for our date,” the blond whined, having woken up no later than nine thirty. His roommate was still half-asleep and on perhaps his third cup of coffee. He moaned out into the empty room and looked through his options, occasionally modelling for Haruka.

“Should I wear a skirt?” he pressed.

“You’ll freeze your ass off,” Haru replied, eyes closed and lips seeking his warm mug.

“Pants feel so dull, though - not at all that flirty style I’m aiming for.” He wanted the slipping and sliding Rei to fall into his cute, stylish arms and think of just how beautiful he was, not ‘what a fashion wreck’. It would occasionally occur to him that the lawyer never thought any less of him, but he wanted to show off if he could.

“Then wear a godforsaken skirt,” his roommate grumbled back, abandoning him to the pursuit in favor for more coffee.

“Ugh,” Nagisa whined, falling back on his bed. He changed his underwear to a pair that gave him confidence in his cuteness - his ruffled pink boyshorts that Rei had seen him in when he spent the night. He glanced through his room again, picking up a cherry blossom pink sweater that matched his panties. Okay, it was a start. He’d be cold with just that, so he picked up a chambray button-down. Alright, he could wear his dark wash jeans with this. And instead of a jacket, he could use his quilted vest with faux-fur trim on the hood. Ooh, and wouldn’t his brown ankle boots and scarf go well with the outfit? And the necklace his father had given him would be the perfect subtle accessory to hang over the collar of his shirt!

Once he’d finished getting dressed, he put Haruka in black jeans, combat boots, and his own cute vest and winter shirt. His ensemble was considerably more casual - he really needed to improve his wardrobe - but he looked as cool as ever.

After two hours of being dragged around the city due to Nagisa’s sheer boredom, Haru left him alone, insisting that he’d had an appointment with Makoto and some other lawyers on the team that he needed to attend. Frustrated, the writer made his way home all alone. He had nothing to do but fix up his make-up and impatiently submit his article for Monday's publication. And even after that, there was still extra time. He paid his bills, he cleaned his room, he wrote a shopping list - just how long would Rei take?

At long last, there was a firm, loud knock at the door, long after the sun had set, at 7pm. Nagisa
leaped off the couch and sprinted to the door, tearing it open and flinging himself at the attorney in a fluid motion. He wrapped his legs around the man’s waist and whined into his ear, “You took *forever*!” The brunet grunted, gently placing his boyfriend back down, and mumbled something strange. “What was that?” Nagisa asked, turning back to grab some ivory mittens and locking the door.

“I said I couldn’t decide what to wear,” he admitted, offering his arm politely for the smaller blond. He took a minute to glance over his beau’s outfit - a red sweater he must have overlooked when he raided Rei’s closet, black trousers, a white button-down, and his grey overcoat - and kissed him on the cheek.

“You look wonderful!” he complimented. The man held open the door to his car for his partner gratefully.

“I just got the sweater today,” he admitted bashfully, starting the car and pulling out of the neighborhood. The writer was practically vibrating in his seat all the way to the park, he was so thrilled, and the staunch attorney himself even seemed unusually receptive to his hints of affection.

The park was visible from a mile away, strung in golden pearl lights like jewelry, with the cheerful rattle of chatter pouring around from all the shops. As the couple entered, they held hands so as not to lose one another amidst the crowd. Nagisa was distracted by each booth, dragging Rei every which way while the lawyer desperately tried to remind him that their ice skating time was approaching. He couldn’t help but admire all the beautiful trinkets!

“They’re all so shiny! And so pretty - I really ought to treat myself, don’t you think?” he said of one booth. Of another, he insisted, “Oh, I’m sure I’ve got something in my closet that’ll match these! They just sparkle, don’t they?”

“Yes, that’s all lovely,” the brunet soothed, placing a hand on the small of his back to guide him away, “but we’ll be late for skating if we don’t get going soon. I reserved us the 9 o’clock time.” Reluctantly, he was hauled away, but in a few minutes more, the blond was secretly enthusing to himself how charming it would be to have his straight-laced man falling all over his arms in the ice rink.

Rei checked them in and they picked out their skates (Nagisa’s narrow feet warranted a white pair of women’s in a size 11), and in a moment, he was left behind by his blond as he took off into the rink.

“Be careful, darling,” he insisted as he stepped out into the rink himself. The younger boy spun backwards and teasingly waited for his boyfriend to tremble over to his open arms, unsteady as a newborn deer on the ice. It did not go as he planned. The attorney gracefully glided to his side, taking his arm and informed him, “There are inexperienced skaters, be more cautious not to cut them off.”

“As the older man tugged him along, the blond fixed up his most incredulous pout. They skated quietly for a turn, but he attentively noticed the young boy’s sour face and gave him a questioning stare.

“You were supposed to be *bad*,” he explained, “so that I could hold and guide you all the way along.”

“That would be unsafe - either one or both of us would fall,” he explained sensibly, arching a dark eyebrow over his glasses. “Besides,” he proceeded logically, striding ahead of his boyfriend and spinning around so that he was backward, “if we were inexperienced,” and he took his waist in a dancing embrace, “we couldn’t do this.”
“Oh, how romantic of you,” he teased, his face blossoming in pink warmth completely unrelated to the chill. “How did you learn to do this, anyways? You’re pretty good!” Rei absorbed the praise like a dog and launched into an explanation.

“Well, you see, skating is really just elaborate maths on ice, so when I was younger I rather enjoyed skating out graphs, especially sine and cosine…” Nagisa tuned out the mathematics, preserving an amused look on his face while inadvertently keeping an eye on the arena. Toward the rail, couples and children slipped and slid around, but throes of elegant skaters made great leaps in the middle, improvising to the warm waltz of the gentle music. Some wore glittering dresses tailored for the professionals while others kept themselves bundled cozily in their heavy winter coats, most in dark, neutral fabrics. And was that another vest he saw across the way?

It was. Moreover, it was a familiar vest over a white winter shirt. He released Rei, passing him to get a better vantage point and unknowingly interrupting a statement about the value of maths in everyday life. The blond got a clear look again - yes, he put that outfit together. And the man wearing it was supporting an unstable brunet.

“That’s Haru!” Nagisa declared as his abandoned boyfriend sulked up beside him. “He’s with Makoto!” The American across the rink had, in no platonic way, his arm around the soft-spoken lawyer, helping him not to fall all over the place, but with apparent levels of difficulty. “They’re totally on a date,” he gushed, beginning to push himself forward to catch up with his friends for some light-hearted teasing, mostly involving Haruka’s no-longer-mysterious absences at night. His own attorney hooked his hands around his waist, however, locking him in place before he could dash off on his own again.

“Now, now, don’t be rude,” he chided, kissing the top of his blond head before letting him take up his arm. “Leave them be, they didn’t know we’d be here as well. Besides,” he added, noting his younger date’s reluctance to be ordered around, “let me have the chance to pay attention to you.”

Well, he certainly knew his boyfriend, the writer could give him that - in a second flat, the red-cheeked boy elected to stay, cuddling closer to his guide expectantly. After less than half a lap of quiet and Rei’s wandering eyes, he grew impatient.

“Well?” he prompted insistently, squeezing his arm.

“Well what?” the brunet hummed absently as his gaze drifted back to the discontented Nagisa. “Oh! Oh, right. Erm... uh... You’re pretty as always,” he tried lamely. He rolled his eyes and heaved a dramatic sigh.

“Right, thanks,” the blond responded sarcastically. He released the older man, turning backwards to face him, and more seriously asked, “Is something on your mind? You’re being such a busybody tonight.” The attorney shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose and furrowed his brow in frustration.

“I was just thinking,” he replied, making a go at his boyfriend’s mitten hand again. He pulled away, placing both on his hips, and giving the man quite the scolding stare.

“Then tell me what about,” he pressed. “I get that you like to think, but dates are designated ‘us’ time, not ‘you’ time.”

“It’s really nothing,” Rei insisted, considerably flustered by the irritable boy before him, “it’s just, I realized you were getting hard to be around and I was thinking of my ex and -” He stopped hastily as an offended look began to eclipse the blond’s pretty features. “No - no, not like that, that came out entirely wrong,” he groaned as the writer began to leave him behind. “Goodness, this is why I’m always thinking, it comes out wrong when I don’t!” He caught Nagisa’s hand and took a deep
breath, pulling him over to the exit of the rink as their hour came to a close. “Let’s - let’s just go somewhere else, where I can actually talk to you,” he pleaded, placing a hand on his forehead.

“Well if you insist,” the smaller man grumbled, stepping off the rink and onto dry land. He removed his skates rapidly, not waiting for Rei, and began marching toward a less-used path that wasn’t part of the fair. A minute later, a panting lawyer joined him, trying again to take his hand. The blond left it limp, but didn’t pull away this time.

“I just meant that it’s been hard to be with you,” he explained, attempting to look his boyfriend in the eye, “because we haven’t had any private time for just us two. Everywhere we go is filled with all sorts of people, and we run into everyone we know, and I really just hoped for some peace, some time to just be exclusively for us.” The haughty man deflated, giving in, and meeting his lover’s blue gaze. “And, well, my ex isn’t important, I was just thinking of how much more I love you and how fortunate I am to have you with me.” When the blond didn’t reply right away, he tacked on an awkward apology. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ruin our time together.”

“You didn’t ruin it,” he mumbled at last, leaning into the taller man’s chest. “You just should’ve told me earlier, we could’ve done something else.”

“We still can,” he offered, petting his lovely hair, “if you want to. I don’t want to leave you on a bitter note.” At this, the writer scoffed.

“You have to fix it, anyways, and I won’t leave till you do,” he informed the brunet. With a relieved sigh, the man took his hand firmly and turned away from the carnival attraction and down a darker path.

“Let’s take a walk then, shall we? Just like the end of our first date.” The memory made Nagisa grin fondly as his boyfriend indulged him and held him close.

They strolled around the outer edges of the park, past frozen ponds and under naked, trembling trees. That silence was so difficult for the blond, but the older man grew more relaxed with each step they took and he found that this Rei he could easily embrace as the time passed. Their breaths billowed out in cloudy dances but every now and then, as they stopped walking between to lampposts, those white rolls of their breaths would mingle sweetly. The night around them was cold and clear, dotted with distant rhinestone stars like winter snowflakes. With each step, the park grew blacker, calmer, and they were guided only by the glow of the stars and their ivory breathing. For a long while, they stayed like that, under the spangled, bare branches, until Rei thought it wise to check the time.

“It’s past eleven,” he murmured to his rosy-eyed date. “We ought to be on our way.” He only offered a quietly stunned “oh” in response as they turned tail and found their way back to his car. The blond had forgotten this comfortable, confident man in the throes of holiday excitement, family, and the ease of progression. This was the one who had kissed him under the red maple and the one who took him dancing in pajamas and the one who had left such an empty feeling in his heart after a first evening of crosswords in the rain, so many months ago.

These were the thoughts that kept him quiet all throughout the ride home. The pair held hands all the way up to Nagisa’s front step, drifting to a stop in front of his house, as the orange glow of street lamps leaked through the forming fog. Neither one was quite ready to leave the other.

“I missed this,” the blond confessed, wrapping his arms around the other man’s neck. “I forgot how nice it was to just be together and all.” Rei simply nodded, but the pair stayed as still as the stars in the midnight sky. Enthralled by his lover’s lips, he bit his own to keep from stealing a kiss. His heart began to throb in his chest against his soft pink sweater and his nails sunk into the older man’s collar. He opened his mouth in a silent plea, but rather than what he thought to do, words bubbled up at his
lips like a fountain. “You’re welcome to stay,” he whispered, delicately handling the familiar words. “We could have a glass of wine or... something.” The enchanted, starry-eyed brunet held his gaze steadfast and serious, try as he did to look away.

“Yes... Yes, I would like that very much,” he murmured earnestly, his arms fastened tight around his lover’s. With shaky hands, the blond reached behind him to open the door for his partner. The house was dark and slightly chilled and, assuming his roommate was elsewhere, he sent the American a quick text warning him not to come home tonight. Or tomorrow morning, for that matter.

“Y-you can just have a seat on the couch,” Nagisa instructed nervously, gesturing weakly to his living room as he flicked the lights on. Rei removed his coat and sweater, draping them over a chair, before sitting on the sofa as the blond busied himself with picking his best red. He settled on a four-year-old Pinot Noir, popping the cork and pouring it out in a pair of glasses. “Here you are,” he said uselessly, joining his boyfriend. He considered it one of his most romantic wines, tasting of rose petals and cherry, and hoped it would do the trick.

They both tentatively sipped at the wine for a few minutes, neither quite sure of what to say. The more he drank, the warmer the blood in his body became. He noticed that the deep red stroked Rei’s tan lips sensually and he had to look away for a moment.

“I’m -” the blond stated out into the silence, setting his wine aside. “I’m just going to, um, get a little more comfortable.” He trotted into his room, thankful that he thought to clean it earlier in the day, and wriggled out of his constricting jean top, practically ripping it away from his throat. God, how hard it was to breathe! He used his pink sweater as a replacement.

The older man had finished his wine by the time his partner returned to sit awkwardly at the edge of his seat. They looked everywhere but at one another - the fireplace, the open cupboard, the half-finished glass of Nagisa’s wine practically gathering dust right in front of them. When at last they had nowhere else to stare but at one another, though, a tiny giggle spilling over the edge of the blond’s pretty lips dissolved the tension like sun did the fog. Simultaneously, the couple moved in closer.

They leaned into each other naturally, with the ease that could only come with hundreds of practiced kisses, entirely familiar with the feeling of their lips, but both hearts shivered like it was their first. The warmth of Nagisa's breath reflected straight off of Rei as they separated and floated back in kind. The brunet's hand hovered right by the tuck of the blond's waist, hidden by his draping pink sweater. His fingers trembled with hesitation, and while doing so they brushed the fabric and the cashmere grazed the skin of his hips. He uncertainly opened his lips to speak, but before a word was whispered, Nagisa breathlessly nodded his consent. Rei swallowed, taking the hem tentatively in those shivering fingers, but his partner's expectant gaze and his own pure curiosity overcame the unsure shake of his heart.

Nagisa flinched at the cold as he gently tugged it off, though his skin warmed with the wonder of new discovery glittering in Rei's starstruck eyes, so dark that they mirrored the glow of the blush spreading across his own little body, rising with each little breath. His hand hovered around every curve, at a loss as to where he should begin his exploration, before pressing curiously at the fold of his waist, where he had begun. They released a flinching breath together, and Rei nervously withdrew his hand.

"Sorry," he apologized uncertainly. "Was that - erm, was that all right?" Nagisa, his nerves having entirely dissipated in the familiar situation, was eager, already beginning to perspire at this thought which had crossed his mind so many times before.

"Yes, it's fine," he breathed, waiting with innocent expectancy for his next touch. He muttered awkwardly, mentioning something about the absurdity of it for this certainly was not his first sexual
encounter, and pushed his falling red glasses up the bridge of his nose. The blond shuffled over to Rei on his knees, bouncing softy where he sat, and the man rolled his blue eyes slightly, turning to face his beau as he recalled that he was with someone that loved him.

The attorney cupped his plump, creamy cheeks and pulled him in for a tender kiss. His boyfriend hummed into it, wrapping his arms around his neck with abandon, but a moment later, Rei eased him off. He took the pretty hands that trapped him, and the tickle of his kiss caused a sigh to slip from Nagisa's heart-shaped lips. His eyelids fluttered as he warmly progressed to his milky wrist, shivering at the affectionate gesture and nibbling at his lips. Rei noticed, but patiently bided his time with his creamy skin before returning to kiss those downy lips.

Now, the blond was not to be left out, and as such gifted him with a feather-light touch as his hands embraced every curve of the man's tanned arms. He was as soft as chiffon in his movements and Rei trembled in reply.

"It's not nice to tease," the blond explained softly, ignoring that he'd done just that to the lawyer. He received a noncommittal 'hmm' as a response and it was evident that Rei elected not to listen. Not that Nagisa particularly minded, of course, when the brunet folded both arms around the small of his back, dropped his face to his collarbone, and trailed his wet tongue along his partner's peachy skin. The younger man blossomed like a flower with a cherry blush as those violet eyes strolled naturally to the hug of his shoulder, and his butterfly kisses were soon to follow. Nagisa's chest surged into him as a moist moan leaked out into the atmosphere for want of something more, as every touch had been too gentle thus far. Ever the gentleman, Rei responded by allowing his hands to travel downward, grazing the surface of his nipples so lightly that despite their sensitivity, the blond was unsure if it had really happened. He began to sweat when Rei deliberately pressed his finger down, his eyes half-liddedly touching the blond's blushing creme skin.

His curiosity soon switched focus as he finished exploring Nagisa's chest. The blond gave a trembling "oh!" as he tentatively drew his long fingers down to his navel, tickling the peachy hair along his stomach and causing Nagisa to flinch from the warm brush of his hand upon the cool skin that remained achingly curious for his partner's touch. His breathless sighs tickled the brunet's short hair as he reached for Rei's shirt, twisting the buttons around until they popped open. The older man meanwhile had cupped his hands around Nagisa's hips and was rubbing them deeply until his white shirt fell open around him. When he sent one final uncertain glance his way, he was met with a steady, roseatte gaze, one that asked no questions, but that gave the permission to continue with his discoveries. Rei reached for Nagisa's jeans.

The blond's grip upon his partner's shirt tightened with the new sensation of hands rubbing his now awakening cock through his pants. He bit his bottom lip with great force - he hadn't known Rei would be such a tease. "Oh, Rei!" he whined wantonly, pressing his barely-there erection against the curve of the brunet's palm in order to get himself fully hard. The lawyer, seeming to have understood the message, tugged the zipper down and undid the button. In a shivering haze, Nagisa could only watch and twist his fists into the white fabric of the shirt.

Rei's eyes widened when he was faced with a pink bulge, hidden under ruffles and ivory polka dots. Shit. Nagisa had completely forgotten. "Um," he trailed, trying to wiggle his way out of Rei's hand that still held the small of his back, but the other man only pulled him closer, laughing breathlessly, until the blond was upon his lap and their foreheads knocked together.

"How sentimental of you," he commented, a finger teasing at the band. "I didn’t think you’d planned this out, but you must have if you picked these ones." They snapped back at his hips as the attorney released them.
"I did not!" he protested earnestly, crossing his arms defensively over his damp chest. The rubbing thumb said more to the lie than the attorney ever could. He explained desperately, "Well, not really - it's just that I feel cuter in them and I wanted confidence for tonight. Anyways," he proceeded quickly, vying for the upper hand, "you don't seem brave enough to take them off."

When he removed his arms from the blond's waist and penis, the blond was convinced he'd offended Rei with his haughtiness. He reached for his shoulders, but found that he was merely removing his red glasses.

"I'm near-sighted," he stated as he folded them up and placed them upon the coffee table, "and thank God for it, otherwise I'd never be able to deal with those glasses slipping all over the place."

"I didn't think it mattered that much," he replied, wrapping his downy, white hands around Rei's neck. He looked down at the attorney questioningly.

"It does," he admitted emphatically, his arms settling back at the small of his partner's back. "I'm very fortunate, not needing my glasses during sex, otherwise I -" he cut himself off and just as the blond thought he'd need to pry, he finished, "I wouldn't be able to see you. And believe me," he said, tracing his fingers over the edge of the writer's growing bulge. Nagisa's mouth opened and soft sounds spilled out, blanketed by Rei's low, vibrato voice. "I want to watch." His pale eyelashes fluttered at the declaration, but he wouldn't be outdone. His hips surged down into his boyfriend's and the brunet let out a stunning cry. He pressed his bare chest against the smaller man's, whose back fell away like a riverbend.

“What do you want to watch?” he asked innocently, having fallen back from his position of advantage. His sunrise, doe-eyed gaze was misty as the morning and Rei’s cloudy wisteria stare stroked his lover’s body before his hands followed in kind, massaging every dip and roll in the blond’s body. The man didn’t need to respond.

“You’re too good for a couch,” he stated, ignoring his boyfriend’s taunts. The attorney slipped his white shirt off of his sweating body, dropping it on the sofa, and lifted his young partner up from where he lay. The bedroom door was open, so it certainly wasn’t difficult to find in the dark. Gently, he placed the blond’s body upon the translucent white sheets, crawling up over him immediately after. Light permeating through the closed curtains coated his sweaty body, and his chest swelled like a golden wave below him.

“So beautiful,” the man whispered, stroking Nagisa’s bare shoulders for a moment. He rid himself of his own undergarments, casting them off onto the floor while never once looking away from that small, wanton man below him. He leaned down to kiss the blond’s sensuous lips, releasing a whimper of his own as their hot, silken tongues melted against one another. The blond tasted the bitter hint of wine.

Rei busied himself elsewhere, passively allowing the kiss to happen, but focused on his fingers sinking into Nagisa’s milky, rotund thigh. He tightened his fingers in the brunet’s royal blue hair, forcibly tying him to the languid, lazy kiss.

“Please,” Nagisa begged, opening his eyes and meeting the lawyer’s equally pleading navy stare, “oh God, Rei.” His shivering arm reached back into the bedside table for lubricant and a condom and when he found what he desired, he tossed them haphazardly at the older man.

He made quick work of slipping the condom on over his long cock and coating his fingers with a sheen of clear lubricant. The half-lidded blond wrapped his thighs around his lover’s neck as with one hand he toyed with his pretty, pale hard-on and massaged his hot hole with the other. When a sweaty finger slipped in, Nagisa moaned delightedly, his back arching off of the mattress and his
hands tangling in the sheets. The brunet wiggled it around some, stroking his younger partner’s erection with greater speed until he managed to slide in a second. The writer’s thighs tightened around him as he explored the walls with lazy thrusts of his long digits until a scream told him he found what he needed.

“Ohhhhh! Oh please, do it, do it again,” the blond pleaded, his hips curling up towards that sensation. His boyfriend forced in a third finger and twisted them around like a corkscrew, in time with Nagisa’s cries. He stretched them apart a few times, watching the luxurious image unfold below him for a few throbbing heartbeats before he pulled them out, leaving the young blond’s body aching with delicious want.

The emptiness was there for but a brief moment until, digging his fingers into either side, Rei pulled Nagisa’s hips onto his stiff member. The head twitched tentatively against the smaller man’s prostate and, dragging a breath into his lips like breeze, his entire body shivered. He pulled out almost all the way, the tight walls collapsing as he did, and let out a ragged sigh before guiding those wide hips back to his own. His nails dug into Nagisa’s firm ass.

“Oh my God,” Rei groaned, folding himself over the smaller man’s thin body. The blond in kind wrapped his arms around his neck, pulling him into his chest. His deliberate, languid movements gave way to instinctive pounding against his beau’s peach-blushing bottom, the moist sound of skin slapping skin muting the lustrous moans. Perspiration drip-dropped into the hollow of Nagisa’s collarbone as their bodies tangled like an ocean wave in the sand.

“I l-l-love you,” the younger man whimpered into his boyfriend’s ear. He dropped his head into his blond’s neck and sucked and nipped at the cream skin.

“I love you,” he murmured hoarsely, hands freely roaming all over his pale navel, thighs, and hips. He bit his lip, gripping the boy’s dick and milking it in time with his noisy thrusts. The blond felt Rei’s cock swell larger and in response practically threw his hips back at it, his body rolling with the heat of pure white delight. Rei tossed his cock as deep as possible into the blond’s tightening cavern, allowing the muscles to rid himself of all the cum in one go.

Like a sigh, they both collapsed onto the bed, shaking, hot, and wet. Nagisa obligingly removed the condom, tying it shut and shamelessly tossing it over the edge of the bed. He lay there, shivering and dirty, until the brunet made himself move, licking away all of his boyfriend’s fluids. When their eyes next met, they both asked simply, what now? Their bodies answered.

They fell asleep.
Morning After

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ivory light poured over the bed from a crack between the curtains. Blue shadows fell in valley of Nagisa’s warm, pale back and over the snow-white sheets. His naked torso was draped over his boyfriend’s, tied firmly in place by his unrelenting arms. With a sleepy hum, he peeked up through his lashes only to find that he was quite awake himself. The blond’s pretty lips opened in a delicate smile.

“Were you just watching me?” he teased drowsily, plopping his head back down on Rei’s broad chest.

“Revenge,” he justified, as the younger man had already had his turn many nights ago. “Now, up you go,” he insisted, shimmying away from his weight. “It’s about time we got breakfast.” The attorney rolled out of bed, leaving his partner cold and pouting, and searched the floor for his discarded underwear and pants. Disgustedly, he came across the evening’s used condom. He shook his head and tossed it out as the younger man tried to push himself up.

“Ooooh, ow, ow, ow,” the blond moaned before Rei could criticize his cleaning habits as he tried and failed to flex his muscles into standing. His boyfriend shot him a worried look.

“Are you all right? Did I hurt you? I probably didn’t prepare sufficiently…” he scolded himself, sitting by the edge of the bed and taking his hand.

“I’m fine,” he murmured, slipping back onto the sheets with a grimace. “There was no way to avoid it, I haven’t been fucked in forever. It’s been about six months, so I just haven’t had my muscles stretched in a while.” Rei leaned over to kiss his nose pleasantly.

“You stay here then, I’ll make us some breakfast.” Nagisa fluttered his lashes teasingly.

“A morning in! Are you sure you’ve got the time?”

“This is the one day I do,” he insisted, leaving the blond on his own with the promise to return with something tasty. In the meantime, however, the poor writer had to cope with being on his own! He burried himself in the pillows, tugging a thin sheet over his sore body (what a workout it had been), and vanished into memories of the night.

Nagisa hadn’t a clue what had made Rei give in to the idea of sex, considering his previous reluctance, but he could let that go if it wouldn’t stand in their way now. The gentle way he’d embraced him, those wondrous blue eyes stroking his body as hotly as his hands ever could...! Even now he was rose red from his ears to his shoulders in a pleased blush. He’d had some amazing sex in his lifetime, but somehow he couldn’t picture anything better than that night. And, as the dorky brunet himself entered the room with a tray, backing through the doorway, he realized that perhaps it wasn’t the sex that had been important that night, but the love.

“Here we are,” Rei told him, interrupting one of his rare, introspective moments to place the meal over his lap. He joined him a moment later, pants thankfully discarded (though he couldn’t say the same for the boxers, what a pity). He’d composed it beautifully of toast, some pieces with different kinds of jams and others with butter, some fatty pieces of bacon, and some fresh-squeezed orange juice (the blond liked to treat himself around the winter time - oranges were harvested in the cold
season, after all). He was surprised when he noticed a couple wet perennials in a vase. “I didn’t want the snow to kill them, so I picked some - I hope you don’t mind…”

“It snowed?” Nagisa enthused, automatically trying to rush to the window to see. He didn’t get far. “Ugh ouch, nevermind. Would you?” The blond gestured to his curtains and Rei obligingly left and opened them to reveal a glittering landscape, coated in head to toe, and likely near a meter deep! “Oh my God!”

“The weight would’ve crushed them otherwise. I haven’t seen this much snow since I lived in Essex.”

“An early Christmas miracle, then,” he giggled as the lawyer rejoined him on the bed and they munched around the breakfast. Near his glass were a couple of ibuprofen tablets - Rei was honestly the best - and he took them for what relief they could offer. The older man took and cleaned the dishes once they’d finished, but returned to keep the bed-bound blond company, of course. And with that came an opportunity to talk. “So,” Nagisa stated, curling into his boyfriend’s chest, “we had sex last night.”

“So we did,” the brunet agreed, awkwardly pushing his retrieved glasses up his nose.

“You seemed pretty adamantly against it at first. What’s with the sudden change?” he wondered. Now that he’d had a taste of what it’d be like with his lover, he wasn’t certain how patient he could be until next time - he would, of course, try though, no matter what.

“I was not adamantly against it, I was simply -”

“You’re changing the subject,” he pointed out in a sing-song voice. Rei snorted, mentioning that he hadn’t meant to. How detailed he was, Nagisa noted, doing things like giving him flowers and breakfast in bed, but being so nit-picky over a word!

“It’s quite a story, to be honest,” Rei confessed, twirling a pattern over the pale boy’s shoulder. Meekly, he met the lawyer’s blue eyes, and the silence prompted him to continue. “Don’t hold it against him when you meet him, but my brother used to take me to all sorts of... unsavory functions while he was in university. When I was sixteen, he brought me to a particularly rowdy party after I’d been feeling down in school - I was being bullied without him around, see.” His eyes took on a sad hue in their depths, but he did not turn away from his love. “There was a girl there and with some convincing, we slept together. It was entirely consensual, of course, but I’ve always regretted it, losing my virginity like that.” He sifted through tangled, golden locks with his hand, careful not to hurt the younger man more than he already had. After a lapse in speech, he was able to continue wistfully, “She just left me in the morning. I didn’t know her name and I never saw her again. Ever since then, I’ve had trouble having sex with people that I’m unsure about. I like to know that I love my partner - and that he loves me.”

“Oh, Rei - I’m sorry,” he apologized, rolling onto the man’s stomach and hugging him like he might a teddy bear. “I promise I’ll always be there when you wake up,” he vowed. In response, the man chuckled, embracing his beau in return, and informed him, “I may regret it, but it’s not a bad memory. Not good, but not bad, either. And honestly,” he blushed deeply, “I might’ve been convinced sooner if it weren’t for my ex. I, erm, mentioned him the other day.” Curious, Nagisa’s downy head propped up, inviting another explanation. “I actually thought that we would get married,” he admitted, making his current boyfriend’s blood run cold, “and we’d certainly talked about it. We’d been together for two years, but he broke up with me because he said I didn’t really satisfy his needs.”

“You didn’t? God, how? Last night was incredible!” he interjected, crossing his arms over Rei’s
chest and placing his chin on them. Red in the cheeks, the brunet thanked him and replied he felt the same.

“To be honest,” he disclosed, “I’m worried you might leave me for the same reason.” Immediately shedding his playful, exaggerated tone, and instinctively gripping him tighter, Nagisa declared, “I won’t do that, you know. You were perfect.”

“Well, you thought so this time, but I’m apparently quite uncreative,” he revealed, shyly eyeing him to gauge a reaction. “You just seemed so fun and teasing that I wasn’t really sure how you’d put up with repetition.” Relieved, the blond heaved a great sigh, relinquishing his hold on his pectoral muscles.

“Oh, definitely don’t worry then, I’m plenty *creative* for the both of us,” he assured, kissing the man’s jaw flirtatiously. “But if you were really that committed, why didn’t you talk about it? Seems like he was just looking for a way out,” he pointed out, turning up his nose at the idea of anyone else loving Rei like *he* did.

“We did,” the older man replied emphatically, “we tried new positions, but it wasn’t enough, I guess.” Like the flip of a coin, the blond’s mood flipped from haughty to insecure and, biting his bottom slightly, he proceeded with much less certainty.

“It used to,” he replied easily, “and I used to think that all the time, even with the next couple men I dated. Obviously, they didn’t last long. But it was funny - I stopped thinking about him when I met you.” The blond’s heart glowed deeply and he prompted a quick ‘really?’ with a nod from Rei. “I didn’t even realize it at first, but when I did, I was more shocked at just how easy it was for you. In fact,” he laughed, “I was only realizing it last night. Even when I did, the first thing on my mind wasn’t that I missed him - it was that you had completely monopolized my thoughts!” He brushed aside the sunny blond’s bangs and informed him, “That’s why I said I was fortunate to have you - I could be stuck in a miserable marriage, but I’ve got you instead.” He soaked up the praise like light and showered his lover with kisses.

“If you want, we can get creative now,” Nagisa offered up in reply, partially in thanks, but mostly because he had a deep ache that begged to be filled. The only way to stop the pain was to keep on exercising those muscles, right? Rei colored at the prospect, kissing the top of his head, but explained, “Maybe later - right now I’m rather concerned about the snow, in fact... We both have work tomorrow, after all, but you live far away from my house and your workplace.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right,” Nagisa acknowledged, clearly miffed by the circumstances. “I guess you should go before it gets worse, huh?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of *we* should go, actually,” he pointed out, glancing uncertainly out the window. “You can just stay at my place until this lets up, can’t you? It is closer after all, and I have a car. It’s easier than public transport, a bit more reliable, you know?” Nagisa rolled over onto his stomach and gave a teasing grin.

“Oooh, you just wanna get *naughty* for a few days, don’t you? Using the weather as an excuse, how terrible.”

“I mean no such thing -”

“And here I was, thinking you were honest!” Rei thumped himself on the bed, mockingly irritated,
and pinned his boyfriend down, using a free arm to tickle his bare sides.

“What’s that you’re saying?” he joked as the boy beneath him squirmed and squealed, “I’m afraid I didn’t catch it.” He wriggled himself out from the man’s grasp, sticking out his tongue, and sat by the pillows.

“You’re dirtier than you look,” he told him, his face having gone red with mild arousal. He noted that his lover’s face was exceptionally pink as well and that his glasses had gone crooked. Rei straightened them.

“If that’s what you think,” he shrugged, standing up and picking his clothes up from the floor. “I need to dig out my car. Why don’t you pack a bag and then we’ll be right over there.”

The blond snorted. “There’s no way anything’ll be moving in this weather. We should just call a cab.” The brunet gave a frustrated sigh, tossing his sweater over a partially buttoned shirt, and began searching the house for a shovel.

“While I’m working, then, go ahead and get your stuff together, won’t you? It might be a few days that you’re there, after all.”

“Don’t be an ass, I can’t move after you pounded me last night,” Nagisa insisted, clutching his naked bum in mock pain. The attorney shot him a vexed glance.

“I swear, you’re such a child sometimes.” He got ahold of a shovel and dug out some of the snow around his car, then busied himself with the dishes all while his boyfriend splayed himself out naked on the bed, using his laptop to begin brainstorming for his January article. Once Rei finished all of the chores, he dug through the younger man’s closet and found a seldom-used gym bag which he tossed on the bed. “I’ll just... erm, pull out some clothes, then? Does it matter?” The blond laughed, for lack of any better way to express his horror without offending his boyfriend.

“Yes,” he replied emphatically, “it does.” He though for a moment, thinking up some versatile pieces, and told Rei, “Okay, first outfit - find my three-quarter sleeve dusty-pink shirt, brown pleated skirt, a thin black belt, and my stockings with black polka dots. Also my rain hat, it’s wide-brimmed and brown. Oh, also there’s a necklace in the bathroom that should be the same color as the shirt. That too.” Slightly overwhelmed, the brunet nodded and repeated the list back, turning back to the closet while his boyfriend twirled himself up in the sheets, watching with amusement. He was impressed that the man managed to find his skirt rather quickly, but the rest, not so much. “No, no, that’s red, it’s a pink shirt. Cotton, you know? Form-fitting, no buttons,” he informed the lawyer as he pulled out another ridiculous article of clothing. “Ugh, who could wear that with brown?” he commented offhandedly as the man put it back where it belonged.

“Why wouldn’t you? I thought it looked fine,” he replied uncertainly.

“Red looks better with black, first of all - that’s a totally classy combo. And my skirt had a really, like, colorful brown color, you know? The red and the brown would be too clashing. It looks good with camel, though. But I have to dress down the color of the skirt.”

“Oh,” he said, clearly not understanding a word that was just said. He shrugged, finally pulled out the right shirt and tossed it over before looking for the next thing on the list. Nagisa folded it, stuffing it beside the skirt and belt and wedging a pair of scrunch boots in. After that one, Rei brought him black slacks, a black shirt with white polka dots, and some red accessories (he was learning!). He tossed in a few pairs of underwear, a practical sweater or two, and toiletries, finishing up with his laptop and charger. “Get dressed,” he told his boyfriend who whined but complied nonetheless - his sweats, sneakers, a long-sleeved tee, and a fashionable coat didn’t quite make the perfect outfit, but
he could tolerate it, he figured, when Rei noticed his wincing steps and carried him bridal-style to the car. “All right, if you insist on being that way,” he said, “then up you go.”

“You’re a romantic after all,” the blond praised as he bent over to open the door for his burdened boyfriend. The attorney shuffled through the snow, placing his beau gently in the seat before returning for Nagisa’s bag. He took care to lock the door behind him (and if Haruka needed to get in, well, he had his own key).

In the end, it took them more than twice the time as usual to get even remotely close and by the time they’d reached the Kensington Gardens, they’d given up, parking as close as they could to Rei’s home, and decided to walk the rest of the way.

Well, Rei had walked anyhow. Poor Nagisa was still feeling sore (all right, maybe he stretched the truth a bit) and had to be carried. They agreed piggyback was easier, and the smaller man took the liberty to cuddle particularly close, rubbing himself against his hard-working boyfriend, whispering soft sweet nothings in his ear and kissing his neck gently.

The world around them was quiet, drowsy, without anyone around to disturb the glittering landscape. All sounds of traffic had stopped to be replaced with the music box melody of falling snowflakes. The blond felt that Rei had not heard his compliments and, not holding it against him, looked into the white sky with the grey snow like a dream. The brunet had a lot to think about, he realized, and he ought not distract from it. Silence was the best gift he could give at this time for Rei. A shade of anxiety fell on his heart - the lawyer didn’t regret it, did he? - and he buried his face in the crook of the man’s neck to chase the thoughts away.

When they reached the complex, they found the doorman diligently clearing out a path by the sidewalk. He greeted them, abandoning his work to open the door for the couple, and left them be with that.

“All right,” Rei said, unhooking his arms from the blond’s legs and letting him hit the floor. “I can’t carry you up the stairs. I’ll take your bag, though.”

They struggled through the halls and into the attorney’s flat, making no small amount of noise, try as he might to silence the blond’s giggles. Nagisa was about to make good on his promise of creativity when his boyfriend received an interrupting call.

“Oh, it’s my brother, I ought to take this,” he mumbled, collapsing from exhaustion onto his couch, never mind the fact that they hadn’t even begun talking. He answered it in Japanese with a wary, “Hello, this is Rei speaking.” Curious, Nagisa leaned over the back of the couch, massaging Rei’s shoulders with his mischievous little fingers. A moment later, he wished he hadn’t. A loud, crackling shout from the other end caused him to jump back in surprise, while poor Rei already seemed terribly used to it. Upon hearing a staticky cry of “Tanjoubiomedetou, Rei-chan!” Nagisa realized, with the blood draining from his face, that today was the brunet’s birthday.

“Rei, why didn’t you tell me?!” he burst with no regard for the conversation at hand. The attorney moved the phone away and guiltily plead, “Not now, Nagisa.” The blond no longer picked up any individual words, but it sounded as though Rei’s brother had turned inquiring and he piped down with a pout. His boyfriend grimaced at what seemed like a barrage of questions. Begrudgingly, he answered, “Yes, that was him.” He paused, and when he continued he sounded quite affronted. “No, you certainly cannot!” Curious, Nagisa inched up in an attempt to eavesdrop on the conversation, earning a scolding glance from Rei as he listened to his brother’s protests. Eventually, the crackling voice on the other end grew so loud that not even the attorney could withstand it. “All right, fine! But just for a minute.” He turned to face Nagisa, obviously irritated, and said, “He wants to talk to you.”
“Really?!” He stole the phone in a flash, his face creased with concentration. Meeting his family was a big step, even if it wasn’t in person. “Hello? Nagisa Hazuki speaking!” he greeted in a chipper tone.

“So you’re the new guy, huh?” came a slurred, cheerful voice. “He taking good care of you?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Ryugazaki!” Nagisa smiled widely and Rei peeked over, appearing most suspicious of the whole ordeal. “There’s just one problem,” he continued teasingly, meeting his boyfriend’s gaze. “He didn’t tell me today was his birthday.”

“Really? What a dick,” he joked. “Do you have a present?” The blond grinned mischievously and he saw Rei stiffen considerably.

“You better believe I have the best gift; it’s called punishment.” He hung up, his declaration followed by prolonged silence from Rei.

“... Well, it was a rude way to do it, but I suppose I should thank you for getting rid of him,” he concluded wryly, relaxing back into the sofa. Nagisa ignored him, a scheming grin upon his face as he approached his boyfriend with a sway in his hips, sore as they may have been.

“Rei, it’s freezing in here,” the blond complained, tossing his arms around his boyfriend’s neck. “Let’s warm up!” The attorney arched an eyebrow.

“And in what way do you intend to do that?” he interrogated, resisting the younger man’s wiles and causing him quite the frustration.

“Well, how about a bath? C’mon, your bathroom is huge, I bet we can both fit,” he begged. His lovely lashes trembled prettily, and reluctantly, the older man allowed himself to be pulled up the stairs by his forward little beau.
flushed back to the air.

“Just use this,” he implored, sending a lewd glance his way.

“I don’t think that’s very safe,” he replied skeptically, eyeing the blue bottle warily. Nagisa let out a breathy, high moan.

“It’ll be fine, I’ve used it loads of times. It just doesn’t work with condoms, but we don’t have one anyways.” Before he could protest to that, he whined, “And we’re both fine, so we don’t need one now, do we?” He glanced back, his rose colored eyes imploring and wanton, as he wiggled his shimmering behind.

“If it won’t hurt you, then,” Rei agreed. The blond settled down, his eyes sleepily drifting shut. A soft pop and plip told him that his boyfriend had begun slicking up his fingers, but he let out a soft yelp when they prodded at his entrance. Quickly as they were there, the fingers pulled back. “Are you all right?” the lawyer asked, stroking his hips with his dry hand.

“Yeah, it was just much colder than I thought it’d be.” Satisfied that it had been nothing serious, he slipped his long, gentle digits back to his ass. The first two slid in with considerable ease - Nagisa was still fairly stretched from the night before - and the third brought no pain, only a comfortable feeling of being filled. When Rei began to scissor him out slowly, there was a hint of a burn, but in the warm bathtub, he was so relaxed that it hardly mattered to him.

“You feel ready to me,” the brunet assessed, pulling out. Nagisa ‘hmm ’ed in agreement and peeked over his shoulder to ask, “Do you wanna do it like this, or how we were before? I want you to feel your best today.” Rei passed him a small smile. “I rather liked you in my lap, but I’ll consider myself happy when we’re both feeling our best, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re so sweet,” the blond commended as he turned around. With the older man’s guiding hands upon his waist, he slipped comfortably onto his member. He tossed his head back, breathing in the steam, and Rei wrapped his arms around his back to keep him pressed close. His hips rolled gently in a circular motion, sending a relaxed sort of pleasure pulsing through Nagisa’s smaller body. He reckoned it felt something like a massage in a sauna - the height of luxurious love.

As they picked up a lazy, gentle rhythm, the hot water stirred around, occasionally spilling into the blond’s well-stretched hole. He found he didn’t mind the sensation either, and each time a little more poured in, he sighed. Rei must have been enjoying as well; he kissed Nagisa’s slick neck tender, sweet, practically drinking the water from his skin.

“I love you,” the lawyer murmured, his thumbs rubbing circles into his back, but his beau could only moan his agreement. The brunet opened his mouth to speak again - Nagisa could feel it - but stopped himself before he did.

“What?” the younger man breathed, gently moving Rei’s head away from his neck, cupping his cheeks. Their eyes met. Unnaturally red, Rei blurted, “Can I cum inside you?” Not used to his lover being demanding of him in any way, Nagisa laughed gently and smiled.

“Of course you can! Honestly, it’s your birthday, you think I’d say no to you today?” He tapped their foreheads together and his fingers stroked the soft edges of the lawyer’s cheeks. Rei didn’t speed up, but each thrust was deliberate and strong, making the blond want to melt into the bath. They kept their eyes on one another. Both of them were red from heat, from embarrassment, but Nagisa had never experienced such a unique sense of intimacy, looking into those dark midnight eyes.
It didn’t take long until he felt a thicker, hotter substance pouring from his boyfriend’s dick in contrast to the water. Nagisa allowed him to rest a few moments, affectionately running his hands through his hair, before the two of them finally stumbled out of the bath and onto the cold marble floor.

“Now just one more detail,” Rei hummed, having recovered his energy.

“What’s that?” the blond asked, his hot body at last quite comfortable. The lawyer smirked, his large hand wrapping around Nagisa’s still quite-active erection.

“I think I’ll enjoy taking care of this,” he replied, removing his hands and pushing his smaller boyfriend onto the cold tiled floor. A moment later, the brunet’s mouth was on his dick, causing him to tense up.

“Oh...” he sighed, the damp strands of his curly hair slapping the ground. The lawyer gave it a few preliminary licks before commenting, “Feel free to cum inside if you want to as well,” and getting down to business.

He was a tease; that much Nagisa could determine. Rei kissed and licked and lapped, using the soft sensations to spark the arousal further and leave him squirming. When at last his lips fully enveloped the blond’s erection, he couldn’t help but thrust up slightly, scraping the back of his boyfriend’s throat.

“Oh my God, Rei,” he moaned, one hand tangling itself as well as it possibly could into a fallen towel and the other reaching to cover his mouth. Both the cold marble floor and the droplets evaporating on his skin caused goose bumps all over, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel the cold with his boyfriend’s hot attention. The brunet’s hand reached up to his nipples, rolling them around in time with his tongue. The contrasting sensations were too much. With another involuntary thrust, he came in the back of Rei’s throat, his face warm and red as he watched the lawyer swallow, deliberately looking into Nagisa’s rosy eyes as he did. The blond’s hand flew from his mouth to his eyes.

“Rei,” he whined, “why do you have to be so sexy?” He heard a deep laugh, and in a moment his cooling body was wrapped in a towel and in a pair of strong arms. He opened his eyes.

“I could ask the same of you.” The older man’s expression was erotic, his lips shining and his cheeks painted red.

“Ugh, stop, ” Nagisa begged, burying his blushing face in Rei’s naked chest. His complaints were followed by a rumble in his stomach which only served to embarrass him more, and only caused his boyfriend to laugh more.

“All right, let’s have a late lunch then. Are you okay to dry yourself off?” he asked as he gently placed the blond on his feet. “I can make us a quick something while you do that,” he offered, already shaking his shorter hair dry and starting for his room to get dressed.

The blond took his time drying his longer curly locks, combing them out to prevent the tangles that often came with air drying or sex on the bathroom floor. By the time he finished, he was rather sleepy and a bit chilled, but couldn’t be bothered to nap when there was food waiting for him. He assumed he’d have sex with Rei after replenishing his energy, however, so he didn’t dress before heading down the stairs.

“Darling, I turned up the thermostat, it really was chill - good gracious , Nagisa, why haven’t you put on your clothes!?” the attorney demanded as he brought over a food-laden tray. The blond
sprawled himself on the couch, pulling the deer-patterned throw over his body.

“We’re just gonna fuck again later, what would be the point?” he replied lazily. Nagisa peered over
the edge of the blanket and saw that Rei had brought over melted dark and milk chocolate, strawberries, matcha, oranges... all kinds of sweet treats!

“Ooooh, that’s just lovely,” he sighed with more stars in his eyes than when he ever looked at Rei -
but lucky for him, his boyfriend just laughed the look off.

“I was thinking back on our first date and thought it might be nice share dessert like we did then,” the
lawyer confessed, settling in beside his beau. He turned the TV onto his old movie channel -
tonight’s film was White Christmas - and wrapped an arm around Nagisa. The blond dipped a piece
of matcha into the melted dark chocolate, having learned that his boyfriend preferred bitter flavors to
sweet, and offered it up to him. Rei glanced away from the screen and, eyes focused on Nagisa’s,
wrapped his lips around his fingers to eat the dessert. Finding an immediate rhythm, he returned the
favor with a chocolate soaked strawberry, his fingers softly stroking the younger man’s mouth. Now,
the blond couldn’t let himself be outdone. Red in the face, he rolled a strawberry in dark chocolate
and placed it between his teeth, leaning into his boyfriend with a pleading look on his face. The
molten liquid burned his lips. Rei was pulled in by the black, gold, and crimson image, and they
shared a bittersweet kiss. Every ploy pulled by Nagisa Rei eagerly fell into, and the delectable treats
fast ran low. By the time they were finished, the blond’s cherubic face was filthy, giving him the
appearance of a misbehaved child. His growling stomach didn’t improve the mood much either, and
gave the attorney a laugh.

“We have to do something else about dinner,” he chuckled, pulling away from their embrace.

“No we don’t,” Nagisa protested, ignoring the low rumble in his stomach and Rei’s subsequent raise
of an eyebrow. The brunet shocked him by kissing him hard and fast, nearly toppling him over in the
meantime.

“If you want energy for the rest of the night, then yes, we do.” Rei got up, turned towards the
kitchen, and left his boyfriend to pout, a blush blossoming over his entire body. That certainly wasn’t
fair, the blond thought, dipping his fingers into the remaining milk chocolate.

A rattle in the doorway startled Nagisa away from the food. His soft blanket slipped away from his
shoulders slightly and who should he come face to face with, as he peeked over the sofa’s edge, but
an older couple that appeared as shocked as he felt. He had the decency to recall that underneath the
throw, he was naked. His jaw went slack. Theirs did as well.

"Mum?!!" The dumbfounded trio turned to Rei, who appeared
nothing short of horrified. "Dad? What on earth are you two doing here?"

"These are your parents?!!" Nagisa blurted, heat prickling uncomfortably from his toes to his ears.
Mortified, he tugged the morsel of protection over his shoulders and made a mad dash upstairs,
shouting something along the lines of an 'excuse me'. Behind him he heard a muffled "that was
Nagisa", causing him to dive headfirst into humiliation like it was a dumpster. Did Rei have to say it
like that? He practically slammed the bedroom door in an attempt to create a wall, no matter how
flimsy, between him and his embarrassment. Collapsing against it, the blond heaved a shaky sigh,
cast his gaze about the room, and promptly realized he'd left his bag downstairs in the doorway.

A few moments later, a knock sounded behind him and he heard his boyfriend speak. "I've got your
bag - do you want to get changed?"

"Yes," he groaned miserably, rolling aside as the brunet opened the door. Rei appeared somewhat
sheepish himself as he handed the bag over.

"Sorry," he apologized, "I completely forgot they were coming. My reminder went off when we were, um... in the bathroom. They're just spending the night and then they're off to the airport. They got an early morning flight, you see..."

"It's all right, it's not your fault. I just made an ass of myself, as per usual." Nagisa took the bag and rummaged through, finding an appropriate sweater and jeans combo - he wasn't sure how Rei's parents would feel about the dresses and skirts and leggings and jewelry... He took the time to tame his sex-tussled hair and wipe down his face before rejoining Rei in the hallway and descending the stairway to hell.

If their first meeting was awkward, there wasn't even a word for their second.

"Mum, Dad, this is my boyfriend, Nagisa," Rei said, stammering over his words slightly. The blond took the cue to offer up his hand and noticed that his boyfriend strongly favored his mother in coloring and complexion. She wore a loose headscarf over her hair, dusted lightly with silver stars. The rest of her was impeccably dressed as well, considerably more fashionable than her son but with the same eye for detail. "Nagisa, this is my mother Amira, and my father Yoshiro."

"Pleasure to meet you both," Nagisa told the couple meekly. Rei's nice height obviously came from his father who, though stopped with age, stood taller still than the young blond. He wore thick rimmed glasses with a funny shape in a way that Nagisa found charmingly familiar. When it became clear that no one would break the silence, the blond quickly found an excuse to escape the oppressive atmosphere.

“I’m sure you all have a lot to catch up on. Why don’t I make some pasta for dinner?” he offered, picking the only dish he could serve. At least it was easy to pretty up with the presence of parsley. “It’s your birthday after all, dear, and we haven’t eaten yet.”

“That sounds lovely,” Rei replied, guiding his parents to the living room. Once they were out of sight, Nagisa slumped against the counter. He could not have made a worse impression. He moped as he filled a pot with water and tossed it on the stove, sprinkling it with some salt for added flavor. They probably thought he was a cheap whore. He tossed in an absurd amount of pasta. There was no way he could possibly recover his dignity. Except for maybe this dish - he could at least show that he was responsible and could provide for Rei in his own way, though the lawyer and his family were obviously well off on their own. How could he hope to fit into that? Nagisa paused as his hand hovered over a particularly nice plate. Why did he want to fit into the Ryuugazaki family? His face went red as he continued his gathering. Surely it was too early to be thinking such thoughts - but he could indulge in a private fantasy, if only to make himself feel better... In his mind’s eye, Nagisa pictured himself in an elegant wedding dress by Rei’s side in a Gothic cathedral - or maybe a tea length garden party dress and a Hyde Park ceremony... The distraction improved his mood by quite a bit as he went about preparing dinner, and the red blush of embarrassment faded to the pink dust of pleasure as intimate thoughts teased his mind.

Nagisa did his best to artfully arrange the pasta on a large white plate, being cautious about where he poured the sauce he’d found. Instead of grating parmesan, he carefully hand cut it with a knife straight from the block, creating artfully thick furls of cheese atop the mountain of pasta. It looked like a dinner from Pinterest, and he snapped a quick picture of his victory, unusually pleased with himself. He ought to learn to cook - maybe a couples’ cooking class with Rei would be a fun Christmas gift?

For a bit of greens to go with their menu, he tossed a winter salad together with balsamic vinegar and nuts that he found in the pantry. Overall, it was nothing terribly fancy, but it looked like it could be,
and that was the important part, wasn’t it? He set his creation out on the table, quickly making up four places, and grabbed a Cabernet Sauvignon, hoping that the peppery undertones of the particular bottle would complement the salad and pasta well. Once everything was set up to his satisfaction, the blond popped over to the living room, for once taking care to ensure he wasn’t interrupting anything.

“Dinner is ready,” he announced. “It’s not much, but I didn’t want to keep you waiting too long. You must be quite chilly, what with the snow. Dreadful weather for travel,” he rambled, his eyes refusing to meet theirs. The older couple murmured their assent, and then left a silence for a moment too long before Rei contributed.

“Let’s all have a seat, then.”

The situation didn’t much improve from there. In the fine dining room, all that could be heard was the gentle scrape of the chairs against the floor and the soft clack of utensils as each person served themself. Nagisa’s sexed-out muscles screamed as he forced himself to sit rigidly straight and proper, wrists balanced neatly on the table, to demonstrate what few good manners his mother had managed to pass onto him. Rei took the liberty to pour the wine in each of their glasses - goodness knew the blond needed a drink about now.

“This wine pairs nicely with the salad,” Rei’s mother praised lightly, elegantly sipping at her glass.

“Thank you,” the writer replied, “Rei and I are both really fond of wine, so we’re both usually well-stocked.” She nodded, and said nothing more. Way to make yourself seem like an alcoholic, Nagisa scolded himself, wanting to slam his blond locks on the table. He shoveled a forkful of spaghetti to give himself an excuse to shut his mouth.

“Did Daiki speak with you today?” Amira proceeded, turning her attention away from the young man across from her and to her son.

“Briefly. He had enough time to say happy birthday, but...” To Nagisa’s dismay, his boyfriend caught his eye, colored obviously, and glanced away in a manner that could not have been more obvious. Yoshiro, his father, seemed to notice and blushed himself, but neither one could have been as cherry red as Nagisa.

“But?” Amira prompted, and the blond wanted to crawl in a hole and never come out.

“... He had practice, he couldn’t stay on the line long,” Rei lied quickly. In a very familiar way, the older woman arched a brow impeccably as she read the mood of the situation.

“I see.” They lapsed into silence once more. Each party seemed to search for a safe topic to broach, and for once Nagisa’s natural charisma gave way to quiet and caution in the face of his humiliation.

“So, did you come to, erm, celebrate Rei’s birthday...?” Yoshiro prompted after a few moments, eyeing the young blond.

“Yes! Well... no, not really,” he responded automatically. “Rei didn’t say it was his birthday, but I was just spending a few nights until the weather clears up. My house is pretty far from my workplace, but I work close to Rei, so he offered...”

“Do you work in law as well?” Amira probed, leaving Nagisa feeling distinctly uncomfortable. He didn’t suppose this was the time for the cross-dressing conversation.

“No, I write a column,” the younger man replied as vaguely as possible, but he was quickly corrected by his boyfriend.
“He’s in charge of an accessories column in Elite, Mother,” he replied, a note of pride easily distinguishable in his voice. The blond glowed and perked up hopefully - Rei had said previously that she was a stylish woman, and looking at her now indicated the same thing.

“Oh, indeed? I’m quite fond of that magazine. I was going to bring the English copy to Satsuki.” Rei’s mother glanced back at Nagisa, her dark eyes reappraising the young man. “How long have you been writing for them?”

“I only have two articles published,” he confessed, setting his finished dinner aside. “I only recently got the opportunity to write, but before that I was an intern and assistant for a few years, so I’ve always worked for them.” The elegant woman nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll be sure to look for your work.” A glance around the room showed that they had all finished their pretty though rather meager dinner, and the blond hopped up to clear the table.

“Why don’t I take care of the dishes? Rei, we don’t have any dessert, do we?” Nagisa collected the plates and silverware and began to make his way to the kitchen when his boyfriend stupidly replied, “There isn’t any chocolate left over from earlier, is there?” The awkward atmosphere returned in an instant. When he met the lawyer’s eyes, the blond realized he was perfectly aware that he’d stuck his foot in his mouth once again.

“Oh, I don’t think dessert is necessary,” Amira cut in quickly. “We should go to bed soon - our flight leaves quite early.” Nagisa quickly backed out of the conversation, face as crimson as holly, and got to washing dishes. Through the murmur of rushing water, he heard Rei excuse himself to make up the guest bedroom.

When he finished loading and starting the dishwasher, Nagisa hurried up the stairs and scampered into Rei’s bedroom where the brunette was collapsed upon the sheets with his glasses off and eyes closed. Making sure the door was closed behind him, the blond changed quickly into his pajamas and flung himself onto the bed with a hearty ‘poof’. Unsurprised by the conduct, the attorney opened one of his eyes.

“That could not have gone any worse,” Nagisa declared, trapping his boyfriend below him. The older man’s hands gripped his hips, and he offered a sympathetic grin.

“Considering the circumstances, I actually believe it couldn’t have been better - but I’ll admit the circumstances were awful,” he conceded as he sat up, pulling the blond into an embrace. “Your behavior was exemplary - you were a polite and graceful host, and this isn’t even your house.” Nagisa’s pout gave way to a slight grin at the praise, and the couple looked into one another’s eyes. They leaned in for a chaste kiss at the same time.

“I guess we aren’t gonna pick up where we left off, huh?” the writer asked regretfully. Not that he particularly minded - it had been a long day filled with one too many surprises. Rei smiled at him.

“Not tonight. I think we’re both exhausted.” Rei disentangled himself from his young beau and pulled back the soft duvet, patting the space by his side invitingly. The blond eagerly cuddled up to him, nestling in the crook of his arm. The brunette turned off the lamp at their side.

Nagisa’s heart beat pleasantly fast, half apprehensive to be sharing such an intimate space with Rei without having sex, and half relaxed and safe in a way he’d never felt before. Curious and gentle, his fingers drifted down Rei’s chest and felt that his pulse was quite similar. The blond leaned his ear against his boyfriend’s heart, and it was that steady and slow rhythm that eased him to sleep.
surprise! rei is demisexual. also you may have to wait an extra day or two for the next chappy on account of my horse show next weekend.
EDIT: bad news friends. I'm on hiatus til I can get a new laptop. Thankfully, my birthday is in the first week of Dec.

A week ago, you were expecting this chapter to be posted on Sunday. A week ago, I was expecting Hillary Clinton to be my president on Sunday. We were both wrong. Anyways its late and I didn't proofread this but I have an 8am class so fuck it

Nagisa didn’t need an alarm to wake up the next morning, despite the dark. The soft sounds of shuffling sheets and a sudden cold from the space beside him quite did the trick, and was unpleasant in an entirely different way than a screeching clock. An involuntary whine sounded deep in his throat, and he blinked his pretty eyes open.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” his boyfriend asked, no longer beside him, but sitting at the edge of the bed and fumbling for his glasses. The clock read 7:15, but his mind screamed ‘bedtime’.

“Yes,” he pouted, his arms reaching to wrap themselves around Rei’s waist. “It’s cold without you.”

“I have to go work,” he replied without conviction. “And I need to make sure my parents get off all right. They should be up already.” Nagisa sighed at the lack of romance and reburied himself in the plush duvet.

“Fine,” the blond conceded, successfully burritoing himself away. Alone. He couldn’t quite fall asleep again and resorted to just waiting for Rei to finish his shower - thankfully, he was efficient in everything that he did, and not ten minutes later, he stepped back into the room clad in only a towel around his waist, with water trickling delectably down his abdomen. Nagisa catcalled, his face peeking around the marshmallow covers. Rei glanced back and arched an eyebrow at him, not honoring him with a reply, but the younger man giggled nonetheless.

While watching his boyfriend dress was quite the treat, Nagisa forced his eyes away and dragged himself to the shower. Once he’d cleaned himself up and washed some of his stiffness away, he moved onto makeup, as per usual. The blond decided on a subtle look, still unsure how Rei’s parents would react to his more feminine tendencies. He wore his black silk button down with white polka dots and black slacks instead of anything particularly ostentatious. When the attorney helped him pack yesterday, he’d said to select red jewelry, but now he wondered whether something so eye-catching would be appropriate... Nagisa reached into his bag to search for his gold herringbone chain, but couldn’t find it with his jewelry. Odd. Maybe he’d put it with his makeup for safekeeping? When Nagisa didn’t find it there either, he began to panic. Having forgotten completely about the older couple staying with them, he noisily raced down the stairs.

“Rei!” he called frantically, bursting into the breakfast nook and thoroughly startling both his boyfriend and his parents.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Rei inquired with concern, placing his coffee on the table and setting aside the newspaper.
“Rei, you haven’t seen my gold necklace, have you? That my father gave me? You know which one, right?” The blond felt his throat constrict with worry. He’d never lost it. He needed it.

“I know which one, but I can’t say I’ve seen it.” Nagisa felt his heart break cleanly in half, and it must have shown on his face, because the attorney hurried to add: “But I’m sure it’s just at your house. I don’t remember packing it.” He eyed the writer warily, and his parents looked on with concern as well, but he heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed into the one free chair.

“Oh. Oh. You’re probably right,” he acknowledged, suddenly feeling much better and a bit embarrassed about causing such a fuss in front of Rei’s parents - again. The couple seemed understanding, however, especially Amira.

“Have a cup of tea, darling,” she implored, pouring him a mug of warm milk, honey, and black tea from a kettle resting on the table. He realized then that the table was quite decorated for breakfast, featuring eggs, toast, beans, tomatoes - a full English style meal.

“Thank you, Mrs. Ryuugazaki,” he replied, his cheeks reddening at his conduct again.

“Amira please, dear,” she stated simply, with an elegant smile directed at the blond. He grinned tentatively back. “I remember how frantic I felt when I lost a set of bracelets given to me by my mother for my wedding. It was just before Rei’s second birthday, in fact - Yoshiro, don’t you remember?” The elder man chuckled from behind the editorial section of the paper.

“I do. I found Daiki dangling them over Rei’s crib, with one of them already shoved into his mouth.”

“Father, is that really necessary to tell him?” the cherry-faced attorney protested while Nagisa giggled at his side.

“Oh, but it’s so cute, Rei!” the blond exclaimed - just imagining him as a chubby-cheeked baby had him gushing. Irritably, his boyfriend shoved a forkful of egg into Nagisa’s mouth.

“What was that you were saying? I couldn’t quite catch it, I’m afraid.” The blond rolled his eyes and dropped the topic in favor of dishing himself up some food.

Breakfast passed pleasantly and much less awkwardly than Nagisa’s barely-passable dinner the previous night. He chatted lightly with Rei’s parents about inconsequential things - what they liked to eat, the weather forecast, the news... It wasn’t long until Amira and Yoshiro excused themselves, however, as their cab would shortly arrive. Tossing on one of Rei’s coats, Nagisa accompanied them down, helping with their luggage, and saw them off with his boyfriend.

“It was a pleasure meeting you both,” he told them, shaking their hands once more after placing their bags in the trunk of the cab. It was dark still, and quite chilly, but the snow had already begun to melt. “Here are your Christmas gifts,” he continued, handing them the neatly wrapped, small packages - one scarf for Rei’s sister in law, one for his mother, and something for Rei’s brother and father that he’d chosen on his own. The blond stepped back, allowing his boyfriend to say his proper goodbyes, and once the cab pulled away, raced back inside.

Light had begun to peek over the horizon, and Nagisa knew he didn’t have too much time left to prepare for work. He pulled out a coat that actually belonged to him (as nice as his boyfriend’s smelled) and, resigned to the fact that he’d left his old necklace elsewhere, tossed his faux-ruby statement piece on.

The entire drive to work, the blond was unusually quiet, unable to stop thinking about his gold herringbone necklace. He didn’t wear it every day, but not having it made him feel uncomfortable
and exposed nonetheless, dampening his mood so severely that once he arrived at work, even the oblivious Momo noticed his lack of energy.

“Nagisa, why’re you so quiet?” he probed, Hana and Gou listening with concern.

“I’m just tired,” he replied, waving it off without enthusiasm.

“Like hell you are;” Gou retorted. “You’ve got twice as much need for socializing when you’re tired. Stop lying to us, you little twat.” Her words were harsh, but her face was worried. The blond rolled his eyes with a small smile.

“I just lost my favorite necklace and it’s bothering me. I could’ve sworn I took it to Rei’s place the other day, but it wasn’t there,” he revealed gloomily as he messed with his keyboard. The restlessness was getting to him. “Rei thinks I left it at home, so I can look later, but still...”

“You’ll be miserable until you do something about it,” Hana stated matter-of-factly from beside Gou’s cubicle. “Look for it today if you’re so upset.”

“But Rei’s so busy...” Nagisa reluctantly protested. The brunet had elected not to join him for coffee the next few days in order to keep Christmas open for them. He didn’t want to be a nuisance.

“You’ve got him wrapped around your finger, he literally won’t care so long as it makes you happy,” Gou replied. “Just text him.”

“Are you positive?” Both women gave an emphatic “yes”. Well, if they were so sure... The young man whipped out his iPhone and sent a quick text to his beau.

To: Rei Ryuugazaki

hey can we stop by my place tonight?? i really wanna look for my necklace... :(

A reply came back almost immediately, despite the fact that the attorney was surely buried up to his red glasses in dull black-and-white paperwork.

From: Rei Ryuugazaki

Absolutely. I’ll be out of work as soon as possible. Christmas is in a week, so if you’d like we can use the trip to collect some extra clothes. That is, if you want to stay over so long...

The blond’s face melted into an affectionate smile at the older man’s considerate behavior - getting back to him so quickly, inviting him to stay longer, driving him all over... Nagisa took the opportunity to recognize that he had considerable luck in finding someone as perfect for him as Rei, and made quick work of a much cheerier reply.

To: Rei Ryuugazaki

thank you!! youre the best <3

Feeling a little more accomplished now that he’d done something about his misery, he continued on with work, prepping his final draft for formatting. Poor Gou would have to work through the holiday on her advent calendar, but Nagisa was buckled down and racing through what he could for the same reasons as Rei was so busy. His pitch meeting with Ms. Amakata was rapidly approaching - he needed her approval for his next article before the holidays officially began, and if he didn’t have it, he’d be working overtime. As if on cue, her commanding voice sounded throughout the office.
“Nagisa! You’re next!” He collected his laptop and waved at her as Michael from formatting exited the office, looking quite pleased with himself. The December edition had printed beautifully, and he suspected that Ms. Amakata must have praised him thoroughly. Time to live up to those expectations!

Nagisa grabbed his laptop and gave himself a mental boost as he stepped into his boss’ less-chilly-than-usual ice cube office. He followed her gesture and took a seat across from her, and Momo waved at him from his position handling visuals from the Japanese branch. The older woman didn’t hesitate once her ex-assistant had settled.

“What do you have for me?” she demanded, crossing her legs and leaning in attentively. The blond sat up a little straighter under her scrutiny and turned his screen her way.

“Well, I was thinking of an article based on the choker fad we’re seeing,” he suggested. He was about to pull examples of his plans, but his boss waved him off.

“Too similar to your last article,” she stated simply. Okay, strike that one off the list.

“World accessory trends?” he tried again. She raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a loaded topic - one misstep, and it’s advocating cultural appropriation, Nagisa. It’s a good thought, but I want to hold off on that until you’re more advanced in your career.” A sting, but the young man shrugged it off - the world of writing was a harsh one, after all, and he couldn’t even imagine the decisions editors had to make. He paused to think - maybe using bracelets, earrings, and necklaces all for one article hadn’t been the smartest choice, holidays or not. Seeing the wheels in his head turning, Ms. Amakata suggested a direction for him.

“My vision for this issue follows the ‘New Year’ theme,” she explained. “I want something new for the readers, but more importantly, I want something new from you. From all of my employees. Your challenge was good for you, but I want to see you expanding creatively.” Nagisa hummed his response, and suddenly thought of his present to Rei, tucked safely under the tree. And after that, Rei’s blue and red sweaters came to mind, the only parts that stood out in a sea of grey. He snapped his fingers.

“How about a New Year’s resolution themed column?” he blurted eagerly, leaning into his editor.

“An interesting thought. Expand,” she ordered. Eager to convince her, he kept on.

“Well, a lot of people might think ‘I want to be more professional this year’, or ‘I want to be more extroverted’, you know?” Ms. Amakata nodded thoughtfully. “Changing yourself is as difficult as changing your style, but it’s really easy in baby steps - like, a new color pop to draw attention to yourself,” he described, gesturing to his crimson necklace. His boss grinned proudly.

“A change in style, huh? That’s what I like to hear from you. New Year’s resolution.” She clapped her hands energetically. “All right, I’ll give you the green light on that one. Remember to write with personality,” she advised, and excused him to begin his work.

Feeling rejuvenated, he started outlining his article, and completely forgot his anxiety about his necklace until he received a text from Rei announcing his arrival. At the sight, he leapt up and, too impatient for the elevator, sprinted down the stairwell, through the snow, and hopped into the car.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you move so fast,” Rei commented dryly, an amused smile teasing at his lips as he pulled back into traffic. Nagisa wasn’t in the mood to joke any longer.

“Just hurry up,” he whined, his eyebrows scrunched together with apprehension. For a moment, he
saw something like hurt in his boyfriend’s eyes, or maybe guilt for his words, and quieted down. A
moment later, the writer apologized. “I’m sorry for snapping, I’m just really worried about it - it’s the
most important thing in the world to me, and I’ve been just so worried this whole day, you know?”
The lawyer shook his head.

“No, no, it’s all right. I apologize for joking. I knew you were upset, I just wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay,” he replied, and they traded small smiles before continuing their drive in the relative quiet.
The writer ran a list through his head of all the places he could have left it - his jewelry box in the
bathroom, his bedside table, even the floor of his room. He couldn’t even remember taking it off
when he slept with Rei!

Nagisa jumped out of the car as it came to a slow in front of his house, before the older man even
had a chance to put in park. As he dashed up to the door, he realized his house keys were still at
Rei’s - he hadn’t any need to bring them with him when he left that morning. Just as panic began to
settle in his chest, the door opened and out peeked a chilly-looking Haruka.

“Oh thank God,” the blond exclaimed, pushing past the American with no explanation whatsoever.
As he ran into his room, he heard Rei addressing his roommate indistinctly. He couldn’t bring
himself to pay any heed to their words. Nagisa pored through his belongings, making a complete
mess in the process. He didn’t find it in his bedroom, not on the floor, nor on the table. The gold
chain wasn’t in the bathroom. Desperate, he checked his coffee table, under the couch cushions,
everywhere in his living room - it was nowhere to be found. Concerned, the other two men watched
him as he flopped dejectedly onto the couch.

“It’s not here,” he murmured, this throat thickened with grief. Rei and Haruka exchanged a glance,
the former looking almost ill with worry. Haruka politely backed out to Nagisa’s room.

“I’ll get some stuff together for you,” he whispered considerately while Rei joined his beau on the
couch. The writer felt a warm set of arms pull him into a warmer chest, and he bit his quivering
bottom lip as he began to cry.

“It was supposed to be here!” he sobbed, curling into Rei’s comforting embrace. “Why isn’t it here?”

“There, there, darling. I’m sure it’s only been misplaced.” The blond felt the vibrations of the
attorney’s voice against his ear. He was faintly surprised to hear that Rei sounded nearly as distressed
as he was. Through his grief, Nagisa felt a surge of warmth for the lawyer’s sincere sympathy. His
tears subsided to hiccups. Haruka wandered back in, holding a bag of mismatched clothes rather
awkwardly.

“Um, I’ll keep an eye out for it while I’m here,” he offered, putting the bag down and sitting on
Nagisa’s other side, rubbing his back softly. The blond rubbed some snot off on his sleeve.

“Okay,” he replied, not thinking to ask what the black-haired meant by ‘while he was here’. He
collected the bag from Haru, noting that while the clothes didn’t really match, they were all of his old
favorites - cozy sweaters, his tracksuit, and a couple soft scarves. “Thanks, Haru,” he sniffled. For a
moment, they stayed as they were, but Rei soon pulled away.

“Why don’t we get going to my place?” he offered quietly, concern etched in his face. With another
sniffle, the blond nodded and allowed himself to be led away by Rei, giving a forlorn wave to
Haruka as he left his house - and hope of finding his gold necklace - behind.

Nagisa could hardly be bothered with thoughts such as eating, and as such, Rei dropped him off at
the apartment before leaving to go get dinner by himself. The blond made sure to leave the front door unlocked for him, but didn’t turn on the lights, instead heading straight for the couch and collapsing upon it, closing his eyes and crying in the dark. At some point, the lights on the Christmas tree automatically turned on, and he pulled the deer throw over his stinging eyes, as mascara poured down his cheeks. Sobbing in makeup was such a hassle.

“Nagisa?” he heard from the hallway as the door opened. From behind his closed eyelids, a flood of light poured in. A crinkling bag told him Rei had placed the groceries on the floor. “Nagisa, where are you?” he called from closer by. The blond moved from underneath the blanket and heard his boyfriend start. “Goodness gracious, what are you doing down there? In the dark, no less.” The sofa creaked slightly where the lawyer sat at his side. A warm hand stroked the writer’s back, and he sniffled audibly. Rei sighed quietly. “Still upset?” The lump of the younger man nodded, and the attorney tugged at the corners of the blanket. “Darling, look at me.” Nagisa’s bloodshot, glassy eyes blinked a few times as he adjusted to the light, and he saw his boyfriend leaning over him. The sincerity in his eyes shocked him. “I absolutely promise you that we’ll find your necklace. So please, won’t you join me for dinner?” Depressed, the blond wondered where Rei got all that serious confidence from.

“... Not hungry,” he replied, the hoarseness in his voice surprising even him - though the subsequent growl in his stomach contradicted those words.

“Not even for macaroni and cheese?” the brunet offered, taking a hold of Nagisa’s chilled hand. The blond’s head tilted.

“... Well, okay.” Relief was evident in Rei’s face as worry-induced wrinkles vanished.

“I’ll go get it. We can just eat on the couch.” The writer pushed himself up and wrapped the throw around his chilly body as the lawyer went to reheat their dinner. The idea of the macaroni - and that Rei had correctly assumed he’d need said comfort food - warmed his heart.

“Here you are,” his boyfriend said, sitting beside him on the couch with his own serving. Nagisa noticed that it was a fancy kind, with crumbs and multiple cheeses, and he assumed that the lawyer had gone to Waitrose. “I’m not usually partial to an unhealthy choice before work, but that’s the least of my concerns. I just want to make you happy,” he confessed, causing the younger man to color. Rei wasn’t usually so vocal about his intentions. The blond figured the least he could do was respond in kind.

“It’s working,” he admitted with a bittersweet smile, catching his beau’s soft violet gaze as he took the warm bowl into his hands. “Can we watch a movie?” he asked, hoping to get his mind off of his grief and at least attempt to enjoy his time with Rei.

“Anything you want, darling,” he replied easily, switching the TV to his usual old movie channel. Nagisa frowned, and before he could change his expression, was caught by his beau. “Do you want to watch something else?” he pressed. After a baffled moment, the lawyer asked, “What movies do you enjoy, anyhow? I never thought to ask.”

“I like a lot...” Nagisa replied, not wishing much to expand. “But I just want to watch something light-hearted right now. Maybe Christmassy.” Rei took a moment to reply, and when he did, his voice was hesitant.

“My sister-in-law bought me a copy of Love Actually one year as a joke...” he suggested. “I’ve never seen it, but it looks rather like something you’d enjoy...?” The blond perked up immediately.

“I love that movie!” he enthused, for a moment discarding his misery. The brunet gave a resigned
“Romantic comedy it is,” he stated. He stood, placed the disk in the DVD player, and fell back onto the couch with skepticism etched on his face. The writer, at last resorting to his clingy self, climbed onto Rei’s lap. “Nagisa!” he protested affectionately, “I won’t be able to eat my dinner like this.”

“I’ll just feed you,” he responded, stubbornly nudging his boyfriend’s arm. Obligingly, the man wrapped it around his small lover.

The petulant young man deliberately made quick work of their dinner, practically stuffing both his face and Rei’s, so that he could force them into cuddling. Not that the brunet was protesting to the idea - once they had set the dishes aside, he willingly tugged his wrapped-up darling into his warm embrace, kissing his downy locks softly. The blond was surprised that his beau seemed rather involved in the movie, but he supposed he shouldn’t have been. Despite all that Rei said, Nagisa knew he had a romantic side, as evidenced by his constant attentions throughout the film. Once they’d finished, the writer immediately applied himself to the older man.

“What did you think?” Nagisa pressed, turning around to face him.

“It was a good movie,” Rei conceded with a grin, rubbing his boyfriend’s back. The blond smiled, obviously pleased with the reaction.

“Which couple do you think we’re most like? I think it’s got to be the Prime Minister and his secretary!” he insisted, wrapping his legs around the older man’s torso like the actress had done at the end. Rei chuckled and pinched some of the fat on the blond’s thigh, causing him to yelp a little and lean in closer to their embrace.

“You do have large thighs like her,” he agreed, and the writer made a sound of protest that was interrupted by further analysis. “But I rather identified with the author and the Portuguese woman. Sometimes,” he confessed, “it feels as though we come from two completely different worlds - you’re so beautiful and cultured and relaxed, I don’t know how I ever reached you. I can’t believe how lucky I am that you love me.” He tilted Nagisa’s chin up and looked into his rosy eyes, but didn’t make a move beyond that.

“... You called me fat, but I think I can forgive you after that,” he pouted, leaning his forehead against Rei’s. The other man laughed.

“I didn’t call you fat, I said you have large thighs, and I happen to be quite fond of them, thank you.” Holding his boyfriend fast, the attorney stood, and for the first time that night, the blond laughed. Rei’s expression melted with affection. “There’s that beautiful smile,” he murmured as their eyes locked. Nagisa’s face went red up the ears.

“Should we go to bed?” the younger one blurted, his arms wrapped securely around his beau’s neck.

“If that’s what you want,” he agreed, setting him down gently and taking his hand to lead him up the stairs and to his room.

Rei helped him undress before removing his own clothes and embraced him upon the mattress, softly kissing the blond’s ears, eyes, and jaw. Nagisa’s lashes fluttered clothes as he hummed his content, but it was cut short as his boyfriend drew away. Displeased, his plump lips formed a pout and his rosy gaze sought his lover.

“... I don’t want to try anything new tonight,” Rei admitted nervously after a prolonged stare. “I just want to be together.” He reached out his hand to stroke his darling’s cheek like it was something
delicate, and the blond noticed that his fingertips trembled slightly. He reached his pale hand up and pressed it against Rei’s, so that the latter’s warmth enveloped his cheek fully.

“Me neither,” he agreed. “I just wanna be taken care of.” He snuggled against the pillows, allowing his eyelids to drift shut - but not before he glimpsed a full smile of deep affection spread over the brunet’s handsome face.

That night, as Rei made love to him, whispering sweet words of comfort and devotion, Nagisa had never felt safer, nor more precious to any single person. This warmth stayed with him until the first light of morning. Though his beau had long since left for work, the blond awoke to a small bouquet of dusty pink roses, dark green pine sprigs, and crimson holly at his side. Tied to it was a handwritten note from the brunet himself.

“‘Nagisa,’” he read aloud, “‘I’m sorry I had to leave you so early. Have a wonderful day - I’ll be home a little past five. Love, Rei.’ Oh, that’s so sweet of him...” The writer gently hugged the flowers to his heart, and took care to put them in a vase as soon as he’d finished dressing. He took a moment to post a picture of the set up on all of his social media accounts (and tagged Rei in each and every one of his posts) before making himself some breakfast and settling down to work.

First things first, he finished his Christmas shopping. Among his purchases were a voucher for a couples’ cooking class for he and Rei to enjoy, a DIY spa day kit for his sister Emi, and heatable insoles and circulation improving socks for his father - Emi of course had helped him pay for the former. He took the time to print the voucher and place it in a prettily decorated envelope, to be set in between the branches of the tree, right where Rei could see it best. And when at last the lawyer arrived home several hours later, it was the first thing he noticed.

“I’m home!” he called into the apartment. Nagisa replied from the kitchen where he attempted another dinner.

“Welcome home, Rei!” He peeked from around the corner to see his boyfriend toying with the envelope by the tree, his coat not even yet removed. The brunet met his gaze and presented him with a little grin.

“What’s this, now?” he mused aloud. Nagisa left the kitchen and kissed the older man on the cheek. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise,” he retorted, poking his boyfriend on the nose. The attorney’s cold-flushed cheeks turned a darker shade of pink, and he muttered an excuse to get away from his teasing beau. Chuckling, the blond returned to his dinner preparations only to be joined by Rei a few minutes later.

“What is it you’re making?” he asked, sitting at the counter and watching the writer with great interest and a contented smile upon his face.

“Steamed broccoli, ravioli, and salad left over from lunch. It’s got orange slices in it!” he relayed cheerily. “Not the best, but it’s about all I can manage at my level.”

“It’s not as though I could do any better,” he replied with a half-hearted shrug. “We’ll have to do better than this if we live together.” Nagisa’s heart skipped a beat, and a set of tongs clattered out of his hands and onto the ground.

“Oh!” he gasped, bending over to grab them and hopefully hiding his holly red face. Rei was already that serious?

“Nagisa, are you all right?” his boyfriend inquired curiously, peeking over at him shyly. A chagrined
look on his face told the blond that Rei regretted saying anything in the first place.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied breathlessly, straightening himself out and placing the tongs in the sink. “I was just... well, surprised. I didn’t know you were that serious.” The brunet’s dark eyes widened slightly.

“At this point it’s still an ‘if’,” he pointed out rationally, and Nagisa was at once relieved and disappointed. “But... well,” the lawyer began bashfully. The younger man perked up slightly, and Rei glanced away, his cheeks dusted pink. “It’s just... it feels like we’re newlyweds, like this - between the food, the greetings...” He sounded too embarrassed to finish, but the blond, for whom boundaries hardly existed, flushed deeply and continued on his behalf.

“I know what you mean,” he agreed sweetly, fiddling with the broccoli. “It’s kind of nice,” he admitted. When they looked one another’s ways, they were both smiling and red.

“It is,” the older man agreed, and they left it at that - a secret shared fantasy too far away to yet grasp.

The next day, Rei once again had work, and Nagisa took the time to deliver a few gifts to his father’s tree - everything he’d bought for Emi and his father, along with the ones that his boyfriend had chosen.

“Hi Daddy!” the blond greeted as he strode through the door, arms laden with presents as though he were some kind of modern-day, fashionable Santa Claus.

“Hello there, son,” his father replied. “I see you’ve come prepared!” he remarked with a smile spreading across his wrinkled face.

“Mmhmm!” Nagisa agreed, releasing his burden upon his father’s bed. He noticed that Emi must have been around lately, as the small tree in the corner of the room already had a few gifts underneath it, and the stockings were showing the first signs of fullness.

“Darling, I’m glad you’ve come,” his father began again, turning fretful. Nagisa noticed that his father had pulled out his old laptop and that it was resting upon his knees. “You see, I’m at a loss as to what I should buy for your boyfriend. This Google says I ought to consider hunting, fishing, or camping gear, but I thought I should ask you first.” The blond laughed outright and peeked over his father’s shoulder at the search ‘what to get your son-in-law for Christmas’. He was a mix between mortified and amused.

“First of all, Dad, we are nowhere near close to marriage,” he stated, wiping a tear from his eye. His face was red as he recalled the previous night’s conversation. “Second of all, Rei is definitely a metropolitan man. The most sporty he’ll ever get is a tool kit.” The old man looked disappointed, and with a wry smile his son patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure something like a tool kit could have its benefits, though!” he offered, not knowing if Rei would even use one of those.

“Well, how about this?” Ken offered, pulling up a window featuring something similar to a Swiss Army knife, but in the shape of a flat rectangle. “It’s a tool set the size of a credit card. It’s called a Tool Logic,” he described. Nagisa’s eyebrows raised.

“I’m impressed with that, actually. It sounds like a good idea!” he praised. “Do you want help ordering it?” he offered, to his father’s great offense.

“I think I know how to use the Amazon,” he stated, quite affronted. The blond let him go and began organizing his haul. He artfully arranged what he could under the tree and slipped a few smaller gifts in the stockings. Unable to resist, he patted his own down as well, imagining what might be in there
and grinning happily.

“Have you decided what you want for Christmas dinner?” he asked, noticing that the family recipe book was still on the coffee table. Ken shrugged.

“I would be happy with anything you could make for me,” he replied happily, pushing his wheelchair over the table. “Do you want to pick out a meal together?” he suggested. He gave a sunny smile.

“Yeah, that sounds nice!” he replied, making grabby hands towards the book and collapsing upon the small loveseat in the room. “Do you think duck would be a good main course? There are only going to be us four, after all,” he mused aloud, peeking through the duck and chicken selections available. “They look hard...” he whined. From beside him, his father piped up.

“Why don’t you send Emi a text? She’s always liked cooking, you know,” he informed his son.

“Oh, that’s a good plan! That way I won’t have to make a decision myself,” he said, whipping out his phone and shooting his older sister a text.

To: Emi Hazuki

Hey :P u know how me and my bf are cooking xmas dinner for dad?? i was thinking itd be cool if u made something too since we suck at cooking lmao

He tossed his phone to the side and refocused his attention on the book, wondering what else might go with dinner. All of the side course recipes looked difficult as well, but if he enlisted his sister’s help, he might feel more at ease with a challenge of such large proportions. He received a text back almost immediately.

From: Emi Hazuki

I’m in the middle of work you know

If she had the time to text back, he huffed, she could have at least been more useful about it. With a pout, he dialed her number and was greeted with an irritated voice.

“Can you not read, you twat?” his sister sighed on the other end. Though she couldn’t see it, he grinned cheekily. His father chuckled.

“Anyways, since you’re so dead set on being useful, I figured I’d bounce my ideas off you,” he informed her, flipping to a dog-eared page at the beginning of the book. “So for the main course, I was looking at this ‘four-spice duck and carrots’ recipe that doesn’t look too hard. What would go with that? It’s got cinnamon, anise, coriander, and cumin.”

“That doesn’t sound awful for you,” she agreed. “Careful though, duck can be tricky. Since it has vegetables with it, I think a soup would finish off a simple menu.” He imagined her shrug from the other end of the line. “It’s not much, but we’ll be a pretty rag-tag group anyhow. Maki and Rika are headed up to Mum’s, but I told her I was settling in here.”

“Have you told her about your fiance?” Nagisa asked, receiving a sharp look from his father (he hadn’t seen that one for awhile) and Emi heaved a great sigh.

“No, not yet. I’m breaking it to her gently. Sort of saying that I moved without him because of the transfer and all.”
“Probably a good plan.”

“Oh - my superior’s calling me over. Text me a recipe for soup from that book, okay? I’ll see you soon.” Before he had a chance to say goodbye, she’d hung up, though he was left smiling heartily.

“She said she would cook soup,” he informed his father, who set to looking for a recipe. Ten minutes later, they decided on a curried parsnip and apple soup that sounded absolutely delectable and way above his skill level. “Anyways, now that that’s sorted out, I have to go. I’m gonna go shopping for all the ingredients and stuff.” He leaned over to give his father a hug.

“I’ll see you soon, Princess,” Ken replied, waving him off happily.

Between grocery shopping and the fact that it had already been dark out once he’d left, Nagisa arrived at the apartment well after Rei had, and walked in to find him lounging on the couch with a book in hand. The older man glanced up over the rim of his glasses at his beau’s noisy entrance, and the blond had to admit that it was an appealing look for him. He left the groceries at the counter and dropped a kiss on the brunet’s cheek.

“Hi, Rei! How was work?” he asked, joining his boyfriend on the couch. He placed the book on the coffee table, switching his focus to Nagisa.

“It went well. We’re wrapping up the aftermath of a minor assault - nothing big,” he replied with a shrug. “Have you been shopping all this time?”

“No, I visited my dad,” the writer informed him. “We decided on a duck with carrots for Christmas dinner, and Emi’s chipping in with a soup.” Rei smiled lightly.

“That sounds delightful. I hope you didn’t buy tonight’s dinner though, because I’ve already started it.”

“Oooh, what is it?” Nagisa asked, perking up and leaning against his boyfriend.

“Just a chicken curry. Nothing fancy. Don’t worry about peppers and onions - I remembered.” The statement earned a kiss from the younger man, but the brunet stood and made his way to the kitchen. Nagisa pouted. “Don’t give me that look,” Rei jokingly complained. “I’ve got to make sure the apartment doesn’t burn down.” The officially bored blond shifted his gaze to the tree and noticed that beside his envelope to Rei, there was another (considerably poorly made) note addressed to him.

“What’s this, Rei?” he enthused, poking around at the sharpie antlers drawn onto it, and the highlighter pink nose. He guessed it was supposed to be Rudolph, and that whatever was inside had been hastily shoved in during the older man’s job. Said man was now grinning smugly.

“If I told you,” he replied matter-of-factly, “then it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it, dear? Now come have a seat, the curry is ready.” With a roll of his eyes at the familiar words, the blond joined him at the table where a delicious-looking, albeit messy, curry was placed in front of him. He dug in happily to Rei’s delight.

“So,” Nagisa began through a mouthful of food, “what’s your schedule going to be like till Christmas?” His amused boyfriend was careful to swallow his curry before he spoke.

“I don’t have to go into work until after Boxing Day, but I have plenty to do from home, as do you I suspect. You’ve got another article coming up soon, haven’t you?”

“So that means we can’t get hot and heavy?” the younger man whined playfully, a pout forming on his red lips.
“You’re dodging the question,” Rei replied succinctly.

“You’re dodging mine!” Nagisa shot back cheerfully. The brunet huffed, but he knew his boyfriend wasn’t really mad because of a lopsided smile tugging at his lips, and the soft angle of his brow above the ridge of his glasses. In peace, they ate quietly, well prepared to enjoy the days to come.

The blond was surprised that in fact they didn’t make love as often as he imagined, but rather settled into a routine that began more often than not with Rei making breakfast, Nagisa waking up just in time to join him, and working on a crossword together (through this he found out that Rei was fond of the Sussex Carol). Around midday, though the writer complained about it, the brunet would burrow away in his office to work on a few case files, and leave his younger beau to garner ideas for his article (and by extension, ideas for Rei’s wardrobe) on Pinterest. One day he used the time to hang out with Gou and Hana to give them their gifts and receive one for himself, and on another he took the underground downtown to relax with Haru.

Once evening rolled around, he would stop at the grocery store and buy either a pre-made dinner or ingredients to cook up something himself. After they ate, Nagisa would work his wiles on Rei and while they made love once (and it was nothing new), the older man usually just took him to bed and cuddled (though he appreciated this as well). In the end, he chalked it up to nothing more than a period of adjustment, since Rei hadn’t been as eager for sex in the first place. Besides, the blond figured he ought to be planning something special for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day anyhow. A treat for himself and his boyfriend. How thoughtful of him!

Their day started as per usual on Christmas Eve, but deviated when Rei left the apartment around three in the afternoon, much to Nagisa’s confusion and delight. He’d have the opportunity he’d need to set up his plan at least, but hadn’t the faintest clue when his boyfriend would return - and whether or not the surprise would be ruined.

Nagisa started by moving the lovely glass coffee table and couch well back from of their original spots in front of the fireplace, leaving a large area of bare floor in the living room. He took the opportunity to light the kindling and drive the day’s chill well out and tied a bit of mistletoe upon the mantle. He set a chilled bottle of champagne on the coffee table and placed two glasses, the stems wrapped in red ribbon, beside it. At last, he turned out the lights. What had been a cool luxury apartment was leant a warm and romantic atmosphere, just the way Nagisa liked it. The area promoted what Rei really wanted, the blond had learned - a sense of intimacy. Hopefully the floor suggested his personal wishes - a racy, heat-filled encounter with his lover.

The blond stepped back to admire his handiwork before preparing the final detail - himself. He hurried to the bathroom, shedding his clothes while he was at it, to do his makeup. His aim was a saucy look, with red eyeshadow and winged black liner and silver gems glued below his eyes. He didn’t use lipstick or lipgloss - no need - but instead shined himself up with a flavored chapstick, giving him a wet and kissable look. At last, he picked out a sheer candy-apple babydoll slip lined with ivory lace and shimmied on a completely transparent pair of matching boyshorts. At this point, the day had grown dark - Nagisa was beginning to worry as what began as Christmas Eve morning slipped into Christmas Eve night... He rushed back down the stairs and used what red ribbon he had leftover from wrapping the glasses to tie his wrists with a considerable amount of slack between them - he wanted to spice up their lives, but he wasn’t sure if Rei was that into the idea of bondage. Baby steps. All that left him with one option left - wait.

And anxiously did he do just that. Nagisa sat on the floor in front of the fireplace as what remained of the day vanished until finally, at 5:30, Rei opened the door and called out, ‘I’m home!’ The blond hurriedly posed himself on the floor, making himself as attractive as possible. When his boyfriend
saw him, his eyebrows shot up over the rim of his glasses.

“Welcome home, Rei,” he greeted seductively, crossing his ankles where he lay. “Are you ready to unwrap your present?” The brunet stayed silent a moment, likely taking in the whole scene, before placing a small box beside the champagne.

“And I take it that you must be my present?” he quipped, opening the bottle with a pop and a quiet fizz, barely audible above the sound of the crackling fireplace. Nagisa smiled in response, his eyelids fluttering half-closed. Rei sipped at the satin-wrapped glass before crouching in front of his beau and tilting his chin up. “I don’t even get to choose? How presumptuous,” he continued with a smirk. Quite tired of all this teasing, Nagisa leapt up, wrapping his bound arms around Rei’s neck and kissing him so passionately that he knocked the poor brunet over. From between heady kisses, the lawyer panted, “Wait - not prepared - just -” but the blond hardly heard him until his boyfriend physically (and gently) pushed him away. “Stop for just a moment!” The writer pouted.

“Why? Don’t you want me like this?” he asked, slight hurt quite obvious in his voice.

“Of course I do!” Rei insisted. “It’s just...” He sat up, sliding Nagisa off of his lap, though the younger man still clung to his arm. “I have something to apologize for first,” he finished sheepishly, his long arm reaching for the box on the table.

“What for?” Nagisa asked cautiously, eyeing the gift with open curiosity. His beau looked like he struggling to come up with the right words to say, but gave up, simply handing the present over with a blush. The blond took the rectangular red velvet box and pulled off its emerald satin ribbon. He opened it, and with shock so wild it brought tears to his eyes, gasped, his soft hand flying to his mouth.

There, sparkling so finely in the burgundy case, was a perfect gold herringbone necklace. Nagisa looked back up at Rei, hope in his eyes.

“...I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would bother you so much,” the attorney confessed, “not having it with you. I noticed on our first night together that it was quite tarnished, so I took it while you were sleeping. I meant the cleaning to be a gift, you see...” He fidgeted nervously. “I understand if you don’t want to continue.” But, with a much softer hold, Nagisa embraced his lover as he held back his tears, if only for the sake of his makeup.

“Oh, Rei, it’s absolutely perfect. Thank you. It’s the best gift I could ever ask for.” Again, Rei pulled away from him, placing his hand upon the box.

“Then, do you mind if I...?” The younger man relinquished his necklace to his beau, who in turn gently clasped it upon his neck. “It looks perfect,” he admired, his fingers lingering around Nagisa’s collarbone. “Can I take this to mean you’re still willing to be my present?” His violet eyes glanced up, and the blond plucked away his glasses.

“Do you want me?” he asked sensually, crawling into his beau’s lap. With one strong arm wrapped around the small of his back, Rei lowered him down to the plush carpet, effectively placing himself over Nagisa. Their foreheads tapped together.

“Most certainly.” Still staring into the blond’s eyes, the attorney took his hand and placed a kiss upon his bound wrist. “Stay there while I get the necessities, all right?” And though he pouted about it, the blond let him go while he made himself more comfortable. He honestly didn’t have long to wait - Rei was back in a flash, about as eager as he was, and joined him on the plush carpet, once again falling prisoner to the younger man’s wild kiss.
There was no hint of reservation between the two. Nagisa was feeling at once pent up and passionate, both thanks to his boyfriend’s vanilla sweetness that led them to not fucking every night he’d been there. Yet at the same time, the blond noted as Rei’s hands ravished his body through the babydoll, it served to make their love tonight all the hotter. The brunet’s fingers teased his beau’s nipples through the sheer red fabric. Once he was bored of just touches, however, his teeth latched on, causing Nagisa to squirm with delight at the sensation. His nails dug into the plush carpet below him.

“Reiii,” he moaned, dragging out his name from between his teeth. He thrust his hips up, seeking any form of contact. His lover smirked and brought his lips down upon Nagisa’s, who in turn caressed his neck - and promptly realized that his boyfriend was still in his suit. Obligingly sliding his hands further down, he helped Rei out of what was no doubt becoming a most restrictive garment. The older man’s own hands tugged restlessly at his tie, casting it carelessly aside. Nagisa undid the first few buttons of his white shirt. The brunet’s hands gripped his hips, and he took it as a cue to strip the older man himself, and expose the glorious body above him. Here, however, he paused.

“I would like to,” he replied, awaiting Nagisa’s next move. In a moment, with a surge of strength he hadn’t quite expected from the smaller man, their positions were flipped. The attorney lay flat on his back while the now quite naughtily grinning Nagisa straddled him. The ribbons on his wrists came undone. Running his pale fingers over his beau’s body, his hands came to pin Rei’s to the ground. His voice became breathy and aroused.

“I’m going to ride you all night long,” he stated, his eyes half-lidded with lust. From his position atop Rei’s crotch, he felt a twitch. The brunet’s red blush told him that his approach was most welcome. He helped his partner out of his very restrictive, well-tailored pants (a pity this purpose hadn’t been considered), and removed his briefs with it before returning his previous position. Embarrassed, but ever the good partner, the older man gently began to massage around Nagisa’s ass, relaxing his body to the fullest while said blond fixed up a condom and a helping of lubricant. He didn’t hold back in application, either. Stroking the cool lube onto his lover’s cock only helped him get harder, which in turn would only help Nagisa feel better.

The younger man discarded the lacy bottoms that came with his babydoll and leaned back, away from Rei. Curiously, his boyfriend propped himself up on an elbow, his violet eyes exploring every inch of the blond’s exposed member. Nagisa loaded his fingers with lubricant and, catching Rei’s gaze and refusing to look away, began to give him a show.

One wet finger prodded softly around his entrance, while his other hand busied itself stroking his hard-on softly. Over the sound of the fireplace, his soft moans made their way to Rei’s ears. And the man was obviously enjoying what he saw, to the extent that it began to embarrass Nagisa himself. If he hadn’t known his body so well, he certainly would’ve taken too long for either of them to wait. But in this matter, he could be quick and efficient, to make up for the time of lowering himself onto his boyfriend.

When he was finished, Nagisa scooted back up to Rei and gave his dick a quick suck for good measure.

“How have you ever done it like this before?” he asked curiously, looking down at the blushing brunet. The older man looked away and shook his head meekly. Nagisa smiled at the display. “Okay then, a
couple ground rules,” he stated, leaning down to kiss the corner of Rei’s mouth. “Tonight, I’m in charge,” he whispered sensually. “I control the pace, and we’re gonna go slow, no thanks to gravity. Understand, you naughty boy?” he murmured, gripping his boyfriend’s chin and forcing him to look his way.

“I understand,” he confirmed, tucking a stray golden lock behind the young man’s ear.

“All right,” he said, pulling away and hoisting himself up into a squatting position, “here we go.” Carefully, he aligned himself with Rei, and with excruciating slowness, guided the tip to his entrance and pushed himself on. His lover watched with rapt attention, admiring each and every vulnerable facial expression, reconciling the devilish man that had pushed him down with the so very exposed boy that now sat atop him. Once Nagisa was content with where he was, he granted permission for the attorney to move.

“Oh, God, Rei, right there!” he moaned, pushing himself back onto that spot over and over. The brunet adjusted himself to match, ensuring that he wasn’t thrusting nearly as hard as his younger partner. Nagisa couldn’t help but moan. Rei was a natural in this position. His attentiveness, his focus, and his meekness all culminated into what was the perfect top for the blond. His teeth sunk into his lip as he silenced himself. The attorney’s hands began to wander across his body.

“You’re so perfect,” Rei told him. “So beautiful. I love you so much,” he murmured huskily as his tanned fingers finally found Nagisa’s erection and began to tease it.

“Oooh Rei, keep touching me, please,” he begged, thrusting himself against his boyfriend’s member with greater speed and force. His erratic movements pushed the still lawyer over the edge. Rei’s hands darted to his hips as his body tensed and he came with a cry.

“God, Nagisa!” he called, as the younger man moved against his orgasm. The writer pulled himself off of his lover’s limp dick and rolled off to the side, only to have Rei’s lovely digits wrap themselves around his erect shaft and begin pumping. His mouth joined a moment later, and the blond’s fingers once again dug into the carpet. When he came, the older man swallowed.

“You didn’t have to,” Nagisa replied, feeling slightly guilty that his boyfriend hadn’t been given any warning. Taking a swig of champagne and looking far more elegant than he should have for a man that was just rode for the first time, Rei shook his head.

“It’s all right, I wanted to. Never mind that, though, you must be exhausted. Can you stand?” Nagisa nodded, but made no move to do so. Rei raised his eyebrows. “... I guess sleeping on the couch wouldn’t be so bad, then,” he concluded as his young partner curled up drowsily on the floor. With a shrug, the brunet grabbed his throw and joined Nagisa where he lay, pulling him into a comfortable spooning position. “But I guess I wouldn’t mind this, either.” Their warm bodies pushed up against one another, and they whispered sweet nothings under the cover of the crackling fire until, before they realized it, they both had slipped into the realm of dreams.
London Light

Chapter Notes

yes! made my goal of 1,000+ hits. next up: 100+ kudos. thanks for giving this all a read, guys. <3
after being iced into my house for more than a week, i made it to a starbucks in which i can FINALLY present chapter 16 to everyone. keep an eye out for my special christmas gift from me. i cant promise an early chapter but i hope you'll enjoy what i add on the 25th.
EDIT: merry christmas!! i got a laptop for christmas and posted a new companion fic to this one, called "Cross my Heart", detailing the first chapter of this from rei's perspective! expect chapter 17 in a couple days as i get back on track with posting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas Day dawned bright and beautiful, light reflecting off of a thin layer of snow and ice and wonderfully illuminating Rei’s apartment through the gold-tinted curtains. For once, Nagisa himself was up with the birds and preparing a meal alongside his beau.

“You really were incredible last night,” he praised as he cut a pear in half. They’d decided on winter fruit wrapped in prosciutto and rosemary for an easy-to-prepare breakfast that would leave room for dinner later on.

“You’re so open about these things,” Rei remarked with a blush instead of responding directly to the compliment.

“Your last boyfriend must have been a real piece of work, making you so underconfident in your abilities,” he pressed on, sticking his nose in the air. The nerve of that man that he’d never even met! His lover grinned shyly, attempting to hide his smile in the mimosas he was preparing.

“Thank you, Nagisa. You always have a way of making me feel loved,” he finally acknowledged, pressing his lips to the blond’s plump cheek. He giggled, placing the last of their breakfast on a cute tray on carrying it out to the living room (still in disarray after their wild night together). “But honestly,” his boyfriend’s voice sounded from behind him as he approached with the alcohol, “will you please put on some clothes?”

“Your shirt counts as clothes!” he protested with a pout, sitting down beside the tree. “And I put on my underwear too.”

“You mean your lingerie?” the older man pointed out, one of his eyebrows shooting up skeptically. Nagisa stuck out his tongue and took a swig of his mimosa.

“You’re wearing your pajamas. Now just grab a present and be done with it!” he replied, wrapping himself up in the throw. Rei rolled his eyes and took a swig of his mimosa.

“You’re wearing your pajamas. Now just grab a present and be done with it!” he replied, wrapping himself up in the throw. Rei rolled his eyes and pulled the two envelopes out of the branches of the Christmas tree. He plopped himself down by Nagisa’s side, not quite within cuddling distance, but close enough to feel one another’s warmth and handed the reindeer one to the young writer. The blond laughed at the poor illustration. “You did this at work, didn’t you? Is it a summons?”

“I should hope you are never in need of my services,” Rei declared loftily, carefully opening his
envelope. “At least, my professional services. Anything else I can offer you, I will.” When the attorney pulled out the cooking class vouchers, he gave a small look of surprise. “How astoundingly practical of you,” he joked. “Thank you.” Nagisa grinned.

“If we like it, there’s an aphrodisiac cooking class associated with it,” the young blond snickered as he tore into his little gift, only to be faced with confusion. Out fell a ticket and a hand-scrawled note on lined paper, likely torn from a journal of some sorts. His boyfreind blushed. Nagisa examined the ticket that had fallen out. “‘Innocence Foundation’s Annual Charity Ball,’ ” he read aloud, “December 31st, 10pm to January 1st, 2am.’ Rei, what’s this?”

“An invitation,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I attend the function every year, and there’s always been a plus-one associated with it, so I thought you might like to come. It’s a very formal event, associated with a charity that overturns wrongful convictions based off of DNA evidence,” he informed his beau. “But that’s not really the gift...” he finished, cheeks glowing as he handed Nagisa the scrap of paper that had fallen.

“Let’s see,” the blond hummed. “‘One shopping trip, sans complaints, for a suit or dress, to be paid for by Rei Ryuugazaki.’ Oh, Rei!” He dropped the note and flung his arms around his beau. “That’s so nice! I don’t have anything that’s ball-worthy, after all.” The attorney colored himself even more deeply.

“It’s a bit of a selfish request, even then. I’m afraid I’ll need to find myself a tuxedo or something and I’d rather hoped you would help me...” he confessed. Nagisa grinned obligingly.

“Of course!” he responded as he pulled another set of packages toward them - a heavy but small one for himself, and a medium one for Rei (from himself, of course). They opened the two together. His was book - the movie of which he’d seen before - called Confessions of a Shopaholic. “Oh, I didn’t know this was a book!” he exclaimed. “Thanks! I hardly ever have time to find a good one for myself?”

“You’re welcome,” Rei responded as he examined his ‘Art of Shaving’ kit. Nagisa jumped in to explain.

“It’s a cosmetic thing. It’ll help condition your skin and keep it soft and youthful, but it also gives a nice clean shave - it had really good reviews online, and Michael from our publishing department swears by it, and I think he has a thing for Hana, which means he has good judgment,” he rambled. Rei chuckled and kissed him lightly to stop him.

“It’s lovely. I never would’ve thought to buy something like this for myself,” he commented, rubbing his ever-so-slightly stubbled chin. The blond blushed at the praise, and grabbed his last gift to Rei - and coincidentally the first one he’d bought. “All right, last one,” the brunet murmured. “I’m afraid my last gift for you was among those you took to your father’s. It should be in your stocking. These other ones are just for decoration,” he explained, gesturing to the other boxes in the corner. “They make for good storage.”

“Didn’t your family bring you anything for your birthday?” the blond asked with a frown, finishing off his mimosa.

“No,” Rei replied smoothly, gently removing the wrapping paper, “they’re bringing back things from Japan instead. Sake, maybe a cookbook... I hope to God Daiki doesn’t think it’ll be funny to bring me back anything from Akihabara this year. He still acts like a teenager, honestly.” Nagisa giggled, sensing a story in there but too distracted by the food to ask. Meanwhile, the lawyer examined the exposed box, taking note of the store name, and opened it, revealing the lovely silk lavender tie and pocket square. “Oh my,” he hummed, gently taking them and holding them to the light, “these are
lovely,” he complimented.

“They’ll look great with chrome, which is like, most of your wardrobe, but I’d hold off on wearing them until January at the earliest. They should make a good spring color, too. You’ll really stand out in court,” the fashionista informed him. Rei nodded, beaming at the thoughtfulness behind the gesture.

“Thank you,” he replied sincerely, tucking them back in carefully. “I like the pocket square. It’ll give me a touch of your personality,” he chuckled. They spent a moment placing the excessive mess of wrapping paper into the brown packages around them. “So,” Rei began after a moment, “when are we going to start cooking dinner? I suppose we ought to practice before our class.”

“Soon,” Nagisa replied breezily. “Finish cleaning yourself up and I’ll actually get dressed and maybe take a bath. It’s too early for more ibuprofen, isn’t it?” The brunet looked momentarily taken aback.

“We used so much lubricant, I was sure there was no way you could be in that much pain today,” he replied, worry creeping into his voice.

“I’m not really,” the blond sighed. “It’s just my thighs. It’s a hard position to hold, you know, and we haven’t been running very much thanks to this weather.” He gestured out the window to the fresh snow. “If I can’t have more, then do you have any epsom salt? I can just bathe in that.”

“I do, it’s under the sink in the bathroom. I’ll help you up,” he offered, sticking his hand out for the smaller man to hold. They walked up the stairs together, Rei with his shaving kit under one arm and the other around Nagisa’s waist. When they got to the bathroom, he spent his time making slow sense of these new cosmetics while his young boyfriend soaked in the tub.

“So is your brother coming here eventually?” Nagisa inquired curiously, referencing the attorney’s earlier comments about his family.

“Yes - he and Satsuki usually come home around February or March, depending on when basketball season ends. Why do you ask?”

“I’d like to meet them,” the writer confessed, lifting a calf out of the water and massaging it gently. “You talk about them a lot, after all.” Rei glanced over his shoulder as he applied the high-quality shaving cream, a surprised look etched on his face.

“Do I really? Daiki is such a thorn in my side,” he responded wearily, giving his beau a good laugh.

“You do! I can tell you love them,” he stated matter-of-factly. The attorney smiled.

“Well, that’s true as well,” he agreed, gently taking a razor to his face, as Nagisa shut his eyes and slipped all the way into the hot water. They continued quietly for a bit, and by the time Rei had finished experimenting with his new shaving kit, the blond saw no need to carry on in the bathroom by himself. For cooking purposes, he didn’t wear anything too nice, instead picking out his sweatpants and a long sleeved shirt. His boyfriend was as stubbornly formal as ever, in a white button down and grey slacks. Once they had made their way to the kitchen, Rei had tossed on an apron and turned to Nagisa with an inquisitive look on his face.

“All right, what’s first then?” he asked the blond who sat at the counter with his laptop.

“We need to start with the carrots, I think,” he replied. They’d need to sit in the oven for awhile, whilst the duck would be cooked in a skillet. The attorney cocked a brow.

“Well before that, we need to get everything out,” he pointed out rationally, pulling this and that out
of his kitchen. Nagisa rolled his eyes.

“Well, why’d you ask me what to start with, then?” he grumbled as he scrolled up to the ingredients list. “Grab a baking sheet, olive oil, and spices,” he instructed before Rei could bicker back. The older man did as told with a wry smile. “Toss the carrots in the pan with the spices and olive oil,” the writer relayed from the recipe, “and make sure they’re coated. Oh, and season with salt and pepper. Oh, we need to preheat the oven!” While the attorney made busy with the preparation of the carrots, the blond set the oven to 400 degrees. “The carrots stay in for 25 minutes, so I can do the duck while they cook.”

Nagisa grabbed the skillet that his boyfriend had provided and tossed the spices in. “Okay, toast the spices until fragrant,” his murmured to himself, turning on the stove and tossing in his ingredients. “Coriander, and there’s some cumin, the cinnamon, and... star anise, okay.” From behind him, Rei snickered. “What’s that about?” the blond protested with a mock pout.

“You certainly like to talk to yourself while cooking, hmm?” the brunet pointed out from where he prepared the carrots quietly.

“Cooking’s boring without background noise!” he protested. “If we aren’t going to talk or listen to music, what else can I do? Besides, I have to keep track of what I’m doing somehow.” Rei laughed.

“It’s just rather cute, listening to all your fussing,” he admitted, and the blond blushed, embarrassed at his perfectionist tendencies, but pleased with the attention nonetheless.

“Oh, hush up and put the carrots in the oven,” he retorted, tossing around the spices in the skillet. The kitchen fast became fragrant with the warm, sharp scent of seasoning. It didn’t take more than a couple of minutes before they were ready to transfer to a grinder. “Rei, will you grind the spices for me? I have to do the duck,” he said.

“Of course,” he replied, quickly setting a timer on his phone for the carrots before he set to grinding the spices. The blond pulled the naked bird from where it lay thawing on the counter and rubbed it with salt and pepper. Giggling, he stood it up, holding it by the wings and wiggled it around.

“Look, Rei, it’s dancing!” he laughed as he messed around. The lawyer huffed with amusement.

“Nagisa, stop playing with the food,” he reprimanded, trying to hide his smile. His lover just picked it up and continued to shake it in his face.

“Dance with me Rei!” he begged in a high pitched voice. “Love me!” The older man ducked away in disgust.

“Rub me all over with those spicy hands!” he kept on, and finally the brunet snickered. The pleasant sound distracted the blond enough that the duck slipped right out of his hands and onto the floor with a smack. The couple froze. “Oh shit,” the younger man breathed, biting his lip to keep from laughing at Rei’s horror-struck face as he scooped up the bird. “Um, meat doesn’t bruise like fruit, right?”

“Of course not, but -” The blond pursed his lips and interrupted with, “Well, then no one will know!” and plopped the bird right back on the counter as his boyfriend groaned. “Now hand over those spices.” Meekly, the younger man finished dressing the bird while Rei reheated the skillet.

“All right, it says to place it skin-side down,” the attorney informed him, glancing at Nagisa’s Mac.

“Which side is skin-side down? The entire thing’s covered in skin,” the writer complained.
“I’d guess it would be the side with the greatest surface area - the top,” Rei informed him wryly, taking the bird and placing it in the pan. The mouthwatering scent of roasting meat complemented the sweet smell of the spiced carrots that began to spill in the kitchen. Simultaneously, the couple breathed in deeply and traded a satisfied look. Who ever said they were bad cooks, anyways?

Rei glanced at the timer on his phone and informed his beau, “The carrots should be finished right when the duck needs to go in - a few more minutes.” He left the duck behind as he grabbed a set of tongs. Gripping the breast carefully, he began to flip it, only to have the tongs slip straight out of his hands and clatter to the floor. In his struggle to grab them again, his fingers landed straight in the skillet. “Shit!” Rei cursed, startling Nagisa, who had never heard him swear beyond a quiet mumble. He scrambled out of the way of the sink, where his boyfriend poured ice cold water over his hand. The blond rushed to his side, right as the carrot timer went off.

“Are you all right?!” he gasped, peeking over his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine - the duck!” he shoed Nagisa, who remembered that the bird and carrots needed to switch places. Frantically pulling out some paper towels, the young man flipped the bird with his bare hands, opened the oven, and shoved it on the rack above the vegetables. He pulled out the carrots and tossed them onto the counter where a nicer platter awaited them, and used the tongs on the floor to transfer them over.

“Okay, that’s done at least,” he muttered. He grabbed the glass pan the carrots had been in, stupidly forgetting oven mitts or paper towels. “Hot, hot, hot,” he muttered as he dashed over to the sink at Rei’s side.

“Nagisa, wai -” but the attorney’s warning came too late. Without thinking, the writer shoved the oven-hot pan under the ice-cold water, where in his pale hands it immediately shattered into a hundred pieces. The blond cried out in shock and withdrew his hands as Rei stumbled back from the mess, tripping over his own feet and landing butt-first on the ground. Who was it that said they were good cooks, again? Nagisa wondered as they looked at the disaster that was the kitchen right now.

For a moment, they simply surveyed the damage, the younger man joining his beau on the floor. They looked at each other, stunned. And in the camaraderie of this disaster, they broke into unabashed laughter, their howling echoing throughout the room.

“Is your hand all right?” Nagisa inquired breathlessly, gently taking it in his own and examining it.

“Yes, I’m fine, but look at you!” Rei protested, switching their hands so that his gripped his boyfriend’s. “You’re bleeding!” The blond glanced down and saw that he was covered in cuts, with one particularly long gash spread across his palm. He realized he was stinging all over.

“Oh, Christ,” he muttered, “I guess I should take care of that.” And right as he spoke, the delicious aroma wafting around the kitchen took on a burnt edge. The blond perked up. “Oh my God, the duck! Rei, get the duck!” But his boyfriend was already on the job, scrambling to get oven mitts and just barely saving Christmas dinner from a most unfortunate fate (though the top was clearly quite burnt).

“Well, that’s that,” the older man concluded, pursing his lips. “I’ll go get the first aid kit. Try to stop the bleeding - a cut that size might need stitches...” As Rei left, the blond stood and pulled some clean paper towels over his hands, which had now begun to hurt as his adrenaline faded. What a day it was turning out to be.

“All right, let’s get ourselves patched up,” the attorney sighed when he returned, first aid kit in hand. “I’m worried some of my stuff might be rather old. Strange enough, I never had any disasters until
“You walked into my life,” he pointed out, softly taking his boyfriend’s bloody palm in his own. He continued to apply pressure to the wound, holding a paper towel firmly in place with his thumbs. Their eyes met and they shared an intimate smile.

“You never had any fun, either,” Nagisa retorted, his cheeks a shade of pale pink. They were so close...

“Well, I’ll admit to that,” Rei conceded, and they leaned in for a chaste kiss. “Now, have you stopped bleeding?” He removed the towel and gently rubbed antibiotic ointment onto the cuts, taking care with the biggest one. “It’s long, but not deep... It shouldn’t need stitches, I don’t think.” By the time he’d finished wrapping his young beau’s fingers and palm in band-aids, Nagisa was sure his hands looked like Frankenstein’s. He grimaced at the sight, but that’s what he got for not being careful, he supposed. He deftly swapped places with Rei, to the attorney’s faint surprise.

“All right, your turn.” Ever so softly, he placed a kiss to the reddening welt across his boyfriend’s fingers. His face went red beneath his glasses. Nagisa used a cream and antibiotic ointment across the three fingertips that got burnt and wrapped them snugly in band-aids. “All set!” Rei grinned fondly, but ever the efficient man, steamrolled right along.

“Thank you. Do you know what time your father is expecting us? We ought to turn off the oven and leave the food in to stay warm.” Nagisa checked the time on his laptop, miraculously unscathed by the fiasco.

“It’s only mid-afternoon, and I said we’d be there around four. We have some time before we’ve got to get going.” The blond took a seat at the counter again, powering down his laptop and setting it aside. Rei leaned over beside him.

“Is there anything you want to do? It’s close to dinner, but we didn’t have a very big breakfast - are you hungry?” The writer hummed thoughtfully.

“Not yet... But I bet a walk would do just the trick! What do you think? Hyde Park is just around the corner, after all. Seems a shame not to take advantage of it while we’re here,” he pointed out. Rei nodded.

“That’s a wonderful idea. We should enjoy the white Christmas while it lasts. It’s supposed to warm up today,” he replied.

“We’ll still need to change, though,” Nagisa mused. “There’s no way I’m going out looking like this.” He gestured to his tracksuit, and pranced off to the bedroom. The older man followed him, likely to grab a sweater or jacket of some sort, while the blond constructed his outfit. He switched out his sweats for a sleek pair of black skinny jeans and tossed a long wool coat over his uni pullover. A scarf, beanie, and his gold necklace finished the athletichic look. His beau had simply added his one blue sweater and grey coat. The younger man took his proffered arm, and out the door they went.

The sun peeked in and out of high clouds to highlight the sparkling powder below their feet. Every step made a light ‘poof, poof’ as they made their way around the block and into the park. The little blond breathed in the cold, fresh air, and exhaled a satisfied sigh in the form of a little fog, and then cuddled closer to his boyfriend.

“Say, Nagisa,” Rei began curiously as he dropped the writer’s arm and wrapped it around his waist instead, “you know a bit about my most recent ex, but I’ve never heard a word about yours.” The blond’s finely sculpted brows shot up.

“What’s this about?” he inquired. He wasn’t exactly bothered by the question, but it seemingly came...
“Nothing in particular. I’m just curious.” With a chuckle, he added: “I wonder if I might have to deal with a huge, buff man pounding at my door at night?” Nagisa laughed at the picture.

“Certainly not, but I guess you’re not far off the mark. To be honest, when we first met, I was surprised I found myself attracted to you,” the columnist confessed. “I’ve had the tendency to go with shorter and admittedly larger men. Gym rats, I guess you could call them.” He paused, thinking back on his last boyfriend, James, and flinched a little. “I definitely had a thing for the ‘alpha male’ type.”

“Goodness, I couldn’t be further from that. How on earth did you end up with me?” the brunet joked with a self-deprecating tone. Nagisa hurriedly jumped in to chase away his negativity.

“Well, firstly because you’re wonderful,” he reminded his beau, leaning into his side. “But I think it’s because you’re so different that I love you as much as I do.” He closed his eyes sleepily and allowed Rei to lead him onward for awhile. “Besides, you’re much more in control than you think you are,” he informed his boyfriend some time later.

“I really don’t feel that way outside of a courtroom. I don’t even remember what I said when we first met,” he chuckled. “I just remember hoping that whatever I said, it wasn’t insulting. I completely short-circuited, like I was on my first case all over again,” he groaned as his boyfriend laughed at him.

“If I remember correctly, you described the plot of an old western to me.” Rei rolled his handsome violet eyes.

“What a first impression that must have made,” he complained. The blond smiled warmly despite the air’s chill.

“I remember Gou asked me if you were ‘cute as a button’, ‘sexy hot as a pepper’, or ‘storybook handsome’,” he informed Rei, “and I said you were none of the above, and all of the above, and I’ll hold true to that. Your first impression was exactly who you are.” Softly, in the light of the day, their chapped lips touched.

“I could say the same for you.” The lawyer tucked a stray golden lock behind his exposed ear, and fixed his beanie. “A little bit different in every way - a little loud, a little annoying, and perfectly good and cheerful. You’ve become the light of my life.” Nagisa’s face went so pink that the sudden warmth stung his chilled cheeks that had grown quite numb. The older man chuckled and wrapped his trendy scarf around his face one more time.

“Meanie,” he pouted through the extra layer of fabric. The attorney laughed at the display.

“You’re just as different for me as I am for you. Most of my relationships have been with like-minded men, more of a good match than a true relationship. I’ve never really fought with anyone before you. I certainly never pictured myself as much of a bickerer.” Nagisa visibly stuck out his tongue.

“Well, you are, so there. You’re nitpicky, too.” They both knew that the blond was just trying to get a rise out of his beau, and without hesitation, the brunet silenced him with another kiss, deep and heady, unlike the previous brush of their lips. Blood rushed to Nagisa’s head, and he wrapped his mittened hands around Rei’s neck, leaving himself at that wicked attorney’s mercy. The brunet dipped him down just enough for the blond to gasp into the kiss. “I take it back,” the writer summed up as they separated and his boyfriend stood him up straight, “you’re my type. An alpha male to the
“I most certainly am not,” Rei protested. “Besides, that’s what you get for teasing someone older and wiser.”

“Oh, come off it, you old fart,” Nagisa joked, jabbing a hand into his beau’s stomach as a bit of revenge.

“Oof,” he gasped, bending over slightly. The blond squirmed out of his grasp and immediately heaved an armful of snow at him.

“Take that!” he shouted, slipping out of throwing distance. The very affronted lawyer packed together a snowball and, with the utmost concentration upon his face, hurled it at Nagisa, hitting him square in the back.

“Doing track means shot put!” he hollered after the blond’s retreating form. He hadn’t considered that. Taking a defensive pose, he dove in after Rei, messily tossing up snow to his face. A sputtering sound told him he was successful in his endeavor, and off to his side he saw Rei’s trademark red glasses dusted with snow. The blond wasn’t nice enough to give them back.

“You certainly aren’t playing fair today,” the brunet remark with a dour look on his face.

“You ever play fair?” he taunted from his stronghold behind the tree before ducking back to safety. Rei’s voice, however, didn’t cheer up.

“I’m bloody freezing,” he complained, “just give me my glasses and let’s be done with this frigid weather.” A prick of guilt emerged in the blond’s heart - he had doused the lawyer in the face and down the back with snow, whilst he had only been hit once on the jacket. He emerged from the spot and, hoping to keep his boyfriend in good spirits, joined him with a meek smile - only to be smattered in the face with so much snow, that the only indication Rei had been joking with him was the vibrato laugh from his side. Nagisa wiped off his eyes.

“I don’t play fair?” he muttered. With a deft hand, the brunet took his glasses back and perched them on his face gracefully.

“I have to keep up with you somehow. Now why don’t we go in for some cocoa and a light lunch?” Nagisa had been right - a walk and a snowball fight was just what they both needed to be ready for food. Not one to let hard feelings over pranks linger, he threaded his arm through Rei’s once more and kissed his cold cheek, the melting snow caught on his lashes brushing the tanned face ever so slightly.

“All right. I’m about ready now!”

The day had grown slightly late, and after a cheerily romantic lunch (followed by glass clean up), they found themselves scurrying to get ready for their evening with Nagisa’s family. The older man made himself quite respectable in his usual grey ensemble, accented with his red sweater and glasses. He had to switch out the soaked trousers and coat for a different set, though. The blond revamped his entire outfit to complement his boyfriend’s. Using Gunn plaid pants (a rather wild purchase, admittedly) as a base, he carefully selected a white shirt and layered a neutral navy sweater over for warmth. His newly shining gold necklace added a touch of formality while a deep red coat gave him...
a pop of color, and at last equestrian style boots topped the look off. They carefully packed their nearly-disastrous Christmas dinner in nice plates and saran wrap - Rei made sure they remembered the serving tools as Nagisa waltzed out the door and to the car without a second thought.

The sun had taken the edge off of any ice that had been on the roads, and while more populated areas had been dusted with salt, driving was still slow. It took them 20 minutes longer to drive to the hospital than it normally would have, leaving their duck and carrots in the precarious situation of growing cold.

“Hurry up, Rei!” Nagisa fretted as the warmth of the food in his lap grew lesser.

“If I go any faster on roads like this, we’ll be deader than the duck,” he shot back testily. “I’m sure they’ll have appropriate facilities to warm it up with.” The blond sighed and glanced out the window. It was dark enough that the Christmas lights on the streets had now lit up one last time, casting tiny fractals of color over his skin.

“It doesn’t change the fact that I’m bored. I want to see everyone open their presents!” he pouted.

“Ever the child, I see,” Rei retorted with a grin. “Don’t worry, it’s just around the corner,” he assured, cutting his boyfriend off before he had a chance to argue any more. Nagisa let out a tense sigh.

“Finally.” The older man pulled up alongside the curb, parking, and took the duck from the blond’s lap. The writer in turn collected the utensils and the carrots. The couple burst into the room, about fifteen minutes late, but received a warm reception.

“Nagisa! I was thinking it was about time for you to be showing up,” his father greeted, his smile illuminated by the lights of the tree (now considerably better decorated than it had been during Rei and Nagisa’s competition). Emi grinned from where she sat on the floor, a smuggled bottle of wine on the coffee table in front of her.

“About time. I figured that Rei would keep you on a tighter ship,” she observed, taking a swig of vino. The lawyer chuckled at the observation.

“Oh, no, I’ve quite got him at my own pace,” the younger man replied, laying the carrots on the table.

“I’m at his mercy most of the time,” his beau agreed. He thoughtfully took Nagisa’s red coat and hung it beside his grey one and Emi’s officer’s jacket. “So, are we to have food first, or shall we open gifts?” he asked, slightly uncertain. The blond had already joined his older sister on the floor and was pouring a glass of red for himself in a plastic cup.

“Wine first,” Emi stated, not hesitating to pour another. “We’ve got two bottles of Pinot and one Scotch between the four of us, and I don’t intend to bring any home with me.” The brunet nodded and sat on his knees between Nagisa and his father, who promptly noticed the bandaids.

“What on earth happened to cause that?” Ken asked as he sipped at his spirits, causing Nagisa to color greatly. He peek at his boyfriend with eyes that begged ‘don’t say anything about the dropped duck’. Rei grinned wryly.

“Several cooking mishaps. Nagisa thought it appropriate to buy us a voucher for a couples’ cooking class, and all I can say is that it’ll be most useful.” Emi snorted with laughter.

“Meanwhile, I’m here with a marvelous soup and a pie to boot,” she bragged to the general. Nagisa rolled his eyes, but couldn’t stop a grin. He’d forgotten about dessert!
“Aside from your injuries, how has your Christmas been?” Ken asked his son brightly.

“Absolutely peachy,” gushed the young man. “Did you know? Rei’s gone and invited me to a ball!” he bragged. “It’s the Innocence Foundation’s Charity Ball!” Emi’s eyebrows raised.

“My boss should be in attendance,” she commented, sipping at her wine. “I hear it’s quite the affair.” Meanwhile, Ken looked slightly confused.

“Pardon if I’m rude, but why on earth would something like that invite defense attorneys and officers?” A good question, thought Nagisa, as he turned to listen to his beau’s answer. Rei chipped in to explain.

“We’re invited mostly for appearances,” he said with a shrug. “It’s in the best interest of all groups involved to uphold justice, after all. Besides, the convictions they overturn have little to do with me. Most of them are cases from the 70’s and 80’s, before DNA evidence was common, and courts relied on eyewitness testimony,” he relayed professionally. Emi nodded, and clinked their plastic cups together.

“Well said,” she stated. “I can see why you’re well-respected as an attorney in my unit.” The brunet colored, and she grinned in a cheekily Hazuki way. To her brother, she said: “I had to investigate him myself a little, make sure my baby brother’s being cared for.” The young couple blushed heartily, the blond especially at his sister’s forwardness.

“Ugh, you suck,” he whined, looking for ample distraction from his father and sister’s amusement. He decided on the presents. “Let’s just get these over with so we can eat.” The writer’s personal philosophy was that if his family was eating, they couldn’t talk.

There were only a couple packages - most of the presents were unceremoniously stuffed inside the stockings. Among the larger presents was a mystery book for Rei, from Emi, a DIY spa kit that Nagisa had made up for his sister, and a tasting flight of Hibiki whiskey from Rei to Ken. Judging by the general rowdiness of the Hazukis, however, alcohol was the last thing they needed at the moment.

As Ken finished up his thank-yous to his son’s boyfriend, his daughter made busy passing stockings out to everyone. The young blond, hands as grabby as a child’s, made no hesitation in digging in.

Everyone’s stockings held a handful of sweets, but Nagisa found a sleek, marble-patterned iPhone case that was unique to his - a final gift from Rei. The lawyer himself found the credit card tool kit and a gift certificate to a top-notch restaurant for he and Nagisa to enjoy together, signed in Emi’s name. And of course, his father received the small but tech-savvy socks and insoles from his children, a gift immediately put to use.

“I feel my feet are better already,” he informed Nagisa cheerily as he helped the old man along. Emi offered to find facilities in which to heat their long-forgotten (yet hard-earned) dinner, leaving the three men on their own - two of which were quite near tipsy. Simultaneously, the man and his son leaned back into their respective seats with a contented sigh. Rei smiled as he refilled their wine glasses, and the officer quickly swung the door open, toting the most mouth-watering scent along with her.

“Your duck looks appalling, but if I’m any judge, it should be relatively unscathed,” she assessed, placing it on the coffee table.

“Bugger off!” Nagisa replied good-naturedly, dishing up a plate and passing it onto his father. The good wine gave his sister a rather purple tinted smile, which he must have been reciprocating. The
food would do them all good.

“Any other mishaps, other than tanning this poor bird’s hide?” she asked jokingly. Any wariness she may have had towards Rei in the beginning had melted away with wine and conversation. The attorney himself piped up.

“I was burned by the duck, but that’s not how Nagisa got hurt.” Throwing his arms up in defense, to the blond’s chagrin he informed them: “Before I could say anything, he took the pan the carrots were in, piping hot out of the oven -” Emi interrupted him to groan, having guessed where it’d end “… and dunked it in ice cold water. There was glass all over the place.” He made a broad gesture, and the other two Hazukis howled with laughter at their youngest counterpart, now flaming with embarrassment. So much for not talking while they ate! So while the duck carried the ever-so-slightly present aftertaste of char, they washed it down with delicious soup and strong spirits. And when full tummies and rosy cheeks turned to drowsy eyelids, the couple decided that it was time for Christmas Day to come to a close. The siblings helped their father into bed, Emi called herself a cab, and Rei carefully helped his boyfriend into the passenger side of his car.

In his tipsy state, Nagisa found himself absolutely tickled by how well his quiet boyfriend fit in with the group, and how easily they accepted him - and all the challenges accompanying - into their ranks. Perhaps, he imagined, it was the spirit at Christmas hard at work. With happy thoughts, he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool window as his beau drove away, under the colorful London lights.

Chapter End Notes

if u want my advice dont get used to all the fluff >:^)
With the end of December came the return of the rain, and of Nagisa to his own house. He was still seeing Rei quite often, on account of their coffee shop lunch dates, but for once their conversations were predominantly in the blond’s area of expertise - modern, cutting-edge fashion. Only the main cause of their last four arguments, post-Christmas.

“A simple black tuxedo isn’t gonna cut it if you want to stand out,” Nagisa maintained, trying to get his boyfriend to come around to the idea of an actual color. “And not a word about that lavender set I got you, it’s too pale to be appropriate for evening, really - not if you want to keep classy about it.” The brunet was haughtily ignoring him in favor of the crossword, and the younger man put his chin in his hand, his elbow against the tabletop. He was right. He knew he was, and he knew Rei knew too.

“Cobalt,” the older man scrawled stubbornly in the 12-down spot. Nagisa blinked and snapped his fingers.

“That’s it! How about a cobalt tux?” he proposed, excitement plain in his voice. The attorney sighed, turning to face his boyfriend for the first time in ten minutes.

“I don’t even know what color that is,” he stated warily, watching as his young boyfriend whipped out his phone. His face softened slightly as he saw the case he’d given Nagisa between his stylish fingers. The blond pulled up a Google search of the color, and his beau was immediately taciturn again. “Oh, certainly not. I won’t be shoved in some electric blue monkey-suit,” he huffed, swiveling back around.

“Well, obviously we’d pick a darker tone. More of a saturated navy than bright blue,” Nagisa quipped. Rei snapped his briefcase closed, and the newspaper along with it.

“No.” The blond grit his teeth.

“Listen, dear, do you want my help or don’t you?” The fashionista delivered the ultimatum, standing from his chair with his hands on his hips. “‘Cause if you do, you’re gonna have to listen to me without throwing my advice out the door, you know.” The lawyer sighed with a defeated look, and stood as well.

“I don’t mean to be difficult. I do want your help.” He bent over and kissed Nagisa on the cheek as they exited the coffee shop. Brushing off the older man’s lapels, the sunny boy smiled pointedly.

“Then I’ll see you on Wednesday,” he stated in a manner-of-fact way that was beginning to resemble the humbled man before him. “Now, off you go. Have a good rest of your day.”

On account of continuing cold weather, the pair had postponed their jogging sessions for a shopping trip, and not a day too soon. New Year’s Eve was on a Saturday night this year and what between
Nagisa’s article and a sudden wrench in Rei’s case, they wouldn’t have time to look for clothes on any other day. Back at the office, Gou and Hana were ever helpful in narrowing down the options beforehand with their unlimited knowledge of the go-to trends.

“Cobalt’s a good move,” Hana agreed with Nagisa when he relayed the hour’s events, “but what exactly does the invitation say is the dress code?” The blond groaned.

“It says formal, but Rei insists that people go in anything from cocktail dresses and suits to full-on black tie tuxes! I hardly know what to do with that!” he whined, appealing to his friends for help. Gou looked aghast, and Hana, thoughtful. An icy voice from behind the trio scared them out of their minds.

“If you want my advice,” cut in their boss, “the three of you should get back to work.” Slowly, sheepishly, they turned to face Ms. Amakata, whose finely sculpted brow arched over a watchful eye. Gou scurried to her lunch break, and Hana dashed to her shoot, leaving the heartily embarrassed blond to type a few uncertain words on his open document. The editor turned on her heels, and he let out a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding, buckling down to get some work done.

It wasn’t ten minutes later that he received an email from the older woman. In his paranoia, he glanced to her ice-cube office. His rosy eyes found her brown ones, and her face was much frozen in the expression it had before. She cocked a brow. He hurriedly read the notice.

“Go with sleek and modern, but not cocktail - M. Amakata,” it read. When he glanced up once again, she smiled at him pleasantly, if not with an edge of exasperation, and tapped her computer with a pen. At ease, the blond continued with his article, much more eloquently.

Once Wednesday had crept on the couple, Nagisa had finally chosen a style for their outfits, thanks to his boss and endless Pinterest boards. He and Rei had decided to meet up at their usual coffee shop, around ten in the morning, for a bite to eat and a bit of direction from there. The attorney had suggested a few suit boutiques, but resigned himself to the fact that those were last on the list. He would dress to match Nagisa, as opposed to the other way around, considering the young man’s penchant for bold statement pieces. The blond, at present, relayed his ideas to his beau.

“I came up with a two-piece for myself. I can’t do any of that midriff-bearing formalwear Gou wrote about, but I thought a skirt and button down would be quite appropriate,” he informed the older man, sipping at his blessedly hot coffee. The snow may have melted, but it remained dreadfully cold.

“You mean like a business ensemble?” Rei questioned, a frown forming on his face - the likes of that would be too casual at a party. The writer grinned wryly, imagining it.

“No, it’s a full, floor-length skirt. Ballroom style, you know. It’s become a trend.” The lawyer just looked confused, and his boyfriend laughed at the look. “The white button-down will dress down the look of the skirt, giving a more modern appearance,” he informed his beau graciously. Rei waved him off.

“Whatever you say. I trust you,” the brunet replied. He stood and tossed his finished coffee. “Are you about ready to go? You know which store we’re headed to?” Nagisa nodded, preparing himself to leave the warm store behind. His lover easily offered his arm for the blond to cuddle up to, which he did without hesitation, now much happier to be on the way.

It was a fifteen minute walk to get out of the business district (they paused in front of Elite’s building to snapchat a photo to Nagisa’s coworkers). The square they came to was rather a favorite haunt of those working for the magazine, and the blond and his friends were of no exception. An upscale
area, many of the storefronts had been featured in the glossy pages of the high-class magazine.

“See that store over there, Rei?” The blond tugged on his boyfriend’s arm and pointed to an unassuming, quiet front with an old fashioned baker’s window. “That’s where I got your tie and pocket square. They have menswear too, as I recall. Do you want to drop in after we’ve picked up my skirt?”

“Yes, that sounds lovely. But where was it you wanted to go, anyhow?” his older beau asked him, eyes glittering with chill from behind his glasses. The blond grinned.

“That one.” He pointed to an elegant white facade three storeys high - easily the tallest of the buildings in the little London square. The front windows featured everything from glittering jewelry to elegant dresses. He’d come here once before to take pictures for Gou, and had fallen in love with the window displays.

The inside was equally graceful. The high windows illuminated a lattice work wooden walkway that the blond swore was the path to heaven. On either side was plush red carpet. Jewelry displays with emeralds, diamonds, and sapphires lined either side, casting tiny fractals of light onto their pillows. Designer names hung above them. The fashionista felt like he could cry every time he walked in.

Without any heed to his surroundings, Nagisa dashed to the escalator, followed closely by his scolding beau. The next floor was much like the first, except instead of jewelry, bags, and shoes, there were mannequins done up in finery - silks, velvets, and furs decorated each and every one. The couple approached the register, informed the attendant that they had a hold on a skirt, and left for the dressing room to try it on - the woman had already set it aside.

“May I show you to your room, Mr. Hazuki?” the attendant asked pleasantly, introducing herself as Hannah. She opened a door slightly down the hall, allowing him into another perfectly private area with a mirror. His skirt and a matching white blouse hung beside it neatly, not an inch of the fabric touching the ground. “Please tell me if you need any other sizes, or if I can get you anything like water, tea... And if you would like, I can bring you a pair of shoes in your size as well,” she offered. Nagisa nodded, not sure which one he was agreeing to.

“My shoe size is a women’s ten,” he informed her distractedly, his eyes glued to the outfit. She smiled in acknowledgment and ducked out of the room to give him his privacy. As soon as she shut the door behind her, the blond tore his plain clothes off of his body and slipped into the ensemble.

The skirt was a floor-length, full A-line black taffeta with pleats and an embroidered chiffon layer on top. Winter flowers of all sorts were stitched finely over the fabric, in deep reds, cherry-blossom pinks, mint greens, and pastel blues. He had picked out a fitted three-quarter sleeve white blouse to go with it, offsetting the traditional old-style embroidery with a sleek and professional edge. He tied the back in a waist-hugging bow and checked his appearance in the mirror. “Oh, yes,” he breathed. In one hand, he gathered up his skirts and pushed the dressing room door open.

The attendant gave him a pair of simple heels and helped him arrange the dress as he stepped up onto the platform and examined himself in the mirror. Through the reflection, he saw his boyfriend’s exceptionally pleased face when they caught one another’s gaze and smiled. Nagisa felt rather like a bride.

“It’s absolutely perfect, dear,” the brunet summed up easily, picking up an edge of the chiffon and twiddling with it in his fingers.

“Isn’t it just?” agreed the younger man enthusiastically, admiring himself in the mirror.
“Since it didn’t take long to find,” Rei offered, “I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to find a new pair of shoes, or something else to go with it.” The blond hummed, not one to want to give up such a fine opportunity, but ultimately pursed his lips and sighed.

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary. Even though it’s on sale, the combined price of the shirt and the dress is almost too much,” he replied, reluctantly stepping down from the mirror. He was sure a necklace or a pair of earrings would absolutely make this outfit, but it was fine on its own.

“Well, it’s how much - £3,250? The budget I set for myself was £4,000, you know, and even then, I was prepared to pay more if you really wanted something...” Rei admitted, uncrossing his arms from where he’d stood to admire his beau. He stroked Nagisa’s cheek, and the attendant had the tact to look away.

“I hope that wasn’t including your suit,” the younger man pouted, really wanting to say yes, but at the same time having no desire to give into his older boyfriend’s wiles. He slipped out of his grip and hurried back to the dressing room, changing back into his everyday wear and emerging again as the plain Nagisa, the skirt and shirt tucked safely into his arms. “Well, let’s get going, we haven’t got all day,” he ordered. That ought to put the idea of shopping for anything other than a suit out of Rei’s mind. The attorney checked his phone.

“Oh, you’re right. We really should be on our way.” Distraction, success. The attorney furrowed his brow and briskly walked after the attendant to the register to pay, and a moment later he came back with a large bag slung over his arm. “All right, let’s go to the menswear store,” he said, grabbing Nagisa’s hand and dragging him out. The blond was quite pleased - he loved the idea of getting to play dress-up with his boyfriend and maybe get him out of grey for once in his life. He even thought that shopping for his boyfriend would most likely be more fun than shopping for himself.

The couple popped back out on the road and walked a few stores down to the unassuming yet regal single-storey front. A sign at the front dubbed it Regis St. Menswear, est. 1918 - just the sort of classy place that would suit the rather interested-looking attorney at his side.

“Let’s go!” Nagisa enthused, tugging his boyfriend in and immediately scanning the store for anything acceptable to him.

The shop had a collection of classy outfits that made the blond’s mouth water. Nothing stood out as tacky or inappropriate, and the more he cast his gaze about, the more in love he fell in love with these clothes. Or at least, the idea of Rei in these clothes. On one side of the room stood tall, uncrowded racks with tweeds of all shades, from earthen greens to peppered browns to textured greys. The other side held lightweight, summery feeling suits. On either side of the register were the most expensive selections - all the fixtures for tuxedos, with white dinner jackets, the classic black, and the more modern navy. Dotted intermittently throughout the store were tables presenting folded shirts, some patterned and colorful, others as prim and proper as the one Rei currently wore. And of course, the beautiful cufflinks and ties with which Nagisa was quite familiar. He tugged on his beau’s arm and pointed to them.

“That’s where I found your gift. They’ve replaced it with a lovely red set, see? Oh, these are the cufflinks I wanted to buy you. I couldn’t afford them, though. Swarovski, you know. Don’t you think this color is lovely?” His amused boyfriend nodded and commented a soft “I see”, while the noise drew the attention of an employee that had been helping another customer.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” an older, stately man greeted the pair. Nagisa tore his eyes away from a lemon-yellow tie that he was absolutely sure he’d never convince Rei to wear. “Is there a particular occasion you’re shopping for today?”
“Yes, a formal charity event,” Rei informed him. The employee graciously extended a hand.

“If you’d like, sir, you may wait over here. My colleague can take your measurements and we can begin a fitting room for you.” When he turned to the blond, he waved the employee off to indicate he wouldn’t need assistance, but as soon as Rei’s back disappeared around the corner, Nagisa immediately dove into the racks.

“Oh, these would be too handsome on Rei,” he told himself as he picked his way through each and every suit, getting giddier at the prospect of his handsome, older partner dressed all fancy. He took a deep breath and smacked his cheeks. “All right, Hazuki, time to focus,” he told himself. It’d only take so long until Rei found him out, after all.

His first selection was a carmel Saxony tweed sport coat accented in slate blue. To go underneath, he picked out a cashmere cardigan in the accent color, and a cold navy tie polka-dotted in ivory. He wouldn’t find them here, but an actual pair of jeans would make that look - or maybe a pair of darker corduroys. And chestnut brown oxfords. He called over an employee to take the selection to Rei’s fitting room.

The next look would have to work with a courtroom environment as opposed to an everyday one. A particularly light grey suit with a closely tapered leg caught his attention. Perfect - not too far out of the lawyer’s comfort zone, but much more easy to accessorize brightly as opposed to the darker looks he went for. Lavender would be a good color. A black shirt, unbuttoned at the collar would make for a sexy casual look. And for the office, a blue-with-white pinstriped shirt and a white contrast collar - it would look perfect with any range of yellows and purples and maybe even reds! He handed it off to an employee with a selection of shirts as well. The poor man was beginning to look quite hassled.

Nagisa had just got his start on a navy suit with turquoise accessories when Rei himself came back from the tailoring area looking quite annoyed. Sheepishly, the blond put a double-breasted coat back on the rack when his boyfriend crossed his arms to match the crossed look on his face.

“Nagisa, what on earth is all that in my fitting room?” he demanded when the younger man slunk up to his side.

“I knew if I didn’t get started on it now, you’d never revamp your wardrobe,” he admitted, latching himself onto the other man’s arm pleadingly. “Won’t you try them on? For me? I even picked out a grey one...” He pouted. The attorney’s irritated look began to crumble the longer he tried to stare down his lover’s rosy gaze. It didn’t take him long to give in.

“Fine. I will try them on, but we are not buying anything except for a tuxedo. Do you understand?” he said firmly.

“Yes, sir!” the blond chirped while his thoughts said ‘fat chance’. He followed Rei back to the dressing area and found a place to sit beside a full-length mirror just outside the rooms. He crossed his legs and hurried his boyfriend along. “Now, go on, I want to see those combinations on you.”

Just as Nagisa started to get impatient, Rei’s face emerged from around the corner of a door. The blond perked up, but his beau wouldn’t move an inch pass that.

“Well, aren’t you going to show me?” he urged after they spent a minute just looking uncertainly at one another.

“... I feel silly,” the older man confessed. The blond caught a glimpse of the tweed sport coat and sighed.
“You said that when you tried out that blue sweater too, but you’ve worn it a couple times since, haven’t you?” he prompted. Offering a sympathetic smile, he sought Rei’s gaze. “I’m not going to laugh at you, you know. I love you how you are.” He saw the older man’s shoulders relax a touch. Jokingly, he added: “Besides, there’s no way I’d mock an outfit I made myself!”

“No, I suppose not,” the attorney replied with a cocked brow. The humor had at last coaxed him out, and he stepped toward Nagisa looking more dapper than ever in the combination, which featured lightly textured navy pants instead of jeans. His hands flew to his mouth to cover his smile while Rei paused to slip on a pair of brown oxfords, per the blond’s suggestion to the attendant.

“Oh my God, you look *so perfect,*” the younger man sighed. It brought out his nerdy side quite cutely, and the slight red influences in the tweed complimented his glasses. He couldn’t stop himself from hugging his boyfriend from behind. “I *love* it. What do you say, is it your style?” His boyfriend grinned bashfully.

“It’s a very English look, isn’t it?” he asked uncertainly, but the look in his eye as he saw himself in the mirror was one the blond knew quite well - he was adjusting to the look, and would feel pleased with it soon. Nagisa had felt that way the first time he wore an actual dress in uni.

“It is,” he agreed. “Very gentlemanly, just like you. I think it fits your casual image.” He stepped away from his boyfriend, checking him out from the front. “With jeans, it’s a wonderful date look, but slacks makes it appropriate for the office.” Rei hummed thoughtfully.

“I couldn’t wear this in court, but it could pass in the office. Well, anyways, onto the next one, I suppose,” he concluded, slipping back into the room without so much of a peep as to whether or not he’d actually purchase it.

His next look was the grey suit, in which he was considerably comfortable, and the blue contrast collar shirt. Without any proper accessories, it looked a little plain, and he supposed that was what made his boyfriend most comfortable.

“I’m rather pleased with this one,” Rei informed him with more confidence than he’d sported with the last one. Nagisa picked up a collection of ties beside him.

“That’s because you haven’t accented yet,” he informed his beau. “Now, you’re darker than I am, but you’ve still got a high contrast look to you, so in a paler suit like this, you need a color pop.” In front of the mirror, he held up a coral silk tie. “Pinks and lavenders are feminine colors, so most guys stay away from them,” he explained, “but that’s because most guys don’t know how to *use* them. A feminine color could potentially be more soothing to a victim when you meet them for the first time, for example.” Rei attentively nodded, and Nagisa swapped the pink out for a lovely shade of yellow. “Now, yellows are good for concentration, but cheerful, and blue is a tranquil color.” He hung a dark navy tie over Rei’s shoulder. “Grey suits are versatile in terms of accessories, so you should take advantage of your affinity for the color,” Nagisa pushed.

“I never thought colors would have a big impact on my work,” Rei sighed, gently setting aside the ties. “I must’ve appeared so grim to my clients, which certainly wouldn’t improve their confidence in me...” The blond smacked him lightly on the arm.

“None of that, dear. *You’re* terribly underconfident in yourself. And as for colors, it doesn’t have nearly as big of an impact as I’m making it out to. It’s more important to look well-dressed and comfortable, anyways,” he informed the man at his side. Softly he pet the spot on his arm that he’d lightly hit but Rei took his hand and kissed it.

“Thank you for your help,” he said. The tender look on his face made the young blond pause. Had
what he said really made such an impact?

“You’re welcome,” he replied absently, wondering why the attorney appeared almost sad.

The brunet modeled a few other looks, but Nagisa couldn’t get the look on his face out of his mind at all - had he said something wrong to bring it on? Was it that he admitted the lavender look was feminine? But try as he might to think of something, the blond was baffled as to what brought that bittersweetness on. He was temporarily distracted when Rei finally put on his tuxedo.

“Well, what do you think of this? Too traditional to match your skirt?” he asked when he came out, followed by the employee with a measuring tape, presumably for tailoring needs.

“Not at all!” the younger man enthused. Rei was in a classic one-button black jacket, but the slim size of the shawl lapels lent him greater height. Like the light grey suit, the mid-rise pants were tapered and well-fitted to his form. Black silk socks and patent leather shoes finished off the look.

“Have you picked out a tie and cufflinks, though?” he asked - that would be the most important matching factor. The attorney shook his head.

“I figured I would have you do it. I don’t know what to pick, since my glasses are red and your skirt’s got all sorts of colors in it.” Nagisa paused to think a moment.

“We want a modern look, so let’s bend the rules a bit. Of course, we have to stick with a black bow tie. A diamond knot should do the trick. But we can add color in the form of the pocket square and cufflinks,” he suggested. “Personally, I think a nice pink would give it quite a modern appeal, as opposed to jewel tones.”

“Like that color?” Rei asked, pointing to a fuschia tie and looking quite grim. Nagisa barked a laugh.

“No, I don’t think so,” he replied, glancing about the room. He scurried off for a moment and picked up a diamond-textured pocket square, pale rose-gold in color. The slightly red hue would accompany his skirt and Rei’s glasses quite perfectly. “This would be perfect,” the blond summed up as he brought it back. “I think a square fold would be excellent for an ultra-modern look, but if you insist, I can support a one-point.”

“A square fold sounds perfectly reasonable.” The attorney walked over to the table featuring the cufflinks and picked up a set of mother-of-pearl set in silver. “Do you think these would be nice?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Nagisa replied, quite pleased with the choice. The slight pink accents would go wonderfully with the pocket square, and the silver setting was in step with the modern cut of the suit. Most importantly, Rei himself seemed happy with the overall look, and with the fact that he’d accomplished his goal of dressing to match the blond. He added the pocket square and cufflinks to his bill, and the couple decided they would be on their way rather earlier than they’d expected. They spent their extra time window shopping along the streets, simply walking without aim. Nagisa was teasing Rei about his extra purchase that was previously deemed ‘unnecessary’.

“Honestly, you looked so embarrassed when you asked the guy to bring everything up to the register,” he laughed, picturing the brunet’s chagrined look when met with his boyfriend’s triumph. The older man huffed, but made no other reply. In the end, he’d bought everything Nagisa picked out short of the pale grey suit, since apparently he had one he didn’t wear often in the winter.

“Don’t tease me so much,” he muttered with a blush. “It’s a hard adjustment...” The blond reined in his comments, and his amused smile faded into an affectionate one.
“You’re right, sorry,” he apologized. “But why are you so opposed to the idea of changing your style?” he asked sincerely. “Usually people have more flexibility than you do, or at least more than one color in their closet.”

“I used to have more,” the attorney defended himself, “it’s just that Kent didn’t think it looked good or professional, so I just got rid of it all.” The blond stopped in his tracks, causing his boyfriend to lurch slightly against his arm. He turned back, surprised, and was met with Nagisa’s aghast face.

“You let someone control your style?” he cried. “I mean, if it’s your boss saying what is and isn’t acceptable at work, that’s one thing, but if it’s anyone else, why on earth would you listen? Who is Kent, anyways?”

“Kent is my ex-boyfriend I’ve mentioned a few times,” Rei explained briefly, as if that made it all okay. “I just wanted to look handsome for him, which is to be expected. And after we broke up, I didn’t feel like wearing colors anyhow, to the point where it became a habit.”

“That’s even worse!” he exclaimed, finally recovering enough to keep walking - they were blocking traffic, and people had given him weird looks. “Just for how long did this guy tear down your confidence in yourself?” he demanded, angry that a single person could have done this much damage to his lover’s sense of presentation. The more he heard of this ex, ‘Kent’ as he was called, the more he felt it was acceptable to hate him, jealousy that he’d been Rei’s first choice or not.

“He didn’t do away with my confidence,” the lawyer replied, “he just told me I didn’t look good. I think he was just trying to help.”

“Well, that was very nasty and controlling of him. A person’s sense of style is how they present their inner selves to the world, you know, and I think you’re a dynamic, complex man deserving of every color on the spectrum.” Rei paused and kissed him on the cheek.

“Your confidence in me really means a lot. But let’s not talk about him anymore. It’s over and done, and thank God for it, because now I have you.” At that moment, a nearby clock struck the hour, and a bell tolled in the distance. The older man sighed. “But not for much longer, apparently. I had to pencil in a client last minute today - I hope you’ll forgive me, but I’ll have to be on my way.” Nagisa smiled wryly - there was nothing to be done.

“All right. I’ll see you Saturday,” he replied, standing on his tiptoes to kiss his beau chastely upon the lips. Rei gave him a sharp nod.

“I look forward to it,” he replied easily, and they left each other at that.

The day in question came much sooner than Nagisa had anticipated. He’d been as buried in his article as his boyfriend had been in his cases. Wednesday had given him a whole host of experiences to work into his column, details ranging from reasons of reluctance to the feeling of freshness one felt when emerging in an outfit that was unquestionably them. It wasn’t until early evening that he was able to completely set his writing aside and focus on himself for a change. He’d soaked in his less-than-adequate (as compared to Rei’s) tub, giving himself a much needed exfoliating scrub, and began his cosmetic routine with a mask, tea, and some snacks. He was in the middle of a rom-com when the door opened and Haruka entered, carrying a black garment in a plastic bag.

“Hey, Haru,” Nagisa called to him. “What’s that?” His friend ignored the question, as he was prone to do.

“I thought you were working on your article all day,” he commented. He thought he noticed a
redness to his roommate’s cheeks - an uncommon occurrence. Perhaps it was due to the evening sun?

“The day’s almost up. What are you holding?” he tried again. “Why are you trying to hide it from me?” he whined as Haruka, shifted it out of view. His face was flushed, it seemed.

“It’s a tuxedo,” he confessed, if only to get the blond to stop pestering him. Suspicion crept into Nagisa’s mind. He paused his movie and draped his arms over the couch, an insufferably smug grin on his face. There weren’t many reasons his casual American friend would have his hands on a tux...

“Whatsoever do you have that for?” he pressed, and under the pressure of his triumphant smirk, the secretive Haruka began to confess all.

“I’m going to a party... with Makoto.” He flinched as the blond squealed out an “I knew it!”.

“So are you going to come with me, then? Is it the same one? We have to get you ready!” the blond plowed on, having completely forgotten his own engagement for the evening. His roommate, in an effort to worm out of the situation he’d put himself in, answered his questions with an characteristic straightforwardness.

“No, it’s not. I’m already good to go, just need to change. Besides, you’re leaving sooner than me. You should put makeup on, right?” And in the amount of time it took Nagisa to think he was right, he’d slunk out of view and into his own private world. Judging by his unusual embarrassment and the apparent effort he was making to impress, he’d fallen quite hard for the fairy tale prince. While Makoto must have certainly been easy to fall for, Nagisa was still quite surprised - he wasn’t Haruka’s usual type at all. An impulsive man by nature, Haruka had tended toward the ‘bad boy’ type in uni, having unwittingly ensnared a few of the blond’s would-be suitors over the course of their friendship. Not that the easy-going boy noticed at the time, of course.

The blond relinquished Haruka to his privacy without further fanfare. Besides, his friend had been right - he needed to get started on his makeup and hair if he wanted to make good time. Rei would be picking him up around 9:30, and while Nagisa was a little embarrassed that they would be arriving right on the dot as opposed to fashionably late, he was eager at the thought of exploring so fine a party.

His makeup was nothing too loud for an evening affair, all shimmering pinks and matte burgundies, with charcoal colored mascara and eyeliner, and only a tinted chapstick for his lips. He flipped his part to one side and took care to fluff up his natural curls. The effect was an asymmetric golden halo around his sparkling face. And when at last he slipped into his tight-fitting blouse and embroidered skirt, he felt he made quite the pretty picture.

A knock interrupted his brief self-inspection. Right on the dot as per usual, Rei stood at the door, as sharp as the blond had ever seen him, although obscured by a rather large coat and miffed expression (presumably a result of the night’s chill).

“Rei, come on inside,” Nagisa invited hurriedly. He may have had his clothes on, but that didn’t mean he was ready by any means.

“Do you have a coat? It’s likely to rain,” the lawyer informed him by way of a greeting.

“Yes, I just need to get everything else!” the blond called from his room, where he filled a clutch with the essentials - his lip tint, a credit card and cash, cellphone, keys, and extra eyeliner. He glanced once more in his mirror, ensuring he was nothing short of perfect, but an onset of nervousness caused him to think himself rather plain. His face formed a pout.
“What’s that look for?” Rei asked as he trailed in behind his lover, placing his coat over his shoulders. “You’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

“I feel underdressed,” he declared, not for the first time noticing his lack of accessories. His fingers traced his bare earlobes. He could’ve invested in a nice pair of earrings at least, but if he bothered to look through his collection now they’d most certainly be late.

“I think I can remedy that,” Rei replied most unexpectedly. The blond had the time to look incredulous before his beau undid the top couple buttons on his shirt, just far enough to expose his collarbone. A delicate color crept up his neck. He wasn’t in the habit of Rei seducing him. But the lawyer undressed him no farther, and instead procured a four-strand pearl choker with rows of smaller pearls in between to cover any empty space. It was light pink in color - a perfect match for the cufflinks and pocket square they’d purchased together. “I was on the way to my client,” he explained, “when I came across a jewelry shop and saw this in the window. I can’t explain how, but I knew you had to have it. I hope the gift doesn’t ruin your outfit, but I was hoping you’d wear it tonight.” The brunet clasped it around his neck. Nagisa was rendered speechless as he toyed with the collar. He took a moment to catch his breath.

“Of course. It’s gorgeous, Rei - thank you.” They kissed each other, and once Nagisa had slipped his coat on, the couple were on their way to the hotel hosting the event.

The charity ball wasn’t terribly far from either of their offices, but its distance from Nagisa’s house was quite another matter. As it was, they were indeed fashionably late, arriving at 10:10 rather than the intended time of 10:00 sharp. Rei seemed rather put out by the fact, and hurried his boyfriend along into the lobby of The Royale - he recalled it as being rather close to Amber Alley, where the two had shared their first date. The two were on par for levels of class, and though the hotel’s exterior was perfectly old and charming, its interior was swanky and modern, accented by the classique of the architecture.

The attorney methodically dropped their coats off at the front desk and presented his invite, and they were escorted by a footman to the elevators along with a number of other finely dressed people, presumably heading to the same function. They were packed in rather tight, and the blond found himself pushed up almost indecently to his boyfriend as they ascended to the tenth floor. Rei wrapped an arm around his smaller beau’s abdomen, ensuring that he wouldn’t move away. As though he could - it was push himself against the attorney or some stranger, and he knew exactly who he preferred.

The elevator doors opened to a hallway, towards the end of which were a set of grand doors thrust wide open. As the other invitees leaked out of the elevator, the attorney offered his arm, just as the other couples did. Nagisa took a deep breath to steel his nerves, closed his eyes, and stepped through the doors.

The first thing that registered with the writer was the music. In keeping with the modernity of the venue, a live band was playing a jazzy tune masked by the low hum of chatter and soft clinking of glasses. Now he was very much reminded of his first date with Rei and felt comfortable enough to open his eyes. The room was bathed in blue and violet lighting, and one wall was entirely glass overlooking the Thames - perfect for a midnight fireworks display. From the top of the two-storey ceiling hung a crystal waterfall chandelier, lending a considerable amount of class to the environment. Each stone reflected the light, so that the venue, while dim, was by no means dark.

As he and Rei made their way towards the center of the room, he noticed that they emerged beneath a symmetrical curved staircase leading to a balcony level for a better view of the city’s golden skyline. Nearer to the dance floor was a long table of food and refreshments, attended by a small
number of the hotel’s footmen. Nagisa’s mouth made a small “oh” but any sound that may have emerged was lost in the noise of the party. They hadn’t been more than 15 minutes late, but there were already one hundred-odd people milling about the ballroom.

“I think I need a shot,” he muttered sarcastically to his boyfriend. Rei gave a wry grin.

“I’m afraid champagne will have to do.” He led him over to the refreshments table and they each picked up a glass and clinked them softly together. The chilled drink and refreshing bubbles along his tongue gave him the kick he needed. He was at a party. This was his scene, much more so than Rei’s. Why was he nervous? When a few minutes later, a red-cheeked older man with a bit of a gut walked over and addressed his boyfriend, he felt perfectly at ease.

“Rei, how are you?” he demanded in clipped tones, temporarily overlooking the smaller man by his side.

“Mr. Halford,” he acknowledged, “I’m well. And you? Have you been making headway on Stafford case?” The gruff man nodded, impressively downing a full glass of sparkling wine.

“Fine, fine!” he replied, waving off the mention of work. Nagisa thought he might already be a titch inebriated. “That’s not why I’m here, and you know it! I came to ask about this beauty you got on your arm! A new girl, eh?” The blond colored considerably at what he took to be a compliment on his makeup skills.

“Of course,” Rei replied, embarrassed for his boyfriend. “This is actually my boyfriend, Nagisa. He writes for the magazine, Elite. I believe you once said Mrs. Halford was fond of it?” The writer held out his hand to the blustery man, slightly amused at the significantly red color in his cheeks that doubled over his error. “Darling, this is my boss, Richard Halford,” he murmured to Nagisa.

“Charmed,” he quipped, shaking hands with him.

“Likewise,” Mr. Halford replied as he recovered from his mistake. “You write for a well-known magazine, then. You’re so young, too. Rei, you must’ve got yourself a smart one,” he stated matter-of-factly. “Good luck; I’ve got to be off,” and as soon as he had come, he was gone. The blond let out a breath.

“He seems an excitable fellow,” Nagisa remarked upon his retreating form. Rei nodded.

“He tends to be a busybody, but that attention to detail makes him an exceptional prosecutor - nothing escapes him, except perhaps the fact that you are male,” he commented. They strolled through the growing crowd, taking tentative sips of their drinks, until they stumbled upon a young man and a middle-aged redheaded woman that looked very much like she was in charge. Nagisa was reminded distinctly of Ms. Amakata. Rei appeared slightly uncomfortable, but again introduced his beau.

“Sophia Wiseman,” the woman chirped after hearing the brunet’s greetings, “defense attorney at Wiseman & Ashford.” Ah. That explained his boyfriend’s discomfort. “And Rei, you haven’t met Jonathan Curley here. He’s just joined our firm, he’s been working on your case.” He nodded and shook hands with the younger defense attorney. If Nagisa could peg him, he’d have guessed the young man was around 27, with sleek black hair and brown eyes.

“I recognize you from court,” Rei commented as they shook hands. The other man smiled and glanced between the blond and his beau with a look that neither of them liked.

“I’ve observed a number of your trials,” he acknowledged easily, a simpering grin splitting his sharp,
handsome face. He turned his attention to Nagisa and, still addressing Rei, remarked: “What an... interesting partner you have here.” Sophia narrowed her eyes and the brunet drew himself up to his full height, standing quite taller than the other man.

“Yes, he most certainly is. I wouldn’t expect a man like him to be dull, what between his many accomplishments,” he bragged, his brow arched high over the rim of his glasses as he stared Jonathan down. “Now if you’ll excuse us, Sophia, we’re making our rounds. It’s lovely to see you, as always.” As soon as they were well out of earshot and view, the blond shuddered.

“God, he was a creep,” he summarized, finishing off his champagne and wishing he had something a bit stronger. He felt like he needed a bath after being looked at like that. Rei nodded.

“I noticed him the very first time he observed one of my cases - I was up against Sophia Wiseman. He looks at me like he knows everything about me, which wouldn’t be half so unsettling if it weren’t for the fact that it could completely break someone down on the witness stand. Sophia is a good woman, though, and an excellent lawyer.” After that, they made their way toward the food table, where the younger man munched happily for a while and replenished his supply of champagne. They made another round and met with donors to the charity, a pair of Rei’s coworkers who were soon to be married, and the host of the party - the CEO of the Innocence Foundation, introduced to both of them by Mr. and Mrs. Halford.

While the CEO, Mr. Halford, Sophia Wiseman, and Rei discussed the details of incredibly complex case that had been settled in the 90’s, Nagisa chatted with Mrs. Halford, an apparent fan. When she too got sucked into the discussion, however, he excused himself to the food table. It took a lot of energy to listen to keep track of something so deep.

The food certainly didn’t disappoint. There was an entire table dedicated to little desserts - petit fours, macarons, and creme brulee cups to name a few - where he found himself quite settled. And if he got sick of sweets, there was alcohol and prosciutto bites and little sandwiches to keep his palate entertained. All the while, the music danced between jazzy swings, flirty tangos, and smooth waltzes.

A tap on the shoulder interrupted his eating and thoughts. He expected to see Rei at his side, but was faced with that Jonathan Curley from earlier. Rudely, the blond felt himself jump at his appearance, though he quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry, you startled me,” he explained, uncertain of what to say to the man that he’d just met. He thought that this Jonathan was rather handsome when he didn’t smile, but again that taut smirk appeared on his lips.

“Don’t apologize, I only came to ask for a dance.” He waved off the offense and gazed down at Nagisa, stepping in a little too close for his comfort - especially considering that he was here with another man. The blond couldn’t answer. He wanted desperately to push him away and scream “fat chance” at him, but he absolutely did not want to reflect poorly on his boyfriend. Evidently reluctant, he nodded.

“Sure, that’s fine...” he said in a tone that screamed not to lay a hand on him. Whether Jonathan was dimwitted or sadistic, he couldn’t tell, but he placed a strong hand on Nagisa’s arm and forcibly tugged him out to the dance floor where an orchestral tango began playing. With Rei, he was sure it would have been romantic, but as Jonathan tugged him in too close by the hips, the writer felt that it was gaudy and repulsive. For awhile, they spun in relative quiet. Just as he caught Rei’s incredibly bothered gaze, the man spoke so as to distract him.

“What is it you do - Nagisa, was it?” he demanded, his brown eyes looking down into the blond’s rosy ones.
“I’m a writer,” he said without generosity. The man dodged his cold tone easily.

“Yes, he said as much. What kind of writer? I was sure my question implied as much.” His tone was critical, and Nagisa rather felt like he was a schoolboy with a much despised and condescending teacher.

“A columnist.”

“For what publication? Come on, be clear.” Nagisa grit his teeth and forcibly stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Anyone watching them would think him quite rude if he did.

“Elite,” he stated, clearly not inviting any further conversation.

“Women’s fashion. I should have thought as much,” he stated derisively, pinching the blond’s bottom through the multitudes of fabric, just as they spun out of anyone’s view. The interrogation did not stop there.

“How old are you?” The writer was thus determined not to reply any further, but was met with another incredibly sharp pinch. “Come now, I asked you a question. Don’t be rude.”

“Twenty-five,” he stated, his face flushed with humiliation and anger.

“Where are you from?”

“Yorkshire,” he replied without hesitation, not wanting another retribution. Jonathan’s hand hovered on the small of his back, threatening to sink lower if need be.

“A country bumpkin, then,” he replied with a disdainful click of his tongue. Just when would this song end? Nagisa wanted to get out of his arms, crawl in a hole, and die. “Are you an only child?”

The blond’s teeth ground against one another.

“No.” His dance partner’s hand slipped down to his arse again, and he flinched away, unwittingly pushing the rest of his body closer to the defense attorney.

“I thought we’d gotten to know each other better than that,” he threatened. Before he could get any grabbier, Nagisa replied.

“Three older sisters, and I might mention one is an inspector with the London police,” he said loftily as at last the tango came to an end. Jonathan held him captive for a moment longer in the lingering silence between songs.

“I don’t recall country bumpkins being so feisty,” he said, releasing Nagisa and relishing in the way he scrambled backwards. When the blond glanced over his shoulder to ensure he wasn’t being followed, he accidentally met Jonathan Curley’s eyes - and the sharp blue eyes of another at his side. He shuddered and immediately sought Rei in the crowd which, at this late hour, had swelled to over three hundred people. He found him beside the staircase, away from anyone else, with a clearly unsettled look on his face. Relieved, Nagisa rushed into his arms.

“What on earth was that about, dear?” Rei questioned, light concern evident in his voice. The way his boyfriend hurried over worried him.

“I have no clue,” he declared, folding his arms over his chest protectively and trying to ignore the lingering sting in his bum. “He just asked me a bunch of weird questions about my family and where I’m from and where I work... so on, so forth.” Nagisa’s beautiful face curdled. “If I didn’t answer him, he’d pinch my arse,” he confessed, leaning his red, embarrassed face against Rei’s chest.
“He what?” the prosecutor exclaimed, pulling his small beau into his embrace, one hand softly detangling his curled locks. “That’s unacceptable - inappropriate - that bloody bastard,” the brunet sputtered, rendered inarticulate with fury. Nagisa was suddenly exhausted.

“Rei, I really just want something to drink right now. Do they have anything stronger than sparkling wine, do you think?” he asked, curling himself into his boyfriend’s arms. The older man took a breath to relax himself.

“Right. They probably don’t, but we can check,” he replied, guiding the blond over to the table with the drinks. Nagisa groaned internally when he saw the man with icy blue eyes standing right there. Rei himself froze, as if those eyes had some sort of hold over him. A pleasant smile graced the face of a beautiful young man with a lovely crop of dark brown hair. He was taller and thinner than the blond, and came perfectly up to Rei’s chin.

“Rei!” he exclaimed in an amicable tone that the writer did not trust in the least. “It’s wonderful to see you again. Would you care to introduce me to your friend?” Nagisa tightened his grip on his boyfriend’s arm.

“Oh...” he began uncertainly, but the rules of politesse would not allow to him to stop altogether. “This is Nagisa Hazuki...” With dissatisfaction, the blond noticed that he didn’t correct the nature of their relationship. “Nagisa, this is Kenton James, my, erm...” His voice trailed off and there was no need for him to finish. Ex-boyfriend.

“It’s wonderful to meet you.” Kent offered his hand, and Nagisa cautiously took it.

“Likewise.” For a man he’d convinced himself he hated, he sure seemed pleasant. It wouldn’t make Nagisa reevaluate his opinion, though.

The following silence between the three was split by Rei’s boss calling him over. Hopelessly, the brunet tossed his gaze between the two men, before disentangling himself from his beau’s tightening grip and hurrying over to his boss. They were left to evaluate one another, and the blond was feeling more and more miserable with every second that passed. With a beautifully agreeable smile still plastered upon his face, Kent spoke.

“Rei must not have paid much for a whore like you.” Shocked, the blond physically recoiled.

“I beg your pardon?” he cried. The other man’s face didn’t flinch.

“Oh, and dumb to boot. He could’ve done much better finding a pick-me-up than a thing like you.” Nagisa didn’t reply. He was astounded, tired, violated, and mortally offended. The noise in the room confused him. Absently, he realized the voices were counting down in unison, all focused on the windows where a fabulous light show would begin in a matter of thirty seconds.

“Well, aren’t you the bitter little boy?” Nagisa crooned, summoning up the last of his energy to counterattack. He wouldn’t damn well be defeated by his boyfriend’s ex.

“Bitter?” Kenton barked out a laugh. “As if. I feel sorry for Rei, needing to buy sex from a wannabe jezebel like you just to boost his confid- ah!” His insult was interrupted by a gasp as from behind him a waterfall of champagne tumbled over his brown locks.

“Oops,” said the unforgivingly cold voice of Miho Amakata, “I must have spilled.” Kent whirled around, any attempts at pleasantry’s totally forgotten, and was about to speak before the woman interrupted him yet again. “If I ever see you or your infuriatingly snobbish boyfriend speak a word or lay a hand on my employee again, I can guarantee you’ll get worse than an expensive bottle of
champagne coating your tacky suit. Now get out.” The voices around them rose in volume, quite unaware of the spectacle happening at their backs.

“Ten, nine, eight -”

“You bitch,” Kenton spat over his shoulder, whirling around to leave. Jonathan Curley stepped in place behind him. The voices in the room reached their peak.

“Three, two, one - Happy New Year!” And as the fireworks roared thunderously behind him, bathing the room in blinking lights, Nagisa watched their receding forms with disquiet in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

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EDIT: Finally got my 100th kudos! next goal: 50 comments, 40 subs, or 30 bookmarks - whichever comes first!
I'm sooooo sorry guys. I'm taking more credits this term, and now I actually have HW too, unlike last term. As such, I'm probably gonna have to update my posting rules: one chapter every two weeks, finals week and horse shows excepted. Don't worry, I only have one more horse show this term though, lol. Don't worry though guys - no matter how long it takes for me to post the next chapter, I have absolutely not abandoned this work. I will see it through to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rei must not have paid much for a whore like you. Nagisa toyed with his gold necklace as he absent-mindedly stared at his laptop. The office windows were all blank as a thick mist rolled over the city.

Country bumpkin. Wannabe jezebel. He hadn’t worn a skirt in the two weeks since the disastrous party - the conclusion of which Rei was entirely ignorant to - thanks to the eyes he could feel following him everywhere, making a spectacle of his every movement, gazes which he once imagined were admiring. Despite the screen of fog, he felt exposed to the world, like he was in a room in which he could only see his reflection, everybody outside able to look in...

A vibration indicating a text interrupted him from his melancholy. The screen announced that it was from his boyfriend, but he wasn’t all too sure he wanted to answer. He felt cheap, vulnerable, worthless... and seeing all that his boyfriend had, all that he had been able to give with ease had lately sparked jealousy in his heart, and it was getting harder and harder to ignore. A night in his society illuminated the vast difference of worlds they lived in. Out of habit more than wanting to see what his beau said, he checked his phone.

From: Rei Ryuugazaki

Are we meeting for coffee?

From: Rei Ryuugazaki

I'm here. Where are you?

Nagisa sighed and prepared his things to leave. He slipped his wallet into his pocket, leaving behind his laptop and messenger bag, and let Rei know he was just running late (a lie - he barely wanted to go). He stepped out of the building onto the wet street, and reluctantly made his way over.

Nagisa was somewhat surprised that when he arrived, his boyfriend looked to be in a worse mood than he was at the moment. In his depressive state, he assumed it was his own fault.

“I’m sorry, Rei,” he murmured as he slipped into the seat across from him. He didn’t have the heart to lie to his face, but he did feel a little guilty. The attorney sent him a questioning glance.

“Whatever for?” he mused, folding his newspaper and setting it aside. He’d been reading it for once, instead of working on the daily crossword.
“You looked upset that I was late...” the blond prompted, wrapping his hands around his warm coffee.

“Oh, it’s not that,” he replied, waving it off and placing his head in his elbow. “It’s this case I’m on, against Sophia Wiseman. It’s not going well, and it doesn’t help that - that Curley fellow is at the bench, constantly glaring at the witnesses while I’m trying to cross-examine.” His face took on a haughty sneer that Nagisa had never before seen on the otherwise gentle man, and the mere mention of his name was enough to get the blond to recoil. Rei cocked a brow. “I wish you’d file a report,” he sighed, the irritation in his gaze replaced with worry.

“We’ve been over this. No. It’s definitely not worth it.” Besides, he thought, his verbal ‘sparring’ with Kenton would come out, as well as the drink incident.

“It doesn’t matter that nothing will come of it - it’ll be attached to his file, and it’ll follow him wherever he goes. You don’t have to press charges.”

“Rei, I don’t want to argue about this today,” he groaned. A lecture on law from his boyfriend was so not on the menu. Rei heaved a great sigh.

“Well, think about it,” he insisted, refusing to give into the younger man’s reluctance. The blond replied with a noncommittal hum, and the subject was dropped. They sat in silence for a while, sipping their coffee, before Rei cut in again. “Oh, I forgot to mention. Daiki and Satsuki are in town.

“Isn’t it early? You said that basketball season didn’t end until March,” he commented with a frown. If it was over this early, that didn’t bode well for the star’s career. The attorney sighed.

“My idiot brother has overexerted himself, it seems,” he explained wryly. “He’s injured, so he’s been excused for the next couple of games to see a physical therapist here.” Nagisa recognized the begrudging tone as his boyfriend simply being worried and not wanting to admit it, and despite himself, he grinned.

“Will he be all right?” he inquired, trying to look serious. An injury could signify the end of a career, after all.

“Oh, he’ll be fine, he’s just in a rotten mood. He hates routine - check-ups, practice, you name it,” the older man replied with considerable exasperation. “If you can put up with his foul temper for a night, I thought you could come over for dinner after my trial tomorrow. Are you free?”

“That sounds great. My deadline is Wednesday, so I only work a half day.”

“I’m in court until five, so you can come over at seven.” He sipped at his coffee, clearly dreading the prospect of a trial. Having finished their usual round of complaints, Rei pulled out the daily crossword, and they spent some time filling in the blanks with one another, but thanks to the blond’s tardiness, their time was fast used up. They both returned to work sooner than they would have liked, but perhaps feeling a bit better than when they’d first got there.

When he arrived at Elite’s building and stepped onto his floor, he found a curious scene unfolding in his boss’ office. Most all other employees had stopped to watch as well, from Hana and Michael from publishing, to the usually out-of-the-way tech gurus peeking out of their rooms. Nagisa cautiously took his seat beside Gou.

“What’s going on?” he murmured to her, as an obscured masculine voice shouted from Ms. Amakata’s office. The woman herself said nothing in reply, lips pressed in a thin line and arms
folded. The blond couldn’t place her look, but rather pegged it as significantly more than displeased - other than that, he couldn’t say.

“I have no idea,” Gou whispered back. “One minute, she was having Momo file reports, and the next he was out on his arse when that whirlwind of a man burst in.”

“And that’s final, Miho!” called the gruff man, his voice now clear as he opened the door to her glass office and stormed out of the building. Nagisa recognized him as one of the London executives from his time as a secretary, and curiosity stirred within him. He glanced back to the older woman standing in front of her office, face unchanged as whispers erupted around the office at the exec’s dramatic exit. He saw her take a steadying breath.

“Are we a gossip magazine?” Her voice shattered the quiet. It was a question she’d often ask when spying her employees slacking off.

“No,” the room chorused sheepishly, Nagisa’s voice among everyone else’s.

“Then stop that yammering and get back to work! Our deadline is tomorrow!” The tension dissipated at routine reply, and everyone scurried to look busy. The young columnist decided that if she was up to her usual strict banter with the office, then she was fine. No disaster could amount from one little displeased executive. The exchange was soon forgotten, not only by him, but by the rest of the office with the hustle of the approaching deadline. The remainder of the day flew by as he polished his article, and by the end of his workday, he realized he’d be late in seeing his father if he didn’t dash out of the building and onto the next bus to the hospital.

Nagisa hadn’t been to visit Ken since Christmas, though his sister had kept him company as she settled into her London life. It was a text from Emi that had prompted him to meet her at St. Lucy’s and enjoy an evening together - and the idea coming from that workaholic was certainly rare. Guiltily, he realized he’d been slacking and the only reason why she hadn’t said anything so far was because she’d been just that way for seven years. Still, it wasn’t any excuse on his part. He arrived a little past the scheduled time of five, finding a tense Emi standing in front of the hospital in the cold. So much for relaxing together.

“Finally,” she muttered as he sheepishly hopped off the bus. “How’ve you been?” she asked as they hopped out of the biting chill.

“All right,” he lied, trying to keep the stress of New Year’s Eve off of his face. Thankfully, the brunette woman looked too distracted herself to notice his feelings. “How about you?”

“Me? Oh, I’ve been okay... The spa kit’s coming in handy,” she informed him with a sigh. They exchanged half-hearted smiles as they collected visitor’s passes and approached their father’s room. “Did Dad tell you why he asked us to come?” she suddenly asked in a hushed tone, just outside his room. The blond’s heart gave a sharp drop at the serious look in her eye.

“No,” he replied in a higher voice than normal. “Why?” She shook her head.

“He didn’t say anything to me. He just asked if I could make you come tonight,” the officer confessed. The siblings took a breath and entered the room, evident concern etched into their faces.

Their father wasn’t in his wheelchair. Ken was lying in his bed, gently smiling at his children as they stepped into the room. The evening sun bounced off of decorations that had been forgotten since the holidays. Like Nagisa and Emi, dark circles and a faintly wrinkled brow were the only evidence of what was likely countless sleepless nights.
“I’m glad you could both make it,” he told them, gesturing for them to sit. The blond’s own apprehension spiked at the lifeless greeting. For once both siblings were quiet as they obeyed his orders. “Dr. Greene spoke with me today,” he stated after they were settled, a smile still masking his features. “Emi, Nagisa... They’ve found a tumor in my spine.” A cloud passed over the last light of the day. The blond blinked several times, the words rolling off of him like rain. “Now, they don’t know if it’s - if it’s cancerous or not, but it needs to be removed, along with part of my vertebrae. This surgery is going to be different from the others... It’s more expensive and higher risk,” he confessed.

“Higher risk? What’s that supposed to mean?” Before the writer knew what had happened, he was standing, the chair screeching out from behind him. His heart beat a mile a minute. It was like receiving the call all over again, ‘Colonel Kenichi Hazuki has a life threatening injury...’.

“... I may not make it out,” he stated simply after a moment, all efforts at cheerfulness dissipating from his face. “But without the surgery, there’s a greater possibility that it could hemorrhage, and I will most certainly die.” The colonel, looking older than he had ever looked before, leaned back against his pillows. “A funeral will be expensive,” he mused with great detachment. “It’s a cost you’ll most likely be faced with sooner than later, which is why I leave the decision of a surgery up to you two. Look at me.” Nagisa collapsed back in the chair, and Emi lifted her face out of her hands despairingly. “I cannot in good conscience choose this myself, knowing the cost of the outcome either way. I don’t want to burden you.”

“You should’ve known we’d say yes without you asking,” Emi replied hoarsely. “We’ll manage just fine.”

“I have emergency savings for stuff like this, after all,” Nagisa agreed, strengthened by his sister’s resolve. His sister nodded in agreement.

“I didn’t spend everything on my move, and my rent here is actually a little cheaper than before. How much should the cost be?” she pressed. “When do we need the money?” Kenichi frowned, wrinkles deep and pronounced.

“With our insurance... £4,760, by next Friday. Dr. Greene has already scheduled it, even though I told her I needed to discuss it first.” The siblings flinched at the number - they were only a writer and a police officer, after all - but steadied their resolve.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Emi insisted, her brother nodding rapidly along with her words. Too tired to fight any longer, his body sagged back.

“... That’s all I needed to tell you,” he said, his eyes dragged back to the window. Nagisa’s throat constricted. “I’m tired now. You two go on, now.” Their murmured goodbyes were unnaturally loud in the silence he left.

The pair aimlessly trudged through the streets, neither one quite wanting to say anything to one another. The blond’s mind was empty, and in the rainy dark of the evening, all he could think was that it had been quite some time since he’d had a good run in this park - and how much he wanted to take off blindly into the night. The older woman had other plans. Too tired to continue, she fell onto a wet bench under a dim, golden light post. Nagisa sat beside her.

“I only have £1,340 after my move,” she confessed. “I can use some of my savings, but leaving my fiancé was... unexpected.” The cold seeped into the blond’s bones.

“I’ve got £1,052,” he relayed after checking his account on his phone. His throat tightened. “I don’t have much for emergencies, so that’s including my checking account. I don’t know about savings.”
“That makes... £2,392,” Emi said thoughtfully. “We’re painfully short.” The older woman bit her bottom lip, her dark curls hiding her expression. “Is this what it’s been for you? This whole time?” she asked, her voice higher than he’d ever heard it before. “What do we do if it’s cancer?”

“We haven’t included his pension yet,” Nagisa tried, but even then he knew it was a weak shot. It’d barely helped before. “Do you... do you think Maki and Rika might help?” Having his eldest sister around had instilled a sense of hope in his family once again, however faint it flickered. “He’s their dad too, after all...” Emi scoffed.

“Barely. You know how they are with Nathan,” she countered, and his hope was snuffed. Briefly, he thought of his boyfriend, but he realized it was futile. Rei was not his family. He didn’t want to be rendered dependent on the attorney. He was an adult, too. He was a man.

“We’ll make it work,” he insisted in a burst of emotional strength. Nagisa wasn’t in the habit of comforting his sister, but he refused to fall victim to despair, and nor could she. She took a long, shuddering breath as she held back her tears.

“You’re right. We have to make it work. Let’s take a break - go home for tonight, take a look at what we’ve each got, and such... We can start planning tomorrow.” The blond nodded, all other responsibilities forgotten. The siblings wrapped each other up in a tight hug, and a moment later they parted, forcibly leaving behind any weakness of the heart in the dark of the night.

Nagisa’s following half-day at work passed in a blur without incident that he noticed. As soon as he handed off his article to Momo, he left for home. He had work to do before dinner at Rei’s, from paying rent to brainstorming topics for tomorrow’s pitch meeting. Everything passed monotonously. He left a message for his landlord about a new contract for Haruka. He wrote a few half-hearted ideas for the meeting. He transferred money from his savings account to his checking account. He told Emi. No amount of chores could lift the weight from his mind, could free him from his distraction - all that echoed in his heart was “what if it’s too late?”.

So busy were his thoughts, Nagisa didn’t notice that seven had come and gone when his phone rung. Exhausted, he picked it up.

“Hello?” he sighed into the receiver.


“Oh my God,” he groaned, tangling a hand in his messy straw hair. “I totally forgot. Are they pissed?”

“No,” Rei replied irritably from the other end. His siblings may have been forgiving, but it seemed the attorney wasn’t nearly so gracious. “How long will it take you to get here?”

“I’ll be there in like, 20 minutes. I’m still dressed from work, so I just need to catch the bus,” he said sheepishly, tossing his keys and his wallet into the pocket of his coat and dashing out of the house. After a quick goodbye, he hung up and shoved his phone in with everything else. Once on the red double-decker, he took a deep breath to calm himself, upset at having pissed off his boyfriend, only to be interrupted by another call.

“Ugh, what does he want now?” he murmured, snatching up his phone and answering it. “I’m sorry, I’m on my way, dear, I’ve only just caught the bus,” he said automatically.

“What?” came the distinctly feminine voice from the other end. It was Emi, not the attorney.
“Sorry, I thought you were Rei,” he apologized. He forgot his promise to work money out together tonight. “Did something happen?”

“I called Maki and told her what was going on.” Her voice lacked energy, and resounded with defeat. The younger man swallowed as his throat grew tight. “She couldn’t make any promises, but she said she’d talk to Rika. They’ll visit him at the least, in case it’s -” She cut herself off, but Nagisa didn’t want to hear the rest anyways. In case it’s cancer. In case it’s the end.

“I transferred money from my savings to my checking account,” the blond supplied in the silence. “And I get paid after this next issue is released on Friday.”

“Yeah. Okay. We’re gonna be fine. I’ll talk to you later.” Emi hung up just as the bus neared Nagisa’s stop and he hurriedly rung the bell. A cheerful dinner with his boyfriend was the last thing he wanted right now, but it was way too late to cancel, and there was definitely no salvaging his impression on Rei’s entire family. First his parents found him naked and covered in chocolate on his couch, now his siblings would see him bare-faced after work, wrapped in a blanket of misery, and late to boot.

Nagisa hustled through the chill of the night and dashed up the stairs of the high-class apartment complex, but he honestly didn’t care much how late he was at this point - he just wanted this whole spectacle to be over and done with. When he got to Rei’s door, he’d scant even knocked before he came face to face with the exasperated lawyer.

“You never change, do you?” he sighed with some affection, but the blond didn’t want to listen to jokes at his expense. Having little else to say, he shrugged and replied, “No, I guess not.” If his words at all surprised his boyfriend, he didn’t see - the writer fast turned around to discard his coat and trot into the living room, the older man trailing behind him.

There was a tall man lounging on the couch that was no doubt Rei’s brother, Daiki. They shared the same coloring that favored their mother, Amira, but the brother’s hair was choppier with a very ‘Devil-may-care’ look about it. Though they must have been close to the same height, it was clear that the elder brother was much more muscular, thanks to his career as a basketball player. Upon seeing the blond, he lazily pushed himself up and offered his hand to Nagisa. He wore a crooked grin.

“You must be the famous punisher, huh?” he joked, referring to their long-ago conversation on the phone. Remembering Rei’s birthday made the blond color. He took the proffered hand and was met with an astoundingly strong grip.

“You must be Daiki, then. I’m Nagisa,” he replied, ignoring the humorous jab. From the kitchen came a beautiful woman with dyed pink hair pulled into a messy ponytail and a glass of wine in her hand.

“Is this Rei’s boy, then?” she asked pleasantly, but the blond couldn’t open his mouth for shock. He’d been expecting a Satsuki Ryuugazaki, but he’d overlooked a small fact. Three years ago, the basketball star married international supermodel Satsuki Momoi. It was the only reason he’d even recognized the name ‘Ryuugazaki Daiki’ when Rei brought it up on their first date.

For a moment, all the blond could do was gawk at the beautiful woman. All of his negative feelings were immediately blasted out of his thoughts as his mind tried to comprehend that Satsuki Momoi, a woman who had been on the cover of Elite and about every other fashion publication known to man, was Rei’s in-law.

“I take it you’re familiar with fashion, then,” she commented wryly, her cheeks turning a shade to
match her hair. The blond, realizing his rudeness, physically shook his head to clear it.

“Yes - sorry - I was just caught off-guard. Rei didn’t say anything about you being, well... a model.” He silently cursed his boyfriend for not having mentioned anything. He should have known that this would be too much for the poor columnist without any prior warning. Satsuki grinned sympathetically.

“I’ve actually taken a break from modelling since getting married,” she confessed. The writer nodded thoughtfully. It was true that she’d been out of the public eye for quite some time, though it hadn’t done much to diminish her fame.

“Oh, I see,” he mused. He offered his hand. “Well, it’s wonderful to meet you. I’m Nagisa,” he pressed on with a friendly smile.

“Satsuki,” she replied simply. “Well, dinner is ready, so why don’t we all sit down?” The blond perked up.

“Do you cook? Rei and I are awful, so we could use some guidance,” he admitted, following her into the dining room with the siblings right behind them. Daiki barked out a laugh.

“God, are you trying to get her to poison us?” he replied, to which his wife rolled her eyes. “Nobody in this damn family can cook, I swear. ‘Cept Mom.” The blond verified this himself upon seeing the meal - burnt curry (Daiki’s dish, apparently), steamed broccoli (Rei’s contribution), and some brown thing he couldn’t quite make out (Satsuki’s). He was comforted by the presence of a good Pinot Noir and several wine glasses. It seemed that wine loving was also a family trait. As they sat down and began passing the dishes around, the woman saw fit to dig back at her husband.

“You see, even if I can’t cook, I can at least claim to have good taste,” she commented as she took a scoop of his curry. “Daiki burns it on purpose.” The model handed the curry across the table to Nagisa, who then proceeded to take a smaller scoop than he otherwise might have.

“Shut up, it’s best that way. All that stuff that sticks to the bottom of the pan gives it flavor,” he insisted. “Besides, it reminds me of your cooking, which is why I love it.” Nagisa snickered at the backhanded compliment while Satsuki tried to look more offended than she actually was.

“Nagisa enrolled us in a cooking course,” Rei informed them. “At least we know we need help,” he pointed out as he used a set of tongs to pick up one of the brown things.

“Oh, those are croquettes by the way,” Daiki drawled. “She packs them in my lunch all the time, even though I beg her not to.”

“Honestly, can you be civil for one meal?” Satsuki cried over her husband’s joking. “What an impression you must be making on poor Nagisa!”

“I think you’re worried more about your impression than mine,” he countered, a handsome, lopsided grin spread across his face.

“Honestly, you are such a child,” she scolded. “I hope you don’t the wrong idea about us, Nagisa,” she sighed, turning toward the blond. “I’m not his mother, no matter how much he acts like a twelve-year-old.”

“Actually, I think you two get along really well,” he replied graciously, unable to hide his amusement. Despite their harsh words, their body language showed that they were in fact very fond of one another. With each cutting remark, the basketball player would softly touch Satsuki somewhere - squeeze her hand, run his fingers through her ponytail, or rest his arm around her
shoulders. And without fail, she would lean softly into it while her mouth said something quite harsh.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone make *that* assessment,” Rei quipped from his side, one brow cocked over the rim of his glasses. He took a sip of wine. Nagisa shrugged.

“If you can tell me our relationship isn’t the least bit similar, I’ll take it back,” he declared loftily, knowing that the attorney couldn’t deny it. The blond took his own glass of wine and steadily drained it, the alcohol winding its way into his tense muscles as he let the stress of his finances, his deadline, and his father slip away. Silence lapsed between the two couples as they contentedly began their meal. Satsuki was the first to break it, shifting her attention away from her grabby husband to the youngest man at the table.

“So, how involved are you with the fashion world?” she inquired with some measure of caution. Nagisa quirked a brow - why would a seasoned model such as herself be nervous around a nobody like him...?

“I write an accessories column for *Elite*, but I only just started writing. I was an assistant for the London editor before that.” He poured himself more wine and pursed his lips. “I actually haven’t ever worked with anyone else,” he mused half to himself as he swirled the burgundy drink around the glass. “I’ve been with them since university.”

“You’re twenty-five, aren’t you? So you’re worked with them about... three years?” Her voice didn’t drop its edge and Daiki didn’t comment. The blond grew curious at the mounting tension.

“And a half,” he added, glancing between the couple. “Forgive my asking, but is there a particular reason you’re asking...?” At the sudden question, Rei choked on a croquette, his brother ground his teeth, and Satsuki’s face lost all of the lovely color the warmth of wine lent to her complexion. The writer himself flinched at the sudden change in atmosphere. “Uh, why don’t you forget I asked that?” he covered, for once fully understand the phrase ‘curiosity killed the cat’.

“It’s not a big deal...” Satsuki replied apologetically. “The fashion industry just took its toll, you see. As a model, I maintained a certain image that came with a certain weight, and I was preparing for my wedding... The combined stress got to me, so I didn’t renew my contract. The fashion world was too judgmental for me,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. Daiki shrugged and Rei gave a succinct nod to demonstrate his agreement.

The columnist felt isolated in the family that only a scant few minutes earlier was perfectly welcoming. He wanted to protest, *Is that all you think I do? Judge people until they hate themselves?!* He wanted to defend himself. But more than that, he wanted Rei to say something on his behalf. As it was, his boyfriend didn’t open his mouth, and the blond managed a little, “oh” in response. He stuffed a burnt croquette into his mouth. Thankfully, they were quick to change the conversation back to dinner, the cold weather, and what a lovely wine Rei had picked. Nagisa busied himself with stuffing his face.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly enough, with the blond recovered enough to contribute here and there to the conversation, which was mostly driven by the married couple’s banter. Rei hardly spoke, but looked the most comfortable the younger man had ever seen him in the few months they’d been together.

Wine contributed to the eventual presence of uproarious laughter that the poor brunet did his damnedest to quiet so that his neighbors wouldn’t be bothered - they had a baby, after all. Daiki called him a killjoy, and it didn’t take long after that for the other couple to decide to go to their own condo uptown.
“Oh, before we leave let me give you my number,” she said just before they turned to the door. A little surprised, the blond offered up his phone. “Text me and we’ll brunch sometime. I don’t have many friends in England, after all, so we might as well get to know each other better,” Satsuki insisted with a dazzling smile. Nagisa responded in kind.

“Sure, I’d love to,” he enthused, keen on spending time with the influential woman. Even if she didn’t much want to talk about her abruptly-ended career, the blond was sure she’d have good insights on his articles. “It was wonderful to meet you both,” he finished, holding a hand out to receive Daiki’s unbelievable grip again. Satsuki ignored his outstretched hand and pulled him into a quick hug.

“You too, dear!” she replied liberally. Her husband rolled his eyes, and the blushing blond had the sense to guess she might be tipsy. Nagisa patted her on the back, and the whirlwind couple was gone in a matter of minutes.

With the silence they left in their wake came the thoughts they had originally pushed away. The blond’s mind wandered to his own sisters - not only Emi, but the older twins - and their degrees of willingness to do something as simple as save their father. With a bit of regret, he wished he’d kept in better contact with Maki and Rika, if only to hold more sway over their decisions. He sighed deeply, and followed the sound of rushing water back to the kitchen.

Suddenly more tired than he’d felt in a long time, the blond collapsed into a stool at the counter, propping his head up on his hand and watching his boyfriend’s back as he finished loading the dishes into the dishwasher. A few minutes passed before his boyfriend spoke.

“So, I’ve been thinking lately,” Rei began reflectively, “isn’t it about time we moved in together?” Nagisa snapped out of his stupor.

“What?” he responded dumbly. His heart thumped in his chest painfully. The gentle chink of ceramic on metal sounded as the older man finished his chores.

“We should move in together,” he rephrased, closing the door and turning to face his younger beau. He leaned back on the countertop.

“Why?” the writer asked, numbness having taken over his brain. After hearing of his father’s impending surgery, dealing with his deadline, and meeting one of the world’s most famous models, he was entirely unable to absorb any meaning of his boyfriend’s unexpected proposition. The attorney huffed irritably and shoved his glasses up his nose.

“I know I’ve told you before that I like to know where I’m headed in a relationship,” he stated brusquely. “And it’s about time we make that next step. You enjoyed your stay here during the holidays, after all.”

“Well, yeah,” Nagisa conceded half-heartedly, “but the holidays are completely different from living together permanently.” He shrugged, signalling the end of the conversation, but was miffed when the brunet didn’t let it go.

“But you’ve met my family, and you liked them,” he added indignantly. “The way things are headed, we’re clearly invested in this relationship in the long term.”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t stop his brows from crinkling with displeasure. “But I like the way things are now. I don’t want to change us.”

“Well, I do,” Rei snapped in a tone that was just too harsh for the poor blond’s emotional well-being.
“It’s not all about what you want, Rei,” he replied coolly, his shoulders tensing. The older man’s lips were set in a grim line, but in his blue eyes there was a fire the blond didn’t like in the least.

“Besides,” he continued well before he could even think of stopping himself, “why would I want to live like this?” He gestured to the grandeur of the apartment, but referred in part to the parties, entertaining his siblings and his parents, and God only knew what else he’d be forced into if they were that serious.

“Live like what?” the attorney interrogated in a raised voice. “It’s a lot neater than that pigsty you’re living in.” Nagisa didn’t honor the remark itself with a reply.

“Why do you have to turn every little thing into an argument?” he shouted back. “Every little thing from the crossword puzzles to asking for and refusing my advice, and now this? Why can’t you just give it a rest!”

“Why do you always have to go and change the subject whenever we talk about something serious?” Rei countered. “The crossword puzzles, refusing my advice,” he mimicked, causing the blond’s face to grow hot and crimson. He sunk his teeth into his lips.

“What does that have to do with anything? If you don’t have the maturity to ignore something like that, then you need to grow up, Nagisa!” The attorney’s impassioned voice had reached hollering levels, and his face shone with the exertion of the argument. The blond stood rapidly, nails digging into the marble countertop and the stool clattering noisily behind him.

“Jesus, is it your bloody job to criticize me? You never shut the hell up, always thinking you’re right about everything just because you’re some damned intellectual born with a silver fuckin’ spoon in your mouth! What do you want me around for, anyways?! So you could shower me with gifts? So you could feel better about being bad at sex? I’m not your fuckin’ whore!” The attorney’s face went frigid cold and a physical jolt went through his body.

“Is that what you think this has all been about?” he asked, astonishment crawling over his features. If Nagisa weren’t half as angry as he was, he might have noticed that actual hurt resounded through the brunet’s speech. As it was, he was furious and no amount of reality could soothe him.

“Isn’t it just! Now, get this through your thick-ass skull, Rei Ryouugazaki: I do not want to live with you, this is not my home, so just accept it and stop trying already!” The attorney’s face grew irreversibly calm, so startlingly so that the writer saw fit to quiet himself, though his heart beat a million miles a minute.

“Get out.” Nagisa recoiled a minute at the coldness, the informality of the speech - if Rei really loved him, wouldn’t he be just as angry? The blond wanted to get a reciprocal rise out of the man, but he’d completely shut down any responsiveness.

“What?” he managed once again - it was the only thing he could think to say that would require a response.

“You’ve made yourself heard, loud and clear. This isn’t your home. It’s mine. So get out.” When the blond couldn’t form any hurtful words, any biting statement, Rei roared, “Now!” The echoing sound sent Nagisa scampering towards the door, snatching his coat from the rack as he went. The only last offense he could deliver was a powerful slam of his front door.
Blood coursing through his body and hands grabbing fistfuls of coat fabric, he angrily marched off through Hyde Park, cursing his boyfriend’s very name with each heavy step. Once he had the sense to feel cold, he gave up on his pointless march through the gardens and hailed a cab home.

Nagisa didn’t much feel like working on his proposal for tomorrow’s meeting - he rather felt like kicking and screaming, in fact - but he needed to rely on his job now more than ever. His task served to distract him from his fury, at least temporarily, as he channeled the last of his energy away into his job that Rei apparently felt such derision toward, and the more he thought of that the more irritated he became again. In the end, he went to bed in as much as a foul mood as he’d arrived in.

He greeted the following morning with a perspective worlds away from the one he’d left Rei with. Oh, just what had he done? His pale fingers tangled themselves in his yellow locks as he released a groan almost loud enough to shake the house.

“Jesus Christ,” he heard Haruka grunt from the other side of the door. Oops. He tiptoed out of the room, intending to hop in and out of the shower before he really pissed the American off, but as the door squeaked open he was met face-to-face with said man down the hallway.

“Sorry,” he said quickly, cheeks pale under the Siamese-blue glare. “I just, um... had a nightmare.” Only a half-lie, he told himself. Although yesterday had been real life, it was the stuff of hellishness.

“Whatever,” Haruka replied, waving him off as he slipped into the kitchen. Nagisa took it to mean forgiveness and showered quickly before getting dressed. He was none like his usual sparkly self, instead in a simple grey ensemble punctuated by his most precious treasure - his gold necklace. He tried not to remember that it was his boyfriend who’d gotten it cleaned and insured.

The blond was greeted by the sight of a proper breakfast for once in his life. Regardless of whether or not Haruka had believed his lie, he’d clearly detected that there was something wrong in his friend’s usual demeanor. A plate of eggs, toast, and sausages accompanied a fresh pot of steaming tea. The American leaned back into a chair, still in his sweats and tank top. Nagisa joined him with a soft grin.

“Thanks for cooking, Haru,” he said sincerely as he wrapped his cold fingers around the mug.

“Don’t call me that,” he protested, a faint touch of red on his cheeks. His hands reached over to ruffle Nagisa’s damp locks. “Do good at your meeting today.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised as they switched their attention to the food. The silence that followed was more for Haruka’s benefit than his own - as much as he wanted to pour out his sorrows to his friend, he held back. The court date that Makoto had set was rapidly approaching, and though Haruka’s role as a witness wouldn’t be needed until a few days in, the American had promised to be there every step of the way. More increasingly, Haru had been away from the house (despite still needing the contract from the landlord to be an official resident). Nagisa suspected that he’d sought comfort from a certain Spanish lawyer, but the notable absence of hickeys this time around made the blond wonder where his friend had been last night. The writer himself had been late coming home. Usually Haru was early if he wasn’t spending the night elsewhere.

All of this was Nagisa’s speculation of course. The only evidence he had that his friend and the attorney were even together were spying them ice skating and noticing bruises here and there on Haru’s neck. It was hardly anything definitive. And it certainly wasn’t his business.

The blond sighed; there wasn’t any point in thinking about Haru’s relationship when he had his own to worry about. And more importantly, his job. He scarfed down the remainder of his breakfast,
tossed the plates carelessly in the sink, and called out a “bye, Haru!” over his shoulder, followed by the customary “don’t call me that”.

Morning meetings tended to start earlier, and as such he didn’t have time to stop by and get coffee. Not that it mattered - he intended to treat today as normally as he possibly could, and that meant he’d stop by at lunchtime, watch his awkward attorney trip over himself with apologies, and be done with it.

All of his energy focused on normalcy and routine, Nagisa didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary when he reached Elite’s building and took his place at the meeting table beside Gou and Hana, with an empty space reserved for Momo (presumably printing Ms. Amakata’s new agenda).

“Hey,” Gou greeted him as he sat down. Hana cocked her head at the subdued palette of Nagisa’s wardrobe, but didn’t comment. “How did meeting Rei’s family go?” the redhead inquired curiously.

“Oh my God, you’ll never guess who Rei’s sister-in-law is,” he jumped in immediately, choosing the first topic that would steer clear of the hair-raising row he and his boyfriend had.

“Who?!” came a voice that was much too excited to belong to either woman. He glanced over his shoulder where he saw Momo take his seat beside them, not a single document in hand. His exclamation had garnered the attention of Michael from publishing. A pair of women - probably from another department - listened in politely to Nagisa’s tale, as they had nothing better to do in the meantime.

“Oh, so I told you Rei’s brother played basketball, right?” he recounted, addressing mostly his friends. Not even Hana could stop herself from leaning in curiously. “Well, his brother is married to a model, of course, being an athlete and all.” His audience nodded, as it was expected. “So it turns out, she’s not just any model. Satsuki Momoi is Rei’s sister-in-law.” The proclamation was met with the gasps of his friends.

“Oh my God,” Gou exclaimed, “you actually got to meet her? I’m so jealous!” The blond gave a gloating smile. Hana’s face was similarly painted with envy.

“It’s been my lifelong dream to photograph her,” she commented wistfully. “Nobody does her justice.” He opened his mouth, prepared to gossip about the woman’s early-retirement (or semi-hiatus? He wasn’t sure), but was interrupted by a commanding female voice.

“No more chit-chat! This meeting should have begun ages ago.” The entire crowd of employees looked to the front of the conference room, faces ranging from curiosity to outright disbelief. The speaker was not Ms. Amakata.

The woman before them had her black hair tied tightly back in a bun and a severe look in her perfectly cold eyes. She wore a red ruffled blouse and a tight black pencil skirt that would certainly be hard to walk in. Who does she think she is? Nagisa wondered to himself - starting the meeting without their editor - the nerve!

“My name is Brooke Westwood,” she continued, “and I am the new editor of this department.” A chorus of exclamations followed, which she promptly ignored. The editor cast a critical gaze over her employees. It may have been Nagisa’s reeling mind, but he thought she looked at him a bit longer than the others. “And I can certainly see why sales have been tanking.”

“What happened to Ms. Amakata?” the blond piped up before he could censor himself. A new employer hardly counted as the normalcy he needed at the moment.
“She was transferred to where she’ll be of more use,” the editor replied, not mincing any words. “Now.”

“Where to? Why?” the young writer pressed, abject shock echoing in his tone. The others around him nodded in agreement.

“Enough questions!” she ordered, snapping him back into the present moment. “Now, we have exactly one hour and one hour only for this meeting, and I can tell I’m going to need all of it if you expect the next issue to reach my expectations!”

The entirety of their meeting was the tensest time in Nagisa’s life as it carried on in its authoritarian style. First, Ms. Westwood took no less than ten minutes to demonstrate just how far out of favor their magazine had fallen in her eyes, and pointed out the exact causes of such dramatic decreases in sales: the increasingly “soft” attitude the magazine had toward all people. What was worse, she actually used examples from recent articles to highlight exactly where they’d gone wrong, according to both the Tokyo and London executives. The next fifty minutes were the specifics. First, she pulled up Gou’s advent calendar featuring a plus-sized model in midriff-baring formalwear, and then she criticized Hana’s lack of “proper” photoshopping, pointing out the thickness in the arms, and the fold of skin in the neck. Both women stiffened at her words. The publishing department got a smack on the wrist for their placement of advertisements. Media coordinators were scolded for not selling more advertising space in the pages. And finally came Nagisa’s turn.

“’Affordable’ is not your job,” she stated simply, preparing herself to move on immediately as if he were a waste of her precious time.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked as she turned to address the next person. He thought he saw her eyebrow twitch for a moment.

“I mean that your job is not to find the cheapest old thing available and slap it together with half-decent advice. If this magazine wants to sell, you need to find better accessories - more expensive accessories,” she explained without an ounce of patience in her tone. Her severe look invited further discussion as a challenge, and Nagisa chose his next words very carefully.

“With all due respect, ma’am,” he replied tentatively, “won’t the accessibility of the magazine help to increase sales, rather than hurt? I-it’s absolutely true that sales have been decreasing,” he submitted with a stutter at her glare, “but the rate at which sales are decreasing has been getting smaller since Ms. Amakata took charge of the depart...” His voice trailed off as the sharp obsidian of her eye cut through his words. He couldn’t bring himself to finish the word.

“My office, after the meeting.” A collective shudder passed through the room, and without further comment from anyone, the editor finished her effective castration of the magazine’s policies under their former boss.

After dismissing everyone, she gestured for Nagisa to follow her to her office without so much as looking at him. He was surprised right off the bat that he hadn’t noticed anything different about it upon entering the floor. The normally glass-walled room was paved with dark curtains, leaving everyone unable to look in, while their editor could still see them from the other side.

Ms. Westwood did not invite him to sit as she fell gracefully back unto her chair. She tilted her chin up, eyes sweeping over his borderline-feminine outfit, and a disdainful look masked her features. The writer straightened himself.

“That attitude is exactly the reason why Amakata was fired,” she stated without glamour. “If you don’t change it immediately, you’re next. Remember that,” she threatened. A chill dripped down his
spine as he recalled his father’s wistfully smiling face, and he knew he needed this job now more than ever before. Nagisa shrunk back as the force of her words sunk into his bones. Fear slipped its way into his blood, tears pricked at his eyes, and his form instinctively made itself as small as possible. “I have an assignment for you. You know Satsuki Momoi?” she demanded, crossing her legs and shifting her gaze to her computer screen.

“Um, yes,” he replied with a few nods for emphasis.

“She’ll be on the cover for the next issue,” the editor replied matter-of-factly.

“Um, but she doesn’t have an agency right now,” he supplied, only to be interrupted by a derisive sigh.

“Have you not figured out what I’m asking? She will be on the cover, it’s your job to recruit her, and it’d better be for a cheaper price since she doesn’t have an agency to go through. One less hoop to jump. You have one week. Now get out. I’m busy.” Like a kicked dog the young man scampered out of her office, hurrying to his desk (unfortunately in her direct line of sight), and immediately texted Satsuki, hoping to Hell that his boyfriend hadn’t mentioned their fight to his family.

To: Satsuki Momoi

hey! it’s nagisa. i was wondering if you wanted to grab lunch tomorrow?? i wanna talk to you about something.

Not as formal as he could’ve been about it, but to be honest he didn’t care. His friends watched him curiously for a moment, no doubt wondering about how his “meeting” went, but were overall too occupied with their own jobs to worry about his. He hadn’t been fired; that much was clear to them. Once he had finished, he tucked his phone away and pulled out his laptop, fast to delete all of his previous ideas and revamping his drafts. A sneaking suspicion had formed in his mind - if Nagisa didn’t have something exactly tailored to Brooke Westwood’s tastes, he would be on the fast track to gone.

While the columnist was certainly working hard to meet the expectations of the new editor, he was not so absorbed as to realize when his lunch break started. Eager to escape her red manicured clutches, he shot out the door as soon as the clock struck twelve thirty. He was eager to recount the horrifying morning to his boyfriend over coffee, and perhaps seek a bit of comfort, as little deserved as it was at the moment. The only problem was that Rei never came.

Nagisa found himself alone on a rainy day in a coffee shop with little more than a crossword for company. At first he made nothing of it. While it was unusual for Rei to be late, it happened from time to time. He alternated between checking the time on his phone, sipping at his coffee, and eventually starting the crossword without him. Each time he switched, he became more anxious. Where was Rei anyways? Guilt at their fight nagged at Nagisa’s conscience, but he didn’t want to give in and actually apologize. It wasn’t his fault. Instead, he settled for texting his boyfriend in an admittedly pleading manner.

To: Rei Ryuugazaki

where are yooooouuu? im boreddddd.

To: Rei Ryuugazaki

come on u arent still mad right???
To: Rei Ryuugazaki

ur coffee order is cold now :(((((

To: Rei Ryuugazaki

Please?

Each typed word seemed to peel off of the screen and constrict itself around his throat, paved with what he didn’t want to say. When he was forty-five minutes into his break, he finally gave up at goading his beau into a visit. Rei didn’t even want to text him, let alone actually speak. Irritably, he turned his phone on ‘do not disturb’ and shoved it in his pocket. Two could play at that game, then! The blond had just started to collect his things when he was interrupted by a familiar voice behind him.

“Nagisa!” sounded the sweet Satsuki. He whirled around to find her poised perfectly behind him. She smiled kindly. “I wasn’t sure it was you until you turned around. Want to sit with me for a bit? I just got your text.”

“Oh, sure,” he responded, his tone not without some surprise. She couldn’t have possibly known where he was. Sensing the question, she gestured to her table and he joined her.

“Rei recommended this place to me and I figured I’d swing by. Running into you was a total coincidence!” He judged by her warm demeanor that Rei hadn’t mentioned their fight. Reflecting on it, that made sense - he wasn’t the type to try and get outsiders involved. In fact, Nagisa was the one to do that - Haruka, his father, his sister, his friends... If they hadn’t all had their own distractions, he certainly would have leaked the information by now.

A light cough made the blond realize that the older woman was waiting for him to start the conversation. She prompted: “You needed to ask me something? Now’s as good a time as any.”

“Oh, yeah!” He colored briefly and sat up straighter - the gravity of the request was not lost on him, especially considering how short their acquaintance had been. “Um, I have a favor to ask - only if you’re willing, of course...”

“What is it?” she inquired, leaning in. Her expressive eyes sparkled with curious beauty. For a moment, Nagisa was enthralled.

“Um, well,” he started, “you know I work for Elite.” She nodded briefly, and for a moment he wondered if he saw a flicker of hesitance in her demeanor. Shaking off the feeling that he was about to do something very wrong, he plowed on. “We need a cover model for our next issue and the editor wondered if I would ask you,” the columnist blurted, and this time he certainly saw a flash of emotion waver across her perfect expression. Anger? Regret? Sadness? He couldn’t place it, so brief it was. Satsuki had to look away to compose herself, and he was absolutely certain he’d committed a grave offense. Just as he was about to apologize, she spoke softly, quietly, in a voice that would not be heard by anyone save the blond over the wrinkled din of the music.

“You’d have found out eventually,” she murmured as her words melted into the din. “I don’t model anymore because I’m recovering from an eating disorder. As a model I - I had to lose weight, and while Daiki and I were still dating, I got pregnant, and we were so, so happy, and he proposed, and I didn’t weigh enough and the baby -” She took a deep, shuddery breath, and the gentle sound of keys and music erased the silence. She didn’t finish her sentence. He stayed quiet a few moments while the ex-model collected herself. “I thought he wouldn’t want me after that, but he - he helped me get better, and we swore I would never go back. And we got married, and I never did.” Her glassy eyes
met his, and he understood every bit of the horror the couple had expressed at their dinner the night before. In his mind’s eye, he saw his father lying in the hospital bed, the golden twilight catching the orange color of the pill bottles, and he understood her grief.

“Oh...” he whispered, swallowing the thick words. “I - I understand. I’m sorry,” he apologized, not knowing what for - the question or the loss.

“You didn’t know,” she replied forgivingly. It only made him feel worse about the whole situation. While he was trying to think of something - anything - to say to remedy the situation, his phone buzzed in his pocket, ruining the entire gravity of the situation.

“Oh!” he gasped lightly, automatically believing it to be his boyfriend. Without much a thought of his current predicament, he checked the screen. At first, he was disappointed to see Gou’s name flash across, but the feeling immediately twisted itself to apprehensive horror.

**From: Gou <3**

**Where are you?? editor is having a FIT**

“Oh,” he repeated, his tone now laced with worry. “I’m late in getting back to work...” he told Satsuki uncertainly. He didn’t want to leave the woman on her own, after all.

“It’s okay,” she urged softly, “you don’t have to worry about me. Your job is important.” A confession that *again* made him feel worse about his accusations against his beau. And yet, against his wishes, Nagisa turned tail and ran out the door, as though trying to abandon his own melancholy and grief with the image of the lonely lit shop hid by the blur of the rain.

Once he was out of view, the blond slowed to a brisk walk, only to have his thoughts catch up as though he’d never left them behind. It was so *stupid* of him to push her boundaries when he’d already known she was done. Everyone had been right about him. He didn’t want to get serious with Rei because he was a dumb whore, and dumb whores didn’t recognize when they had someone perfect. The attorney probably thought that *Nagisa* had used him for money and sex in return for a pretend relationship, not the other way around. Had he? Was he just the blond’s comeback story? He didn’t know anymore. Before he realized it, he’d come to a complete stop in the middle of the sidewalk, his hot tears meeting the frigid drops of rain from above. This was all *his* fault, not Rei’s. And in a stunning moment of clarity, the cold, hard truth dawned on him.

He and Rei were over.

Chapter End Notes

*sorry it's taking me so long, so I'm giving you guys a hint: chapter 19 is called "Drown your Sorrows"*
Drown your Sorrows

Chapter Notes

june update: finals are over, I am dead, but I am still chugging at this. I absolutely refuse to give up!
one entire term later, I present to you chapter 19 lmao sorry about that this is a pretty dialogue-heavy chapter too :/ sorry guys

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nagisa barely heard the berating speech Ms. Westwood administered upon his re-entry to the building. She said something of this being the perfect example how not to act at a professional publication, but he’d stopped caring somewhere between the trek from the coffee shop to the office. His eyes, red-rimmed and puffed up from embarrassingly public sobbing, didn’t escape the attention of his coworkers, though however much they wanted to help they couldn’t - the constant reminder of their jobs being on the line stopped them from saying much. Once the authoritarian woman vanished to a lunch meeting with an investor, Momo, Gou, and Hana confronted him about his appearance.

“Are you cold?” the younger man asked, referring to his runny nose.

“What happened to you?” the redheaded woman inquired, fretfully examining him.

“This can’t be good,” the photographer commented, her tone the most subdued. It was this calm presence of understanding that made him give in at last. The blond had no more tears to spill, but he buried his face in his hands at his desk.

“I’m fucked,” he groaned. “The editor told me to get Satsuki Momoi to be the cover model, but she flat-out refused because of - personal reasons,” he explained choppily. Her miscarriage was anything but public knowledge, and he couldn’t bear it if he screwed up bad enough to be the leak of that information. “I don’t know what to do!”

“Don’t worry about the cover model and focus on writing your best,” Hana advised, giving him a quick squeeze. “I’ll touch bases with media relations to get a different one, and then whatever happens will be on me.” Gou nodded in agreement.

“Just write as well as you can. There’s no way you’ll be disciplined or anything. Your articles have some of the highest reviews online,” she informed him confidently. His misery began to subside, although he had lied about the heart of the problem.

“I’ll try to keep her attention off you!” Momo added. “That way you won’t have to worry about her breathing down your neck.” The writer sniffled slightly and wiped his nose on his sleeve (which was beginning to look a little worse for the wear).

“Thanks, guys,” he murmured, giving a half-hearted grin. At least that was one less thing he had to worry about, but he still had four hours of the daily grind to get through.

More focused on wallowing through his self-pity than doing actual work, Nagisa skimmed through menswear websites, imagining what his ex-boyfriend would have liked and what would have looked good on him. More than once he bitterly recalled that pressuring Rei to change his style was likely
one of the reasons why the attorney had dumped him so unceremoniously. More than once, he felt that he had really deserved it.

Fortunately for the columnist, misery was not without inspiration (weak though it may have been), and he settled on the topic of menswear accessories - what to add in the workplace, how to increase confidence, and precisely how to toe the line between feminine and masculine. A solid idea if he ever had one, but he wasn’t as invested in it as he should’ve been.

“Suspenders, bow ties, oxfords...” he listed to himself in a whisper as he hunted through designer websites and runway looks. While some had been converted seamlessly to women’s fashion (bow-tie necklaces, oxford heels, etc.), others still possessed a distinctly masculine aura (suspenders, cufflinks, three-piece suits like the ones Rei wore...). Much of the advice he weaved into his first draft was similar to what he’d told the attorney on their shopping date, and that only made him want to cry again. Thankfully, once he finished work, he had only a bus ride to wait to fling himself into the arms of Haruka and open the floodgates once more.

The blond burst through the doors of his shabby, lonesome house to find his roommate poring over documents in the living room. The American peeked up over his reading with his usual inscrutable expression as Nagisa threw himself onto the couch at his side.

“Haru, I’m having the worst day,” he moaned, shutting his eyes to the yellow light of the lamp. A shuffle of papers and a small huff sounded beside him, but when his friend didn’t elaborate or ask after him, the writer steamrolled on. “Rei and I got into a fight last night, and now it’s over! He didn’t text me back at all today!”

“Is that it?” Haruka asked irritably, for once ignoring the name-jab. Momentarily shocked by the apathy, Nagisa opened his eyes and sat straight up.

“What do you mean by that?” he protested, for once looking his friend in the eye.

“I mean that this happens all the time. The world doesn’t revolve around you,” he stated. On the surface, his tone was emotionless, but the blond thought he detected... bitterness? The slight disdain that Haruka revealed was too much for the younger man, and he lost any semblance of control over his emotions.

“So, you mean I find and lose the love of my life all the time?” he repeated, distraught at the very thought. The words were far too close to the ‘dumb whore’ mantra that had played through his mind all afternoon. “Why does everyone hate me all of a sudden!?” he exclaimed, tossing his hands into his hair. He wanted to rip his straw locks straight off of his scalp.

“That’s not what I fucking said,” Haruka deadpanned, his teeth grinding against one another. “I said it’s not all about you and him and your perfect fucking relationship. Every time you get into one stupid fucking fight, it’s the end and you come crawling back here, expecting me to be your goddamn mother hen. Some people have real problems to work out!” he snapped, showing more emotion to the blond than he ever had previously.

“Why are you getting so mad?” the writer whimpered. He wasn’t used to such a passionate version of his friend. “Are you talking about you and Makoto?”

“What does it fucking matter?” Haruka retorted. “There never was a ‘me and Makoto’ in the first damn place, and it’s all because of that dumbass case he’s got!” The black-haired American stood, papers scattering all around. “Jesus, you’ve got it so good, but you’re too dumb to see it!” he hollered. Nagisa’s only response was to break out in heaving sobs, the cumulation of stress, grief, and sensitivity overwhelming him, and escaped into his room. The rational part of his brain (a part
that sounded suspiciously like Rei) told him he was acting like a fifteen-year-old, and that Haruka
had only lashed out because he was feeling the exact same was as the blond, but his heart was in
favor of ignoring the fact.

Nagisa cried himself to sleep that night. He didn’t notice Haruka leave, or come home. Maybe it was
selfish, and maybe it was stupid, but he could only focus on all that was spinning out of control.
He’d lost his boyfriend. He’d lost his best friend. He was well on the way to losing his father. Any
pleasure his job had once given him all but vanished, and he really began to question whether he’d
been wrong about his passion, and that all he had been doing was pushing his own judgment onto
his loved ones. This was the white noise that lulled him to a restless sleep.

He awoke several times throughout the night and morning, and eventually called in a sick day at
work. Even though it was Friday, he couldn’t bear to spend even a moment under his horrific new
boss’ stare. He spent most of the morning mulling about his room, listlessly switching between his
new article’s first draft, checking his bank tab for his incoming payment for his last one, and
watching some movie he was only half-interested in until he heard Haruka leave. Briefly, the blond
recalled that today was his court testimony and hoped he wouldn’t be back for a long while yet.

Though Nagisa didn’t much feel like feeding himself, he took the opportunity to get out of his room
to boil water for at least a bit of oatmeal and tea, both completely laden with sugar. A comfort food if
ever there was one. Burrowing himself in a blanket, he spent the whole afternoon at the breakfast
table with his food and laptop. At least working on the article would distract him from the situation at
had, at least a little.

As time went on, it was clear that his earlier wish had been granted - Haruka didn’t come home that
afternoon, or that evening, or even the next day. Briefly, Nagisa had the decency to hope that he was
working things out with Makoto, but a nagging voice in his heart told him that the American was
only avoiding him after their fight.

Late Sunday morning, as he repeated his oatmeal-tea routine while depressively pining for both his
ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend, a hard knock on the door startled him out of his stupor. Strange - he
distinctly recalled the jingle of keys as Haru left for court on Friday. He surely wouldn’t need to
knock if he’d decided to come home.

Nagisa shuffled over to the front door in his pajamas, wearing a look somewhere between quizzical
and pathetic, and checked through the peephole. He immediately recognized his distinctly displeased
landlord and warily opened the door.

“Oh, hello, sir,” he greeted after summoning the energy to deal with what would likely be a shitstorm
over a small matter. The old man marched into the room without so much as an explanation.
Dramatically, he pointed to the sofa that contained a blanket and Haru’s scattered clothes.

“I beg your pardon?!” The writer blinked several times. The implications of that comment didn’t
bode well at all with him.

“Renters from my other properties have seen, you know! The dresses, the endless men! You’re that
type! And you’ve been in violation of your contract!” the landlord declared with a crazed sense of
glee, as though he had just been waiting for this to happen. “And on top of all of that, you’re
unemployed! You didn’t go to work on Wednesday, or Thursday, or Friday! Now listen here, boy, this is your eviction notice!” He shoved a white packet with dense text at the overwhelmed columnist who couldn’t even get a word in edgewise - namely, that he and Haruka were not sleeping together and that he was very much employed.

“But - but -” he tried, only to be interrupted by the ultimatum he’d been positively dreading.

“You have one month to get all your stuff, and get off of my property!” he sniped. Through the open door, Nagisa could see a number of well-to-do neighbors eavesdropping on the ordeal. His eyes pricked with tears. How could he know which were the ones to report him? Which were the ones that looked at him with such disgust?

“You can’t be serious,” he attempted pleadingly, but the old man just gave him a disgusted glance and stalked out, not even bothering to close the door.

For a short while, he just stood there, his thoughts bouncing around as though his mind were a mirror, but eventually the heat of his neighbors’ stares pulled him out of his trance. He hurried to shut their gazes out, slamming his entire body against the door hard enough that he was sure he’d find a bruise on his arm later. A shock of cold seeping into his bones alerted him to the fact that he’d fallen to the floor, as though the thin papers in his hand had turned to stone and forcibly pulled him down.

He didn’t know how long he lay there crying in the doorway, stomach churning, body growing cold from the draft seeping between the cracks. One moment the cloud-filtered light leaked across the room, and the next, his digital clock flashed 4:38 in the black of the early morning. What was the worst end to his week transformed into the worst beginning of the next as he realized it was Monday morning and he had work.

The blond pushed himself weakly to his feet, the popping of his stiff bones the only sound in the house. He might as well attempt to get another couple hours of sleep, despite how exhausted from oversleeping he felt. He doubted quantity over quality would help him much at that point, but all the same the fatigue overtook him as soon as his sore body hit the bed.

It was a testament to how drastically he overestimated his abilities to think while as tired as he was, when he awoke past 10am, having forgotten to set an alarm for work. His bleary, red-rimmed eyes opened to a dim light spilling over his body. His phone buzzed a few times in his pocket - the culprit that actually woke him. Puzzled at his sudden popularity, the writer checked his texts.

From: Momo Miko

nagiiiiii where r u D:

From: Gou <3

Babe get your ass up here before ms shitstorm works her magic

From: Chigusa Hana ✽

Nagisa Hazuki if you are not here in the next five minutes, all of my hard work covering for you will be in vain

From: Chigusa Hana ✽

She’s in a good mood so far but not for long so hurry your pretty little ass up
The final text from his coworkers was timestamped at two minutes ago, though the others were from more than an hour past. His blood ran cold as he texted them to try for an extra 20 minutes as he threw on anything he could find on his floor, splashed water on his face, and sprinted out the door (now featuring an extra eviction notice posted out of bitterness by his landlord).

It was an added pity that he hadn’t been jogging as of late - he nearly missed the bus that only came once every 30 minutes and was well winded after he chased it down for half a block, only to be faced with an angry driver in full-on lecture mode. The blond guessed that the driver only stopped when she saw how close to tears Nagisa was, and let him off with a “don’t do it again”.

Once off the double-decker, he sprinted his three blocks to the office, used the seven flights of stairs instead of the elevator, and popped in fully flushed, red-faced, and sweating despite the late January chill.

“Way to look desperate,” Hana griped, having materialized at his side as the columnist tried to catch his breath by the stairwell. “Where have you been?”

“Didn’t... set my... alarm,” he panted, hand clutching his blouse over his racing heart.

“You idiot,” the photographer groaned, patting him on the head nonetheless. “I told her you were doing your photography in the morning this time. I emailed you a few shots I took between session breaks, too,” she informed him as she guided him to his desk. The blond shook out his curls as he regained his composure. He had just settled in at his desk when Ms. Westwood herself stepped through the elevator doors with a touch of a smirk on her face as she headed towards her office, Momo scampering around behind her.

“Ah, it’s you,” she condescended to greet him. Her demeanor looked pleasant enough, and he ventured an uncomfortable smile. “Your contract has been terminated. Have a good morning.” The entire bustling office stiffened. Hana’s green eyes went wide at the declaration. Momo physically jumped back from their boss.

“What?” he exclaimed, taken aback at the casual dismissal. His throat went dry, and he couldn’t make any of his muscles move from his half-seated position.

“Excuse me, I should have been more clear. You’re fired. You may collect your belongings and leave. There are cardboard boxes in the photography department.” She pivoted on her black stiletto heel and marched away from the stunned young man, and vanished into the dark corner that was her office. Simultaneously, the employees she’d left behind in her wake all turned to look at Nagisa. People he’d known for years. Michael from publishing. The tech gurus that had helped him format his first article. Momo Mikoshiba. Hana. Gou.

“You’ve got to be bloody joking,” he muttered, his mind whirling with every bit of exhaustion and negativity that had been building over the course of weeks, ever since that untimely New Year’s Eve encounter with Kent and Jonathan Curley.

His friends helped him pack. Everywhere he went in the office sympathetic eyes followed him. Whether or not he’d deserved to be fired didn’t matter to them - all they knew of the kind, sunny blond was that he didn’t deserve to be fired like that. At least with the entire office on hold to assist their ex-coworker, the job got done so fast that Nagisa really couldn’t say whether or not he’d ever recovered from his shock enough to even stand during the hour and a half it took. The time passed in a blur, and before he knew it Gou was saying, “I’ll go put this in my car,” and lugging off all of his decor by herself. All that was left was his emotionless shell of a body.

Nagisa shoved himself out of his desk, his head tucked to his chest to hide his humiliation, and
gathered the last of his belongings. He didn’t give another look around the building that he’d grown so familiar with over the years. He couldn’t meet the pitying gazes of his friends and coworkers as he mustered as much dignity as he could and swiftly escaped to the elevator.

He drifted through the London streets until his aching, blistered feet bulged in his traitorously pretty black boots. His fashionable computer bag dug welts across his shoulder until it felt as though it would nearly sever his head. The wool coat he’d snatched off of his floor was soaked with the consistent, light rain that fell from the grey, cloudy sky in place of the tears he’d long since cried out. At last when vanished behind the clouds, and whole city turned from steel to black, he found what he had all day been seeking.

A pub. As a true English countryman (so he justified it to himself), Nagisa knew there was only recourse at this point in time - alcohol. And one with a fair number of patrons, considering it was a Monday night.

He collapsed on a rickety velvet barstool and promptly said, “Whiskey, please,” without an ounce of hesitation. Almost as soon as the golden drink was in his hand, he knocked it back like it was a shot, the red burn paving itself all the way down his throat. “Another, please,” he requested of the already exasperated bartender, fully intending to savor it this time. There was nothing like the smooth warmth of a good whiskey in a bar with the vague acridity of smoke clinging to the wood of the tabletops.

“Looking to get wasted?” inquired a familiar voice at his side, interrupting his pitiable film noir fantasy. Too miserable to be irritated, he glanced over only to find who but Ms. Amakata in a state sadder than his. Her once-fine curls were tied back at the crown of her head in a messy half-ponytail, and she was drinking what he assumed was straight vodka (it certainly wasn’t water, at any rate). Her eyes, which once held such inspiring passion, were empty as she turned to him and said, “I see they got you too.”

“Yeah,” Nagisa sighed as a joint response to both of her statements. He couldn’t even bring himself to be surprised that of all the pubs he could’ve found, he managed to land in the exact one his old boss wanted to drown her sorrows at as well.

Briefly, she looked like she was going to spout some proverb at him, or try to comfort her old employee. She opened her mouth and closed it again, before simply deciding on, “Take a shot with me,” a request which he gladly obliged. The blond didn’t much feel like discussing his failure as a writer. Amakata, however, appeared to have other ideas.

After downing her vodka like a champ, she sighed dramatically and lamented, “I can’t believe them, firing me. I made that magazine. Without them, they’d be nothing. It isn’t my fault magazines are falling by the wayside! And even then, I took preventative measures. Like Gou.” The younger man finished off the shot she’d bought him and turned back to his whiskey, the fuzziness of both 40% alcohol drinks beginning to affect him.

“None of us saw it coming, for sure,” he agreed, turning up his nose at their nerve. Blaming others for his problems sounded like a better time than actually examining his own conduct at the moment, and so he channeled his grief into indignance. “I don’t know why they’d even think of it!”

“It was the New Year’s party,” she replied humorlessly. “Or at least, that was their excuse. I got a complaint written up from HR.”

“What? So it’s all my fault!” Nagisa exclaimed as he finished his drink and proceeded to commiserate with another. His ex-boss waved off the response.
“I would’ve done it again in a heartbeat, even knowing the consequences,” she insisted stubbornly. “I’ve been grooming you up for the big leagues for years. Nobody’s gonna talk to you like that under my watch. Have another shot.” He obediently did as he was told.

“You’ve been grooming me?” he repeated between sips of... whatever it was he was drinking, his speech slowly growing slurred. It seemed the older woman was in the same boat, as she grew more boisterous with each shot she took. He wasn’t sure how many she’d had, nor had he noticed that they were both drinking like sailors.

“‘Course, I couldn’t let your talents be wasted on a goddamn internship! Assistant-ship... whatever it was you did! God, your ideas were so good. I almost never wanted to say no!”

“You almost always said no to me!” he protested with a sharp laugh. Alcohol certainly turned her cool exterior into an honest woman.

“‘Course I did!” she cried, “I had to, I was your editor! But damn, I saved every single one of your ideas for future reference! So I could make you write them later!” Her face made a smacking sound as she collapsed into her hands, and Nagisa began to drunkenly giggle at the display.

“Naw, you didn’t!” he protested with the false embarrassment of someone accepting an expected gift.

“I did,” she assured with a sharp nod and a slosh of her drink. “Like, like when you said that hyper-pigmented lips would become mainstream!”

“You flatterer,” he snickered as they reminisced - that incident had happened when he was only an intern. At first, the sharp look Amakata had sent his way made his skin crawl, and he’d regretted the remark immediately. Later, however, he came to realize it was a look of shrewd attentiveness that indicated an idea and a plan to execute it. Even in his drunken state, he’d be able to recognize that brilliant spark anywhere.

“And I remember those damn execs gettin’ their knickers in a twist when I had a model with a blue lip on the cover,” she sighed dramatically. “And they don’t even know half the shit they talk. Have you seen how they dress?”

“They wouldn’t know art if it hit them in their faces,” Nagisa agreed as the exasperated bartender sent another whiskey his way.

“More concerned with sales,” she replied. “God, you don’t know how much I hated it. Do you know what we were selling?” She grilled her former employee with a severe stare that he hadn’t encountered since he was a child in primary school.

“Magazines?” he ventured, too drunk to think anymore critically about it.

“Insecurities,” Amakata quipped, “and if I could do it all over, Nagisa, I would have changed everything. All of it. I would change the landscape, starting with the godforsaken name. Elite. What bloody shit. Those ‘elites’ don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“Well, why don’t you start over?” he questioned, not realizing that going back in time by three or so years wouldn’t exactly be a feasible plan. She sent him a wry glance, but inebriated as he was, he ignored it and barreled on, his drink sloshing around in its glass. “Fuck it! Make - make your own magazine... magazine. Thing. Be the editor-in-chief you were meant to be.”

“That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” she responded. “Let’s do it. Let’s have another shot.”
Between his ex-boss’ apparent love of vodka and his own need for whiskey and a distraction, Amakata and Nagisa were well on their way to drinking rowdily until morning (despite it being a weekday evening). Every time they came up with an awful, infeasible idea they’d celebrate with an undeserved shot until the dark, low-lit room was spinning around the blond, and their laughter was echoing off the walls, drilling into his mind. All at once, the 80-proof liquor had hit them like a ton of bricks. He forgot where he even was. And who was shouting at him?

“... cutting you off... home... drunk...” a voice sounded from behind the blurry bar.

“’m not drunk,” he responded, hugging an empty whiskey glass to his chest. He was only twenty-five, and people in their twenties simply didn’t get drunk. It was a fact.

“... need to call someone...” Ah. It was the bartender that was speaking. But who to? To him? The blond lifted his head and attempted to put his surroundings into focus. Ms. Amakata was half-passed out on the shoulder of her dubious fiance, whose eyes were locked on Nagisa. Clearly, he could only babysit one intoxicated adult at a time and was at a loss with what to do with him. In his hand was a phone encased in a white marble print... Wait.

Nagisa’s phone. Goro most certainly had Nagisa’s phone in his hand.

“Uhn,” he groaned, attempting to snatch it away, and tripping into a stool in the process. The advertising executive gave him an exasperated glance before dialing a number. The part of the blond’s brain that sounded like Rei told him he ought to have a passcode if he didn’t like people going through his phone.

“Yeah, can you come pick him up?” he heard Goro say into the receiver.

“Who you talkin’ to?” Nagisa whined, making grabby hands at his phone. The older man attempted to hold him at arm’s length while still supporting his fiancee, but it didn’t take him long to wrap up whatever he was talking about and pass the phone back to its owner. The blond petulantly stuck out his tongue before scrolling through his recent calls to find out just who intended to interrupt his perfectly deserved drinking session. The name pictured nearly made him sober.

Rei was coming to get him. He should have figured - Goro had met him once before. He knew that they’d dated, but not that they’d broken up. Any ounce of fun, of comfort, of indignance he’d felt flew out the window into the rainy night, and was replaced with great shame. He’d never hated the thought of an ex seeing him like this, but as he sat back down and took a glass of water, he could feel tears welling his eyes and blotchy patches of heat rising in his cheeks.

“What’chu do that for?” he sniffled helplessly, lacking the words to describe exactly what it was that upset him.

“You’re wasted,” Goro replied as he settled the bill with the bartender (and included a large tip). He wrapped one arm around Amakata’s back, the other around Nagisa’s, and walked them outside. The cold bit into the tracks of tears along his red cheeks. They stood there, ignoring Nagisa’s steadily falling tears until a familiar black sedan pulled through the developing fog and parked along the curb after what seemed like a heartbeat, and an eternity. Rei stepped out.

The attorney’s face was completely inscrutable, as though he was wearing a mask, and it only made him want to cry more that he couldn’t understand. What did the brunet feel when he observed him so detachedly? Was his mind as still as his face? When he opened his mouth to speak, the blond leaned in so far to listen that he stumbled, barely keeping his balance thanks to Goro.

“Let’s get you in the car,” Rei sighed neutrally as the blond’s weight was transferred from one man to the other. His bottom lip trembled as more tears cascaded down his face. “Don’t cry,” came his
steady voice. While it lacked the warmth that he so craved right now, the younger man clung to its sensibility and groundedness, hoping against hope that it would again be comforting and affectionate.

The lawyer buckled his ex safely in the car like he was a child, and he certainly felt like one. Their drive was quiet, void of all the banter and bickering that had once characterized their relationship. The longer the silence lasted, the harder Nagisa’s tears fell until they were punctuated with half-drunken hiccups that evolved into full-on sobs echoing in the car. He hated this unfamiliarity. It was like he was trapped in a small space with a complete stranger, and the thought of the man that he loved so dearly thinking of him with such distance crushed him.

“Why are you still crying?” Rei asked, his eyes trained on the foggy road in front of them.

“Be-because you don’t lo-love me anymore,” the blond blubbered, his own gaze blurred by cloudy tears. “Y-you br-broke up with me.” His irregular breaths punctuated his speech. At last, a bit of emotion peeked through the distant mask the attorney wore.

“I didn’t break up with you,” he assured lightly, glancing at Nagisa for the first time that night. “I was certainly angry, but we both said harsh things that we didn’t mean.”

“You didn’t?” he checked, turning his pleading expression back to Rei. His hands reached for the attorney’s arm that rested on the gear shift, but he pulled away as they approached a red light. His heart felt like a bruise.

“No, but we need to have a very long and serious talk. Not tonight, though. You’re drunk.” Nagisa’s eyes filled to the brim with tears once more.

“Ok-kay,” he agreed before abandoning himself in the silence. His head was spinning. The city shrouded in fog eluded him. Every now and then, a blurry yellow light from the streetlamps would permeate through his vision until at last, they pulled onto the drive by Nagisa’s house. The lights were already on inside, and as soon as they stepped out onto the grass, the front door opened, revealing Haruka’s silhouette.

“Nagisa,” he called as the pair approached, the smaller man supported by Rei, “there you are!” He looked like he was about to ask something, but upon catching sight of the blond’s state, he stepped back to allow them inside without saying anything more. The warm light burned the writer’s eyes, and he automatically flinched, burying his head into Rei’s arm. The brunet guided him to the couch where he collapsed, grabbing a discarded sweater to place over his face.

“What happened?” inquired a soothing voice in a low tone.

“Makoto?” Rei asked, pulling himself away from Nagisa. “What are you doing here?”

“We were waiting for Nagisa to get home. When I dropped Haruka off, we found this...” In the background, the blond heard a sheet of paper unfurl and wondered what it could be.

“Eviction notice’...?” the attorney read, dismay creeping into his voice. The younger man’s eyes flew open underneath the sweater and again filled with humiliated tears. What kind of adult was he? How could he have let that happen to Haru, who depended on him for a safe place to live? How could he have let Rei find out? “Nagisa, why didn’t you tell us about this?”

“I’m s-sorry!” he choked out a sob, curling into the back of the couch. A small poof sounded beside him and the sofa sagged with the weight of someone else. A soft hand combed through his hair.

“We aren’t mad,” Haruka told him in a voice gentler than he’d ever heard from him, “we’re worried.” Nagisa sniffled. “So, is that why you’re so drunk? You don’t normally do this.”
“Yeah... well, not the only r-reason,” the blond confessed, his voice muffled by the couch. Haru’s relaxing fingers massaged his head and his muscles began to lose their tension. “I got f-fired,” he stuttered between hiccups. “And my dad is - my dad is...” His lips trembled as he tried to find the words to finish his sentence.

“Is he sick again?” Haruka murmured. Nagisa’s following outburst of sobs answered his question - it seemed the poor blond hadn’t run out of tears yet.

“They think it-it’s cancer!” he howled as the emotion overcame him. His breaths hitched in his throat as he coughed out his cries. Before any more sounds could creep up his throat, however, his entire mouth went damp and a slight flavor of bile colored his tongue. He stood shakily and darted to the bathroom.

Over the sounds of his miserable retching in the toilet, he heard Haru say, “You guys should probably go. We’re not gonna get anything coherent out of him tonight.” His footsteps approached the bathroom. He didn’t hear their response, but a hand reached up and began to stroke his back sympathetically and through the open door, he heard the other two men leave.

After a few more minutes of misery, Haruka filled a cup of water at the sink and passed it to the blond, once he was certain he was done dispelling the contents of his stomach. Nagisa took small sips to clear the taste from his throat and spit it out while his roommate quietly helped him to his feet and guided him to the bed.

“Make sure to lay on your side,” he murmured as he drew the curtains shut so the light of the street lamps wouldn’t bother him. The pathetic boy certainly felt miserably ill, but even in his half-sober state he figured he didn’t have alcohol poisoning. As such, it was safe to drift off almost immediately after the American drew the blankets over him and wished him a goodnight. Eyes still encrusted with tears, he fell asleep to the first dreamless night he’d had in a long while.

Nagisa awoke the next morning to a hand gently shaking his shoulder, followed by a vague sense of light, and finally the most painful splitting of his head he’d felt since he partied as a freshman in uni.

“Uuhnnn,” he groaned, curling up into the fetal position and clutching his head.

“I have ibuprofen and water,” Haruka whispered. A soft clink on the bedside table followed. “Rei’s here, so take the pills and come out when you feel up to it. Makoto and I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

He took the proffered medication and lay back down, sipping at the water for another fifteen minutes or so before he felt ready to get out of bed and face what promised to be an incredibly difficult day. Like a frightened animal, he slunk out of his room and down the hallway to find Rei sitting at the breakfast table, concentrating on the crossword puzzle. At his boyfriend’s sheepish appearance, he set the newspaper aside and gestured to the chair across from him.

“Have a seat,” the lawyer told him as he stood and approached the kitchen. He didn’t look the blond in the eye. “Do you need anything to eat or to drink?”

“Coffee would be nice...” Nagisa replied, thinking that he didn’t even deserve the gesture. Rei busied himself for a little while longer than necessary as they both steeled themselves for their conversation. The younger man tried desperately to quell his emotions and prepare to listen, as the older man tried to organize exactly what he had been feeling since their explosive argument.

“Well,” Rei sighed as he set a pair of mugs down in front of them, “shall we start at the beginning, or
last night?” He sat down and placed his elbows on the table, looking intently at the blond. Nagisa noticed that there were deep bags under his eyes, half blocked by his glasses. Clearly, this hadn’t been easy on his boyfriend, either.

“I guess the beginning,” he offered, his lackluster gaze dropping to the coffee in his hands, prepared just the way he liked it.

“Where is the beginning, anyhow? It couldn’t have started with that fight - I realize that now.” The older man grinned wryly while the blond at last reciprocated his willingness to communicate.

“I actually started feeling upset at the New Year’s party...” he confessed, recalling the harsh words Rei’s ex had tossed at him, tainting the entire memory with bitterness. “Dancing with that guy sucked and all, but that wasn’t really the problem. First, you didn’t introduce me as your boyfriend to your ex, and normally it wouldn’t have bothered me, but you said that you two were gonna get married... It made me feel really insecure.”

“I see,” Rei replied. “I didn’t introduce you because I didn’t want him involved with our private life at all. I just wanted both of us to get out of there,” he informed the younger man. “I’m sorry that you felt that way.”

“It wasn’t only that. He must’ve known we were together.” Tears stung Nagisa’s eyes, but he tried to hold them back. He took a sip of his coffee. “I’m never gonna forget what he said next, after you left. He told me, ‘Rei must not have paid much for a whore like you’,” the blond repeated with a regretful smile. The brunet’s jaw went slightly slack and his eyes reflected his astonishment. “He said - he said you were using me as a pick-me-up, that I was dumb, and some other things... I mean, I didn’t believe that was true, but the thought wouldn’t go away.”

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“I can’t - I’m sorry. That must have been awful,” Rei sputtered. For a moment, it was unclear whether he was angry, sympathetic, sad - but with a deep breath, he set the emotions aside and focused on listening.

“That’s why I said those awful things,” the blond pushed on, through his choked words. “I- I don’t think you treat me like a whore. And I don’t think you’re bad at sex. I was just so stressed about being good enough for you that I didn’t think about what I was saying.” He glanced up at his boyfriend to see his glasses off and his hand covering his eyes.

“I won’t lie,” the attorney stated, his voice shaking, “what you said then really hurt me. It felt like you were targeting my insecurities, and it made me feel very vulnerable.” Nagisa hiccuped and felt his first tears of the day fall at the confession.

“I-I’m sorry,” he apologized, “I never meant to make you feel like that. I’m sorry. I just didn’t feel good enough for you, and I still feel like that, and I took it all out on you at once.”

“Is it because of the conversation we had with Satsuki and Daiki at dinner?” he probed, slipping his glasses back on as he steadied himself in preparation for the rest of their conversation.

“It wasn’t just that - it was mostly because you guys said those things while I was having a bad day... I’d only just gotten the news about my father and it’s a huge strain on my budget, and well, now I’m unemployed, but... Even with all of that, I want to feel like I’m your equal. Like I’m supporting you and providing for you just as much as you’re doing for me.” Nagisa met his gaze, his rosy eyes alit with sincerity. “I’m a man as well, Rei. And more importantly, I want us to share a life, rather than just me injecting myself into yours.”

“That’s what I thought moving in together would do for us,” he replied with equal earnestness. Their
hands found one another across the table. “I feel the exact same way as you do, so I suppose I don’t understand why you’re saying no... To me, it really feels like if our relationship is stagnating over this...” He bit his lip and squeezed Nagisa’s hand like he didn’t want to let it go. “It—it feels as though it’s the end. As though we should break up.”

The blond closed his eyes and felt a tear drop down to land atop Rei’s tanned knuckles. He took a deep breath before replying, “If that’s what’s best, maybe we should.” Instinctively, their fingers entwined as though refusing to let go. “I-I don’t want to, but what I need right now more than anything is consistency. I said no because you’re the one constant in my life right now. I don’t know what’s happening with my father, I don’t know what’s happening with my housing, I don’t know what’s happening with my job. Moving in together is a huge step, and I just - I can’t dedicate any time to adjusting to that. Not yet.” The brunet took a deep breath, and for a moment was silent.

“I understand, Nagisa. If that’s the case, then I’ll wait,” he decided simply. The writer’s head snapped back up and looked into Rei’s gentle eyes. “I don’t want to give up. I don’t want to lose you over this.”

“Me too,” he sniffled. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The couple sat there, hands clasped tight in warmth, for a long while. The gravity of their words weighed on them, no longer light and feathery confessions under the winter night snowfall, and Nagisa realized just how hard it was to love, deeper than that of the frivolous, half-hearted choices that he’d made before in life. And as strange as calm hindsight felt, he didn’t hate them - he felt rather empowered, despite the knowledge that he had hurt both himself and Rei. He wondered whether his lover felt the same, and what thoughts swirled behind his impassive face.

A knock at the door caused their attention to flicker away from one another. As the knob turned, Haruka announced, “We’re back,” and entered with a sheepish looking Makoto.

“Haru, don’t just open the door,” he scolded, looking embarrassed at the thought that he might have interrupted something.

“It’s all right,” Rei replied as he collected the now-cold coffee and set it in the sink. “We were just finishing breakfast.” Haruka pulled out a seat next to Nagisa, who offered him a wistful grin.

“Thanks for staying with me last night,” he said apologetically, “I didn’t mean to cause trouble for you.” His roommate shrugged.

“Whatever, it’s fine,” he replied, grabbing a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket. The eviction notice. “We’ve got some other stuff to talk about.” Makoto took the last seat, sandwiching himself between Rei and Haru. His roommate opened and closed his jaw a couple times as though he was searching for the right words to broach the topic, but was uncertain how to be sensitive about it. Nagisa appreciated the effort, but wasn’t surprised when Haruka simply decided on, “How did this even happen?” All three men looked at the blond. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, wishing that it wasn’t too soon to take more painkillers - this conversation was its own headache.

“Honestly, I’m hardly sure,” he said, resting his head on his elbows. “I think it’s because we’ve been living together, sort of... There’s this stipulation in the housing contract that says if somebody has resided here for three months, aside from the primary resident, that the landlord must be notified and a new contract drawn up.”

“But I moved in late November, early December,” Haru pointed out, “and it’s only the middle of
January now.” In response the blond gave a defeated shrug.

“I know. I called him last week about updating the contract... I knew I was cutting it close, but I guess he just wanted me gone, no matter the circumstances. Apparently, the neighbors have been complaining about us.”

“Complaining? How so?” Rei chipped in, concern rising in his features. Haruka’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nagisa blushed at explaining the whole ordeal - being called a homosexual slut wasn’t exactly in his top 10 fun memories to recount.

“Well, the neighbors have apparently seen, um, all the feminine clothes. And once Haru moved in, I guess they thought we were together. So the landlord just looked for the first opportunity to boot us, I guess. You know, that whole ‘no sinners in suburbia’ kind of thing,” he explained with an awkward smile and laugh. There was only so much one could ask for in a city as big as London. The two lawyers, however, shared a concerned glance before looking back at Nagisa. Makoto’s lips were pressed in a thin line, the first sign of any displeasure he’d seen from the fairytale man, and Rei’s brows tucked underneath his glasses in a familiar gesture of concentration.

“Do you remember his exact words?” his boyfriend interrogated seriously. The blond stopped to think a moment, taken aback by how seriously the two of them seemed to take it.

“Well, he said I was in violation of my contract, and that I wasn’t paying extra rent in order to live a ‘degenerate lifestyle’ with Haru,” he explained, “and I think he watched me for a few days ‘cause he saw that I wasn’t at work Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of last week. That was before I was fired though.”

“Nagisa, that’s illegal,” Rei asserted in a grim tone that held the slightest touch of anger. The writer glanced to Makoto and Haru to see that they wore similar expressions.

“Well, I know that,” he replied with confusion, “but he’s technically evicting me for not telling him about Haru in time... isn’t he?”

“Does your renting contract explicitly state that you’re required to contact him within three months?” Makoto cut in as he examined the eviction notice with greater concentration.

“I can’t remember,” the blond confessed. “The landlord definitely told me that when I started living here, and I’m pretty sure it’s written, but I guess I must not have read through it terribly carefully... I just remember signing.” He nervously tucked a lock of hair behind his ear as his eyes drifted to the floor. An intelligent lawyer like Rei must think him so naive and stupid for such a thing.

“Some parts of contracts are conducted orally, so that shouldn’t be a problem, particularly if your landlord rents out other properties and has given similar stipulations,” the attorney stated, more to himself than anything else. Makoto had his phone in his hand and appeared to be taking notes. The blond’s eyebrows raised.

“What are you doing?” he asked them skeptically. Rei took a pause from his considerations and replied, “You should file a lawsuit. You’re entitled to some serious compensation under antidiscrimination laws.”

“Yeah,” he scoffed, “but you have to win to get money.” He hardly wanted to believe he was deserved anything in his miserable, though the consideration was tempting. Fleetingly, he thought of his father’s surgery scheduled in only days... There was no point pursuing the money, he thought, if it would come to late to help his family. But Rei and Makoto didn’t budge.
“Nagisa,” the latter addressed him, green eyes soft and pleading, “it’s my personal opinion that it’s not right to let him get away with this. It’s my professional opinion that this is an open-and-shut case. It’d be very difficult for you to lose.”

“But,” he continued weakly, balking under the certainty of his words, “none of that changes that I can’t afford a lawyer right now. I’m spending all of my savings on Dad’s surgery.” A legal battle was both time-consuming and fund-draining, never mind the emotional toll it could take - he couldn’t commit to that with the certainty of future medical costs, with his father’s life in jeopardy. Makoto didn’t hesitate to respond.

“I’ll represent you.” The other three all took a double take. “Pro-bono,” he added with confidence. “I just won the case with Haru,” he proceeded, sliding a hand over the American’s on the table, “so I’m not busy. I might not be able to argue your case in court, but I can build the arguments, write the briefs...”

“But... why?” Nagisa relented. He didn’t know Makoto all too well, aside from hearing about him here and there - what reason did he have for helping the poor blond?

The Spaniard’s eyes crinkled downward in a gentle smile as he said, “How could I not help my closest friend’s loved one?” He punctuated the statement with a laugh. “Or my loved one’s closest friend?” Both Haruka and Rei had gone a bit pink in the face, looking at anything but Makoto and Nagisa, the latter of which at long last offered up a wobbly grin.

“Well... if you’re sure... I don’t know what to say. Thank you,” he stammered, feeling his eyes well up with tears. “All of you, really. I was so stupid, not asking for help,” he confessed, “but you’ve still put up with me and all the problems I’m causing...”

“You aren’t causing us problems, Nagisa,” Rei told him, tentatively placing his hand atop the blond’s and brushing his thumb over his knuckles. Haruka rubbed a hand across his back.

“But where should we go? Court cases take a long time, don’t they? Should we just stay here like nothing happened?”

“No, that’s probably not a good idea,” his boyfriend advised, leaning back in his chair. He was quiet for a moment before suggesting, “What about your sister? I know she only just moved to London, but she may be your best option.” Makoto and Haru were both tactfully quiet on the topic - though neither knew what the fight was about, they sensed the caution in the attorney’s tone, and the silent offer with it. Nagisa allowed himself to feel grateful, however, that Rei didn’t push the topic of living together so soon after their not-quite-resolved argument. Although staying with his boyfriend temporarily sounded like the most natural option, it was clear that they both needed space to cope with the near-disastrous fight.

“Yeah,” he agreed, running his free hand through his blond hair (that most definitely needed a wash). “I’ll have to call her today, and find some time to get all my stuff into storage somewhere.” He could perhaps auction it off for extra cash, but he was on a strict schedule of only a little over three weeks.

“Do you need some privacy to make the call?” Makoto offered, rising from his chair. The other two followed suit, but Nagisa waved them down.

“No, it’s all right,” he assured, standing to look for his phone. He’d probably left it in his bedroom. He stretched to remove his stiffness from sitting too long - serious conversations sure required a lot of time - and shuffled down the short hall to his bedroom.

His phone wasn’t hard to find, considering it had nearly vibrated itself off his bedside table. Carefully
picking his way over mounds of dirty clothing, he snatched it right as it buzzed off the edge and checked the screen to see - speak of the Devil - Emi herself calling him. Nagisa quickly swiped to answer.

“Emi, I was just about -”

“Where have you been?” she exclaimed frantically, causing him to jump. The blond shivered. “I've been calling you all morning - never mind, just hurry to The Princess Grace Hospital, it's Dad! The tumor, he’s hemorrhaging and they need to operate immediately. I’m almost there, but please hurry. This could be -” Her voice cut off as though she couldn’t finish the words, and Nagisa heard a car honk in the background.

“E-Emi? Is he going to...?” he choked out, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip to keep any minute semblance of control over himself. Someone - he wasn’t sure who - called to him from the other room, but every last bit of his focus was on her next words.

“I think so.”

Chapter End Notes

a side note: don't be like nagisa and drink away your problems, and if one of your friends is vomiting from too much alcohol intake or displaying other signs of alcohol poisoning (unresponsive, pale, clammy, etc.), call an ambulance or take them to the emergency room.

june update: keep an eye out for "steal away", coming soon!
At long last, after a major struggle, I present chapter 20, marking the 2/3 milestone of the story! I got super busy during the last term and came home for the summer to find that my parents had got a puppy which I am now in charge of while they’re at work. I got really hung up with technicalities in this chapter, so it was a slow trudge through the first five pages. After that, the last eleven came easy over a couple days! If the last chapter was dialogue-heavy, then this one is plot-saturated. I just can't seem to strike the right balance these days! Anyways, thanks for keeping up with this fic. <3 I have to acknowledge my frequent commenters one of these days. Know that I read each and every one over and over and over when I'm struggling to power through these! new goals: 30 bookmarks, 100 comments, 2500 hits, 150 kudos!

Nagisa burst through the doors of the emergency room, heart pounding painfully against his chest as he rushed to the front desk, Rei striding hurriedly behind him. Curious eyes followed, but he hardly cared. He was hyper-focused on the people at the reception desk.

“I’m here for Kenichi Hazuki!” he exclaimed breathlessly, hands on the counter to support himself, followed by his boyfriend’s comforting touch on the small of his back.

“Right this way,” a nurse replied, gesturing down a hall. “Your sister is already waiting.”

They were escorted to a private waiting room where they joined Emi, who still wore her uniform. Her short curls spilled over his shoulders where she sat, head buried in her hands. As the nurse shut the door behind them, her head snapped up.

“How is he?” the blond fretted, joining her on one of the plastic chairs.

“I don’t know,” she replied, her tone defeated and bleak. “It was so sudden - he’d been complaining about increased pain near his spine, and then this happened, and Dr. Greene called, and I got here right when they took him into surgery.” She took a shuddery breath, and Nagisa leaned his head against her shoulder, as anxious as she was. Her eyes momentarily flicked between Rei and Nagisa, as the clock ticked away like a heartbeat. She sighed. “Um, Nagisa, I called Maki and Rika. They’re on their way.” She glanced up at the lawyer one more time, apologetic, and continued, “I wasn’t sure if you wanted to um... have Rei along.”

“Oh,” the lawyer interjected before his boyfriend could say anything. “I see. Why don’t I get you a change of clothes?” he offered. The blond had gone to sleep in his outfit from work, and on top of that hadn’t showered in a while either. He felt guilty for it, but the younger man reluctantly nodded and replied, “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea...”

“I’ll be back in a couple hours, then,” he said, turning to make his way out. While Nagisa was thankful that the attorney was giving the family their space, as soon as he disappeared from view, he felt terribly lonesome. More than anything, he wanted Rei’s comfort - to be held, and to be told that everything would be all right. He had been through this struggle all on his own once before, and he wasn’t capable of doing it alone anymore.
As though she could sense her brother’s discomfort, Emi wrapped an arm around his shoulder, temporarily startling him - he’d forgotten she was there. Even through her own uncertainty, she offered him a gentle smile, just enough to set him at ease as he cuddled closer, reminding him that no matter what, they were family, and she would never leave him to cope with this by himself again.

The seconds, the minutes, and eventually the hours ticked by with no sign of Maki or Rika. On and off, the other two siblings would glance between the clock and the door, wondering if they would be here for them - for their father - in his final hours. As the clock ran, Nagisa even began to wonder who they would hear from first - the sisters, his boyfriend, or the doctors.

Two and a half hours into the surgery on the dot, Rei once again walked through the doors, a set of folded jeans, a button down, and the blond’s favorite university pullover draped neatly over his arms. A crease rested between his brows and his lips were pressed into a thin line. Nagisa rose to greet him.

“Have you heard anything yet?” the attorney asked as he handed over the clothing. The younger man shook his head no, his eyes downcast and his jaw clenched. A moment later, however, he relaxed as a soft set of lips touched his forehead. “Go change,” his boyfriend instructed, “We’ll wait for you here.”

Although reluctant to do so, Nagisa left the secluded area and slipped away to the bathroom. As he swapped clothes in the stall, he noticed that not only had Rei brought his comfiest favorites, but that he’d thought to bring along a change of underwear as well. The blond’s throat tightened with gratitude as he remembered how close they’d come to ending their relationship that morning, but he pushed it aside. He had to think of his father. Taking care to splash some water on his face and bundle up his dirty clothes, he hurried back to the waiting room lest he miss any news.

“– don’t understand what they’re playing at,” he heard his sister say as he approached the door. Curious, he peeked around the corner to see Emi clenching her phone in her fist and Rei with his hand somewhat awkwardly placed on her back.

“What’s going on?” Nagisa demanded, dropping his clothes off to the side as he switched his complete focus to the conversation at hand.

“Your other sisters have called...” Rei began, at a loss as to describe what occurred. He switched his rosy eyes over to the hunched officer.

“It’s been two hours and they’ve only just left!” Emi exclaimed, tossing her phone back into her purse. “They drove all the way home just to tell Mum and Nathan what’s happened - never mind that we’ve been waiting here for hours!”

The blond was used to the cold shoulder from his sisters, and so the information that Maki and Rika didn’t jump at the chance to be at Ken’s side didn’t surprise him, however much it still hurt. In the early days of his father’s injury complications, he’d kept all three of them - Maki, Rika, and Emi - updated about all of the medical changes, but as time went on and they became unresponsive, he’d eventually given up. The feeling of bitterness elicited a sharp laugh from him.

“Of course. So they’re all the way in Bridlington? It’ll take them hours to get down here! Anything could happen between now and then!”

As if on cue, a nurse in full mint scrubs ducked into the room with a polite cough, immediately silencing the trio. Emi and Rei sprung up from their seats and approached Nagisa anxiously.

“We’ve just finished the surgery,” the nurse told them, “and we’ve moved Mr. Hazuki from the
operating room. It’ll be about 90 minutes until he should be ready for any visitors, but in the meantime, Dr. Bingham can discuss it with you. If you’ll follow me, now.” She turned and left the room, the group anxiously falling into step behind her.

The blond felt sick to his stomach at the neutrality of her words - what was his father’s condition? Was it good that they could see him? Did it mean that he was at the end? Before he realized it, he found that his hand was clenched tight against something soft that reciprocated his grip with considerable delicacy. His round, terrified eyes glanced up and found his lover’s earnest gaze looking back at him, and he realized that Rei’s hand was in his. And that he was likely cutting off Rei’s circulation. He took a deep, deliberate breath, loosening his hold, and allowed the older man to guide him until they reached a row of offices. The nurse stopped at the last one and opened the door for them to enter.

An older doctor stood from his desk and reached out his hand for Emi, and then Nagisa and Rei, to take. He gestured for them to have a seat with a professional smile, but the blond could hardly stand to see the look on his face, as anxious as he was to hear the news. He fell back into the chair across from the surgeon, finally eliciting a response.

“You don’t need to worry,” he stated cheerfully, “I have good news. The procedure went exceedingly well.” Dumbfounded at the surgeon’s words, all the tension left Nagisa’s body as he sagged back into the wooden chair. He launched into an explanation that the blond couldn’t fully appreciate, though he understood the gist of it. The tumor burst that morning, requiring immediate medical attention. They proceeded with their original operating plan of removing parts of the offending vertebrae to access the tumor below.

“This is where treatment gets complicated,” the doctor continued to explain. Nagisa’s anxiety spiked again. “We sent part of the tumor to the lab to determine whether it’s cancerous. If it is, his treatment plan going forward needs to involve a bigger team with more specialists, and we won’t be able to plan our next step until we’ve consulted with them. If it’s not, however, we’ll need to go back in and replace the vertebrae.”

“How long will it take to get the results?” Emi’s hands rubbed against her lap, leaving small traces of sweat along her pants. The younger man was sure he was in a similar state as his imploring gaze found its way to the surgeon again.

“It typically takes about 48 hours. We’ll let you know as soon as they come back,” he assured calmly.

“What about his recovery in the meantime?” Rei cut in, his voice low and serious. His fingers swiped the top of Nagisa’s hand gently before he tightened his grip in a soft gesture of support.

“We’re optimistic that’ll will go well,” the doctor began, “but because he is older and the area we operated on has historically been a problem with him, he may take longer to fully recover.”

“I see,” the attorney stated neutrally, his voice trailing off slightly. When the group offered nothing more, simply processing the events of the day up until now, the doctor checked his watch.

“He should be waking up from anesthesia in 30 minutes,” he informed them, “and should be ready for visitors then. Would you like to wait in his room?”

“Yes, please,” Emi answered as she stood. Nagisa bit his lip, trying to keep himself from dashing ahead of the surgeon and tearing through the halls to find his father himself, Rei’s supportive grip over his own hand being the only thing holding him back.
They were lead to a private, albeit small, room surrounded by the beeps and whooshes of machinery that were all too familiar to the blond. He dropped Rei’s hand as he found chair at the rainy window sill and fell back into it, exhausted and hungry and all sorts of empty. His sister mirrored his movements exactly, and despite it all, the three of them grinned wryly.

“I’ll get you both something to eat,” Rei suggested, pulling out his phone to find something more tolerable than hospital food. The younger man was about to thank him when he caught his boyfriend’s violet eyes subtly glancing between him and Emi - a brief suggestion that now would be an appropriate time to bring up his living arrangements with her. As the attorney ducked out, the writer steeled himself for yet another difficult conversation. Maybe it’d be easier now that he’d ‘practiced’ - people did say that the third time was the charm, right?

“Um, Emi,” he began awkwardly, focusing his gaze at his feet, “I actually have something that I need to talk to you about.” He heard her shift in her seat and could picture the look of sincere concern on her face - the tilt of her lips, almost like a pout, and the crease of her brow - but he couldn’t make himself look up.

“What’s wrong?” she prompted, her tone uncharacteristically quiet and subdued. He was sure he didn’t sound much different.

“Well, the thing is, I was actually fired the other day. And, um, I’m being evicted,” he confessed, a lump forming in his throat. It was no easier the third time around than the first.

“Why?” she cut in, her voice recoiling at the shock. “How did that all happen?” Nagisa sighed in response and finally glanced her way, finding her in the exact state he expected.

“It’s a really long story, but I’m being evicted essentially because I’m gay and unemployed. And yes, I know that’s illegal,” he added as she tried to interject. “Rei’s friend is gonna help me press charges, I guess, but I still need somewhere to stay. Can I crash on your couch? I can make food and everything since I have the time now, I guess,” he offered with a derisive snort at his pathetic state.

But his older sister wouldn’t have any of it. She stood and wrapped her protective arms around Nagisa, rubbing her hands up and down his back as tears collected at the corners of his eyes and his bottom lip shivered.

“Of course you can, Nagisa,” Emi replied, emotions restrained in her voice. Through her strong grip around his shoulders, he could sense her anger on his behalf and her own empathy on the topic. He supposed that her break-up and subsequent move must have taken their toll on her. She pulled away a moment later, releasing tension with a drawn-out breath. “So, can I ask why you’re not staying with Rei?” She reached out to fix Nagisa’s bangs.

“We actually had a fight,” he admitted, relinquishing his messy hair to her tender touch. It wasn’t often she was outright affectionate with him, and he savored the attention.

“You should be careful,” Emi warned as she flicked a stray lock back into place. “Rei is a good man.”

“I know,” he replied meekly, if not with a bit of distraction. “Hey, Emi,” he murmured, half afraid of the words he was saying, “how did you know things wouldn’t work out between you and your fiancé? Why did you break up?”

“Well,” she began thoughtfully, no doubt taken aback at the timing of the question, “there was a lot. I guess if I had to narrow down the root cause, though, it’s that we didn’t have a good working partnership.” The blond’s brow wrinkled.
“What do you mean?”

“Well, for the few years we were together, the romance was there, sure, but the way we worked together was a mess. Sure, it was nice when he bought me flowers, but it didn’t matter when I was the one cooking and cleaning for two on top of the demands of my job. Some people can handle as much, but it wasn’t for me. He thought that the romance was enough… I didn’t,” she described simply, her voice removed and analytical. “When you’re thinking in the long run, Nagisa, you have to find someone willing to strike the right balance with you. That’s why I’m so fond of Rei. I know the two of you are really just starting, but you clearly have that potential. Whatever needs to be resolved should be done so with care.” She grinned wryly and ruffled the hair she’d previously worked to neaten, causing the blond to roll his eyes. “I’m proud of you,” she admitted, “for taking the time to make some space between you and him. You’re usually such a clinger.”

“Hey, watch the hair,” he complained with a blush, swatting at her hands. Though he didn’t reply directly to her comments, he knew he’d have to take them to heart, and hearing her say that he’d done the right thing meant the world to his confidence. He’d never say it out loud, but he didn’t want his relationship to fail like his parents’ and then his sister’s.

A knock on the door snapped them to attention, and a moment later the nurse stepped in, prepared to monitor their father until he awoke. Nagisa and Emi fell silent as they settled down once more. During the nurse’s notetaking, their father awoke and mumbled answers to her questions, before dozing off once again. The two siblings, left with nothing else to do but wait for him to gain full consciousness, decided to wait for Rei in the hospital’s cafeteria.

“I brought you two some Chinese food,” the attorney said as soon as he spotted them sitting the corner. He pulled out a chair to join them. “How was he? Did you get the chance to speak to him?” he inquired, reading the lingering feeling of melancholy in the air.

“No,” Nagisa replied with a sigh, pulling half of the food towards himself and stuffing his face. “He only woke up a little bit, and then the nurse had to ask questions. He probably didn’t know we were even there,” he mumbled around a mouthful of rice.

“He’ll probably be right as rain soon as we get back up,” Emi comforted after swallowing a piece of chicken whole.

“I imagine so,” Rei agreed. “These things usually take a bit of time, after all, and I’m sure he’d prefer to be clear-headed when he talks with you.”

“But I want to be there for him when he wakes up,” the blond protested as he wolfed down the take-out.

“At the rate you two are eating,” the lawyer observed, “we’ll be back up there in less than ten minutes. Oh, and Makoto called me while I was out, Nagisa.” Emi perked up at the unfamiliar name, and the blond finally stopped his endless munching.

“What did he say?” he inquired. Their conversation had been abruptly cut short by the morning’s emergency, and he’d left Haru and Makoto to fend for themselves back at the house.

“He’s going to collect some evidence today to file a lawsuit on Monday. He needs access to your phone records and your contract. Do you know where that might be?” Rei paused and offered a sympathetic glance. “He said that you’re not to worry about anything,” he added.

“My laptop, somewhere. It’s not password protected, so he can look for it there if he needs to,” Nagisa replied as he collected his trash, his sister doing likewise. “Alright, let’s go.”
Back in the room, they found Ken sitting up in his bed, albeit with his eyes closed until they opened the door. Pronounced bags made his eyes sag, but he offered up a weak smile nonetheless, giving him little crow’s feet on his face. The rain continued to slip down the window in the corner.

Nagisa and Emi rushed over to his side, their words practically tripping over themselves as they apologized, while Rei hung back by the chairs. Ken gave an exasperated smile.

“Now stop saying ‘sorry’, you two,” he scolded without real force, reaching his right hand out to pat his son on the head, while his left reached for his daughter. “I should be sorry for the worry I’ve caused you. And Rei,” he continued as the attorney snapped to attention and stepped forward to the end of the bed, “thank you for being here.” His face flushed a soft red in contrast to the grey of the day.

“Of course,” he replied, clearly embarrassed by the inclusion. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I wasn’t here for you – all of you – in such a difficult time,” he confessed quietly, his violet eyes deliberately looking away from the family, but Kenichi refused to have that.

“Now, now, don’t be like that,” Ken countered. When Rei looked up, he found the man wearing an indignant frown and waving him over. Tentatively, the attorney joined the family by Nagisa’s side, only to be tugged into a group hug by the older man. His arms were joined by Nagisa’s while Emi snatched his free hand from the other side of the bed. From beside him, the blond could practically feel the hot glow of his boyfriend’s bashfulness rolling off him in waves and the words of his sister returned to tug at his heart.

Ken released them all a few moments later, peace descending over his exhausted features. Nagisa leaned against Rei, who supported him with an arm around his shoulders. Emi backed off a little way to check her phone for any news of the missing siblings.

“Maki and Rika should be on their way here,” she explained to their father, “but they’re coming from Bridlington. It’s been some time since they left, so I imagine they’ll be here soon.” She had just finished saying as much when the telltale click of heels on tile began echoing through hallway, accompanied by indistinct voices outside of the door. The blond’s shoulders went cold as Rei removed his arm and stepped off to the side just as the door creaked open.

Two faces poked in, different as night and day in both expression and appearance. Maki was as honey-blonde and chubby-cheeked as her younger brother, but with watery brown eyes and a gooey look of dramatic worry. Rika, her fraternal twin, had straightened dark brown hair with her lips set in a grim line. Neither were happy about being here – that much was clear to the writer.

“Well, if you’re awake already, you mustn’t be really sick,” Maki exclaimed as she stepped into the room, her face melting into a look of relief, no doubt at the fact that she wouldn’t have to be here as long as she’d imagined.

“When Emi called, she made it sound like you were on your deathbed,” Rika accused as she followed her twin. The spiked black heels had belonged to her. The added height made her look like a looming specter of death, eerily similar to Ms. Westwood. The high ponytail didn’t improve the mental image.

“It’s not like they’ve finished all the tests,” Nagisa replied without mincing his words. He needed their money, not their flippant attitudes. They didn’t have to be here if they didn’t want to!

“It almost sounds like you want him to be sick! Honestly, there’s nothing wrong in being hopeful, now is there?” Maki sighed as she fell back into one of the lounge chairs. The younger blond felt a spike of irritation at her antics. “You were so much more cheerful when you were a kid – what
happened to you?” she griped. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed one of Rei’s brows arching at the statement, a mark of his own displeasure. Despite himself, Nagisa felt a small wave of warmth. Could it be that Rei wanted to stand up for him? Emboldened by the silent symbol of support, he carried on.

“It could have something to do with all of the responsibility you all shoved on me when I was a teenager,” he snipped. Before his sisters, his father, or his boyfriend could cut in to lessen the impact of his scathing words, he moved on himself. “But it doesn’t matter. It’s done.”

“We need to discuss what to do, moving forward, if it turns out the tumor was cancerous,” Emi agreed, closing the topic of their negligence with considerable finality. Maki and Rika, clearly dissatisfied with that, set their sights on stirring up trouble within a new topic.

“The two of you seemed to have been handling it just fine on your own,” Maki griped, pulling out her phone nonetheless.

“Yes, well, I’ve just completed a huge move and Nagisa is 25 with an entry-level job, thank you,” the oldest sister retorted in clipped tones. She was well used to handling all parts of the family at this point, the writer realized - cutting off Maki’s antics, saving his own pride, and cutting to the chase like Rika clearly wanted. He was grateful for it. He certainly didn’t know how to talk to any of them without losing his temper, and he was embarrassed enough as is that this conversation was taking place in front of Rei (now warily eyeing the two factions alongside Ken, both at a loss for words).

“Do we really have to have this conversation in here?” Nagisa complained, wanting to spare the other two men at least some embarrassment. He wasn’t eager for his father to find out he was unemployed either.

With some grumbling and sighs, the four siblings wormed their way into the hall and away from the door, which an invisible hand shut gently behind them. They found a bench out of the way of the room where Maki and Rika seated themselves comfortably. What had they been thinking, wearing heels to a hospital anyways?

“Nagisa and I have about half of what we need to pay for this surgery,” Emi informed them promptly, pulling up a note on her phone to show them the sums and figures. “A little over, when we figure in Dad’s Armed Forces pension. But we need about £1,000 from each of you in order to cover this surgery fully.”

“That’s doable, I guess,” Rika sighed after checking her bank balance. “What I’m more concerned about is the future if this is cancer. I ran the numbers at work,” she said, turning her number-jumbled phone screen their way, “and as you can see, it’s no easy task.”

“Should we open some sort of joint bank account?” Nagisa wondered as he recalled that Rika worked in finance.

“That’s a possibility,” she acknowledged as she shared a knowing look with her twin, “but I’ll be honest: we don’t feel responsible for this situation at all.” His heart stopped at her words. “You were always his favorite,” she continued as the color drained from his brother’s face, “and Maki, Emi, and I consider Nathan our dad anyways.”

“Speak for yourself,” Emi replied stonily, her arms crossed and her eyes cold. “He may have been closest to Nagisa, but we all have a responsibility to care for family in our times of need. If you won’t do it for your father’s sake, then you should at least contribute for your brother’s sake.”

“Nagisa is an adult,” Rika rationalized, not even casting him a spare glance, though at the moment he
hardly felt like more than a shell of himself.

“Barely!” Emi interjected, trying to restrain her fury to the volume of a whisper to keep from disturbing passers-by. “He just entered the workforce, but he’s been dealing with this financial burden since he was in university!”

“Oh, you’re right,” Maki added, retracting Rika’s statement herself, “I wouldn’t imagine an adult would bring along his fling to a matter as serious as this.” The younger blond’s head snapped to attention at last. His fling? “I was wondering who that was in the room. It wasn’t a doctor. So, I looked at your Facebook. Honestly,” she sighed in exasperation, “if you’re going to go around doing that, you should at least privatize your posts. I could see them even though we aren’t friends.”

“Doing ‘that’?” he echoed, his voice shaking with disbelief.

“Trying to prove some point to your family,” she explained, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re acting beyond immature. And bringing him here? Totally inappropriate, Nagisa,” she accused, her curls bouncing as she shook her head.

“This conversation is over,” Emi stated before he had a chance to react himself. “If you two aren’t going to be helpful, then you’ve made it quite clear you don’t feel you belong to this part of the family.” At this declaration, both twins frowned.

“Emi, you don’t seriously –” Maki began, only to be cut off by her older sister.

“Yes, I am serious. Come back when you’re ready to act like family,” she spat, turning away from the group and stalking off to their father’s room. Not wanting to get caught in the tense atmosphere, Nagisa hurried after her, not bothering to look back at his sisters.

When they stepped back in the room, they found Rei sitting at the window sill, looking pensively out at the darkening sky while Ken dozed off in his bed. The attorney refocused his attention onto the siblings as soon as they shut the door.

“We were just talking,” he explained, “when he started falling asleep. I imagine he must still be exhausted.”

“Visiting hours are almost over,” Emi continued with a sigh. “I suppose we should all be on our way then. You’re coming with me, aren’t you, Nagisa?”

“Yeah…” he affirmed half-heartedly, his voice trailing off as he looked at his boyfriend. He wanted the chance to talk to him again before he left for his sister’s apartment. If they hadn’t fought, he would most certainly be going home with Rei right now, ready to relax in his comforting arms, ready to cry when he needed to and love when he wanted to. Emi’s words came back mind, and he knew that if he tried to fall into his lover’s arms, he would only smother that flame between them that had suddenly grown so weak.

“I’ll make sure to call you,” Rei murmured, slipping his hands into his coat pocket as though he wanted to touch Nagisa, but couldn’t make himself reach out. Now that his father’s condition was stable, the tension and need for support had both lulled. They were faced again with their feelings and the reality that they had deeply scarred their relationship. The blond took a deep breath.

“Okay. I’ll be waiting to hear from you then.” And with that, they both turned from the room and walked away.

After they left the hospital, Emi drove back to her office to check in with her superiors before
heading to Nagisa’s house to collect some belongings, and then back again she drove to her Lambeth home, culminating in a tiring evening. The exterior of the complex did not impress; it was run down and grungy, though not entirely hideous and unaccommodating. The officer lived on the third floor.

Emi jammed the key in her door with a clatter and rammed her body full-force against it as though she were tackling a dangerous suspect, letting it swing open with a huff and a satisfied grin.

“It gets stuck sometimes, so you just have to fiddle with it,” she told Nagisa, stepping to the side to let him in and flicking on the lights. He set his duffle bag down by the door and took his shoes off beside a pile of torn-up boxes.

“Sorry about the mess,” she apologized sheepishly as she hung up her coat by the door and stuck her keys in the pocket. “I’m still unpacking.”

“It’s fine,” Nagisa replied with a wave of his hand. It’s not like his place had been any better, after all. He sagged down onto the couch that would be his bed for God only knew how long. He hoped to get out of here in a month at least, but there was no real telling until he found employment somewhere.

“Does pasta sound okay for dinner? I don’t particularly feel like making an effort tonight,” Emi called from the kitchen, pulling out her pot regardless of her brother’s answer. He grinned wryly.

“A million carbs with a side of butter? Sounds perfect,” he quipped, thinking back on the day that seemed, between the hospital and his sisters and his boyfriend, like it’d never end. He heard Emi snort in response - no doubt she was thinking the same.

“All right then,” she replied as she tossed some spaghetti in a bowl and began preparing a simple meat sauce. While she busied herself, his eyes wandered around what was to be his home for at least three weeks.

Despite the derelict appearance of the building and the problems with the door, the apartment was cozy. The floors were a hickory wood color with neither scuffs nor shine, and the walls were a plain ivory plaster, but the windows were large and sure to let in plenty of light during the day. There was a small hallway with only two rooms attached - the bathroom and Emi’s bedroom. Neither looked particularly big, but the most important feature to his sister, of course, was the spacious kitchen, despite the clutter of boxes in the rest of the flat.

“So, what do you think?” She peered around the corner, having noticed her brother’s staring.

“It’s nice,” he allowed. Nagisa could hardly afford to be picky; he imagined his next apartment wasn’t likely to be much different, whenever it was he was able to find one. He sighed dramatically.

“What is it now?” Emi asked him as she dished up a mountain of pasta on two plates.

“I need a job,” he whined, hating the idea of going back to secretarial work. He didn’t imagine Ms. Westwood would write him a particularly stellar letter of recommendation, and he’d worked as an assistant for most of his career under Ms. Amakata. “I just hate the idea of putting my dreams on hold for reality. I had just got that job as a real writer.” Emi set the plates down on the coffee table and joined him on the couch.

“I read what you were writing,” she admitted with a slight blush (presumably she’d tried to follow his advice). “It was really good. I can’t imagine why they’d let you go.”

“It was the worst,” he asserted, twirling his fork around on the plate. “I must have really fucked up. I didn’t even get a two-weeks’ notice.” Emi’s expression changed from sympathetic to indignant in a
moment.

“That’s outrageous! Did you at least get your severance pay? It should tide you over until you can get a new job.” The blond choked on a noodle at her words. After a quick sputter and pat on the back from his sister, he sheepishly turned to face her.

“Um, this is stupid, but what’s that again?” he wondered. When he first received his contract from Amakata, he thought he’d seen something about that, but to be fair, he was 23 at the time, too excited to work for a big-name magazine to sweat the small stuff.

“Oh my God, Nagisa,” Emi groaned, “you didn’t even check, did you?” He shook his head meekly, with the impression that she was angrier at the circumstances than at him. “Listen, in the U.K., workers that have their contracts terminated are guaranteed what’s called ‘severance pay’ – a sort of parting pay that makes sure they’ll be alright as they look for a new job. It’s also required by law to give two weeks’ notice of any lay-offs, except in extreme circumstances. And right now, you are telling me that you didn’t receive either of those, in writing or words,” she finished, her eyes wide blown with shock.

“No,” he replied as he thought about the previous week. Ms. Amakata certainly hadn’t said anything about lay-offs to him, and Ms. Westwood had only been the editor for a few days when she fired him. Furthermore, before that… “Oh no,” he moaned as he realized how well he’d been played. “Amakata was fired right after the last issue was sent to the presses. I wasn’t even paid for my January article!” The brunette woman sucked in a deep breath and rubbed the bridge of her nose as though trying to keep herself from exploding with fury at her brother’s mistreatment.

“Does Rei know?” she inquired after a moment of quiet. Nagisa shook his head. He’d been so focused on talking about his fight and the eviction that it hadn’t occurred to him at all to mention it. He didn’t even know anything illegal had transpired. “Do you know why you were dismissed?” she continued. “Were you given any reason at all?”

“No,” he replied. “I mean, it might be because I failed to recruit a cover model, but I did try to ask her. And even then, I don’t think that’s really part of my job…”

“You need a lawyer,” Emi stated simply. “Do you think the guy representing you on the housing charges will be willing to help you out here?”

“I don’t know,” Nagisa stammered. A charge filed against the owner of his house was one thing, but would Makoto be willing to go up against a corporation as renowned as Elite?

“You’re gonna need to find out tomorrow. If not, ask Rei to help you find someone else,” she replied, relaxing slightly now that they at least had a plan in motion. She dug back into her pasta. “Nagisa, you’re up for a tough couple of months here.”

“Yeah,” he agreed grimly, “I think I have that much figured out.”

The next morning, Nagisa awoke to the clatter of his sister making her way to work and decided that he himself may as well get started on the day regardless of the early hour. Just because he was apparently filing a lawsuit against two businesses didn’t mean he didn’t need a job. He spent the earliest part of the morning re-polishing his resume and seeking postings anywhere – from secretarial work for the government to customer service in department stores.

At around nine, however, his phone interrupted his desperate Google search for work. Expecting it to be Makoto, he steeled himself for the next conversation of legal technicalities that he didn’t
“Hey, Makoto,” he greeted as calmly as he could manage, “I have some news for you about my dismissal.”

“What?” came the voice of his ex-boss. “I’m not here to talk about your old job,” she stated clearly as the blond tried to piece together what would happen to him now.

“Um, why are you calling?” he asked, closing his search on his computer to focus on her words.

“A new job,” she replied triumphantly. It was a pity he didn’t understand at all what she meant by that.

“Uh,” he managed, unable to think of anything to say to that. If she knew someone willing to hire him as a writer – even an assistant – he was all ears. He just hadn’t expected anything to crop up so soon.

“You gave me the idea,” she responded enthusiastically, the authoritative spark having returned to her voice. “A few days ago, when we were drinking,” she began to explain, “you asked me why I didn’t just start my own magazine. Well, I will, and I’ll be damned if I don’t have you on staff.”

“Uh, I don’t think I have to tell you that I was really drunk when I proposed that,” he replied in a flustered tone, barely scrapping together the memory of that night. “I didn’t think you’d take me seriously.”

“Well, I did, and you can’t back out of it now,” she quipped in her usual efficient tone. Despite it all – the stress of his family and uncertainty of his financial situation – he smiled nostalgically at the order. “Meet me later today to discuss it, say, three o’clock at the coffee shop.” Although he doubted much would come of the meeting, he found himself agreeing to the whims of the powerful woman that he admired so much.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, “that works out perfectly.” If he met Makoto in the early afternoon, he could walk to the usual coffee shop and then head to the hospital from there to check on his father. Without saying so much as a goodbye, Amakata hung up, leaving him feeling better than he had in weeks. Was it wrong, he wondered, to feel this hope building up inside him when so little was certain about the future? At that moment, sitting on a ratty old couch in a flat that wasn’t his, Nagisa felt strongly what faith Amakata had placed in him and his ideas. At last, after weeks of worry, he began once again to feel faith in himself.

Chapter End Notes

September Update: Making progress on chapter 21 which still has no official name (considering ”Shop Talk”) - it may be awhile yet until it's posted as I'm hoping to do some catch up work on future chapters until school starts. I don't want you guys to end up with one chapter per semester, but it'll be a busy year.
After he hung up the call and took a much-needed shower, Nagisa stared down into his duffle bag packed with a severely limited amount of clothing. What was he supposed to wear to meet an ex-boss with a new business venture? The context begged professional wear, but he was only going to go a coffee shop and he didn’t particularly want to stand out (which ruled out skirts for the moment). After a temporary struggle, he settled for a long oatmeal cable-knit sweater over distressed jeans, his black ankle boots, and a dark burgundy scarf, topped off with a dark grey wool coat in a simple silhouette. He needed to show Amakata that he hadn’t lost his touch, after all.

Right as he finished getting dressed, he received a text from Makoto with the address and directions to the building from Lambeth via public transportation. Rather impressed by the attorney’s attention to detail (like the fact that Nagisa only used public transport), he sent a quick thank you with a promise to be on his way right as he left the apartment.

He hopped on the bus stop a few blocks away from the complex and snagged a window seat, staring out at the wet rubble ground as it passed beneath him, the upcoming meeting now at the forefront of his mind. Makoto and Rei were coworkers – it wouldn’t be outrageous to assume he’d run in to his boyfriend while he was at work. The blond’s cheeks reddened slightly as he considered the serious side of Rei which he’d only glimpsed before at the coffee shop as he worked on case files before the crossword. Would Nagisa interrupt his focus if he came by to say hello? He so desperately wanted to be close to him again but was hesitant to do anything that might pester him. He felt as though they were only one misstep, one more harsh word away from irreparable damage. Never before had he wanted so badly to prevent that.

These were the thoughts that occupied him until he reached his stop in front of one of the few non-skyscrapers in the area – an unassuming pale building done tastefully with Georgian-style accents. Nagisa went inside and took the lift to the fifth floor, which housed Rei and Makoto’s firm. The décor was nothing short of classy and studious, with plush Turkish rugs and a 20th century oil portrait of a man hanging behind the receptionist’s desk. A few clients sat comfortably in leather chairs off to the side and flipped through various magazines – including, Nagisa realized, Elite, reminding him that he’d have to tell Makoto about his job complications.

Nagisa sighed quietly as he tore his eyes away from the traitorous issues and approached the focused receptionist typing away at his computer. Nervous, he tucked his stray locks behind his ear, hoping that he hadn’t messed himself up, and wishing he’d worn something a titch less casual. He was presenting himself to all of Rei’s coworkers, he realized a bit too late.

“How can I help you?” the receptionist queried, shifting his eyes away from the computer, his full attention now on Nagisa.

“Oh, um, I have an appointment with Makoto Tachibana,” he quipped in response as he chased his comparative thoughts away. Just because this young man was cleanly-dressed and professional
didn’t mean Nagisa was any less so in Rei’s eyes. Probably.

“I’m so sorry,” the receptionist apologized as he checked his computer again, “but Mr. Tachibana has been called away to an emergency meeting. He’s not scheduled to be back for another 45 minutes.” The man glanced up apologetically as the blond froze. His meeting with Ms. Amakata wouldn’t be for a long while – he wasn’t worried about missing it – but he didn’t particularly fancy waiting here, surrounded by the cause of his own lawsuit, for the better part of an hour. “I can reschedule you for another day, if you’d like,” the receptionist offered at the blond’s hesitation.

“Oh, well, I can wait, but let me check my calendar,” he replied half-heartedly, pulling out his phone as his brain rapidly tried to work out a solution.

“… and make sure to call me if anything changes.” A door off to the right opened, and the familiar voice interrupted the blond’s thought process. A moment later, out stepped Rei and a pair of clients. Surprise registered on his face for just a moment as his clients left, but a second later he composed himself with a mask of neutrality. He was wearing the suit they picked out together, the blond realized. Light grey wool, a blue pinstriped shirt with a white contrast collar, and a navy tie and pocket square. The modern combination was nothing short of dashing on the older man, and the writer found himself dazzled.

“Sir?” the receptionist prompted, glancing between the lovers. “Your calendar?” Snapped out of distraction, Nagisa colored rose and peeked back down at his phone, unbearably conscious of Rei’s blue eyes sweeping over his body. Did he look okay?

“Mr. Tachibana told me to have him wait in my office,” Rei cut in, striding to the desk. The receptionist glanced up, taken aback by the declaration that was no doubt slightly unorthodox, but decided not to question it.

“Of course, Mr. Ryuugazaki,” he replied graciously. The brunet sent Nagisa a prompting glance, holding the door open for him, and he hurried over to follow.

“Thanks,” the writer murmured as the door shut and he fell into step behind his boyfriend. A few curious glances peeked through open doors down the hall, but for the most part it seemed like everyone was too focused on their own work to notice who appeared to be another client. Even so, Nagisa fidgeted shyly, wondering how he looked in their eyes, standing at Rei’s side.

At the end of the row of offices, one last dark wooden door was propped open, revealing a surprisingly light space with large, curtained windows for privacy. On either side of the door were two mahogany bookcases, filled with all sorts of legal books and folders. Though décor was sparse, the blond noticed that on the old-fashioned desk, beside the modern computer and stainless-steel water bottle, was a simple glass picture frame, and in it, a selfie they had taken in passing on one of their dates. He made a beeline for it as soon as it caught his eye.

It wasn’t a particularly flattering photo of either of them, but it was one of the few that Rei had taken himself (after a good amount of begging on Nagisa’s part). The brunet had, for once, been grinning sincerely in the picture only to have his face squished by a surprise kiss on the cheek from Nagisa, a highly focused expression painted on his face. He recalled taking a myriad of better photos that day, too – simple ones that showed off the backdrop of the attorney’s beloved bridge much better. He lifted it from its spot on the desk, face aglow with happiness, and turned to ask his boyfriend about it only to find him looking away with bashfulness as he closed the door behind him.

“It was my phone background,” he explained shyly, “but I couldn’t unlock my phone just to look at it during work, so I printed it out.” His cheeks a deep cherry red, he kept his gaze anywhere but Nagisa and strode over to his desk to needlessly straighten out his already perfect stack of files.
“How long was it your phone background?” the blond asked teasingly. They’d taken that picture in October, and by now January was almost over. Considering the timing, he must have kept it throughout their first fight, unless he set it later – but that didn’t make sense considering they had much nicer pictures following that day.

“Since we took it,” the attorney confessed with a sigh, having realized that he’d never hear the end of it. The writer peered at the photo, tucked safely away in the polished glass that reflected his bare face. His expression struck even him as odd – nostalgic and happy certainly but fading like the sun setting behind a cloud. Why did he look like that, he wondered, when he was so pleased to see that little traces of him were rooted everywhere in Rei’s life?

“Say, Rei,” he murmured, his voice sounding distant to himself. He couldn’t stop the words that followed. “When will you kiss me again?” His sister’s warning of distance came back to him briefly, but his personality couldn’t warrant it for much longer. They hadn’t been intimate since December. They hadn’t even kissed in three weeks. Sure, Rei had said he still loved him, he had shown him that he still loved him, but Nagisa wanted to feel it with every fiber of his being.

Behind him, he heard the gentle click of a lock on the door. For some reason, the sound made his heart leap into his throat. He kept his eyes on the picture in front of him as he felt the attorney’s gaze sweep over him.

“I can kiss you now, if you’d like,” Rei offered tentatively. The blond didn’t hear his footsteps on the carpet, but a moment later he felt the heat from his body barely brushing Nagisa’s back. The red frames of his glasses appeared in the reflective glass of the photo frame.

“I want you to want to kiss me,” he admitted petulantly, placing the picture back in its original spot with care. A kiss wouldn’t mean what he needed it to if there was no heart in it, if he was just making Rei do everything he wanted like some sort of servant. The brunet took a fraction of a step closer, effectively pressing their bodies against one another, and nuzzled his face in the crook of Nagisa’s neck. He felt even his ears flush hotly at the forgotten contact.

“I do want to kiss you,” his lover confessed, one hand carefully stroking his hips through his cable-knit sweater. He hadn’t anticipated this response. “It occurs to me that I need to be more vocal of my thoughts around you,” he continued to whisper in the blond’s ear. “Yesterday, I wanted to hold you throughout the whole surgery, I wanted to yell at your sisters about the way they spoke to you, and I wanted to bring you home with me and make love to you all night long.” The blond felt his eyebrows shoot up at the passionate confession, and the roar of his heartbeat almost drowned out Rei’s words entirely. “Of course, I understand that none of those things would have been the appropriate course of action at the time,” he added, both of his arms having wrapped themselves around Nagisa’s midsection, “but it didn’t stop me from wanting them. From wanting you.” The younger man put his hands over Rei’s and gently removed them so that he could turn around to face him.

Their lips touched softly, like it was their first, and in many ways, it was. What had occurred between them had changed their relationship, and although they weren’t sure how yet, it was clear that it had left a significant impact on them. They would need to change together if they wanted to keep this love, and Nagisa finally felt ready in a way that he hadn’t been for any other man – and he could sense as much in their gentle kiss that Rei felt the same.

As sweet as it started, the blond needed something deeper, and his boyfriend was all too ready to oblige. Their kisses shortened but came harder and faster as they gasped for breath in what little time they could separate themselves for. Nagisa was so forceful that his boyfriend stumbled back into the chair at his desk, but he didn’t seem to mind as he pulled the smaller man into his lap. His hands
stroked the attorney’s face as their mouths relaxed against one another’s, each one allowing their kisses to grow deep and heady. The blond’s hips rolled against Rei’s, the older man’s hands encouraging him to rub harder with his strong grip.

A ring from the phone on the desk startled them out of their intense make-out, and they both had the sense to recall where they were. They stared at one another as the shrill tone sounded again. His face redder than Nagisa had ever seen before, Rei hit a button on the panel.

“Yes?” he answered, his breathing slightly labored. The receptionist spoke back.

“I know you’re in with a client,” he began apologetically as the blond grinned wryly. He tucked his head into the crook of Rei’s neck, too embarrassed to even look at the phone. “I’ve just had a call from your next appointment saying that they’ll be arriving about ten minutes early. Does that work with your schedule?” he proceeded. He could feel Rei’s heartbeat where their chests were pressed together and knew his was racing just as quickly.

“That’s fine, it doesn’t interfere with my other… business,” he finished lamely, jumping as his lover bit delicately into his neck. The nip wasn’t hard enough to leave a mark, the blond justified to himself, and if it did, the currently disheveled collar of his shirt would cover it.

“All right, I’ll make sure to let them know,” the receptionist replied, hanging up the phone after what felt like much too long of a conversation. Nagisa tried to think of something – anything – to say to Rei but couldn’t make his mouth work. When neither one could find any words after a few minutes, labored breathing the only sound in the room, the attorney finally made a bold proposition.

“We have 20 minutes still,” he informed his lover in an authoritative voice that was merely an attempt to cover up his shyness. Rosy eyes blown wide, the blond glanced up to ensure he was understanding Rei properly. His dark blue eyes kept darting between Nagisa and the wall as though he wanted to look at his boyfriend but was too embarrassed about the situation to let his gaze linger for long.

The blond slid out of his lap, evidently to the attorney’s dismay, but positioned himself on his knees in front of his chair. The disappointed look quickly changed to shock as his glasses began to blend in with the redness of his face.

“Here?” he muttered, more as if he were asking himself than Nagisa. Despite a conflicted look on his face, his hands traveled up to his pants, pushing them down just far enough to expose his half-hard cock. The younger man supposed he could blame himself for that – it wasn’t as though it was easy to resist the grinding of one’s lover on their lap.

Nagisa placed a kiss at the tip as he wrapped his hands snugly at the base. A few good strokes were all Rei needed for his erection to spring up fully enough for his lover to wrap his lips, no longer chapped from the cold but shining and plump, around the shaft. The brunet inhaled a sharp breath between his teeth with the introduction of Nagisa’s warm mouth.

Nearly a month apart had made Rei physically sensitive. His fingers had carefully threaded themselves through the writer’s downy blond locks, but a few swirls of his tongue around the head was the only thing that caused his grip to tighten. Nagisa responded eagerly to his boyfriend’s show of desperation by pushing his mouth all the way to the base, until Rei’s cock teased at the very back of his throat. He pulled back only once he found it to breathe, coughing as he did so. It had been a long time since he’d deep-throated anyone, and he certainly hadn’t yet done so to Rei.

“Are you all right?” the attorney asked with concern in his husky voice. His hands traveled down to stroke Nagisa’s cheek.
“Never better, it’s just been a while is all,” the blond responded as he leaned into the gentle touch. “Just do what feels right and don’t worry about me – I know my limits,” he assured, guiding Rei’s grip back to his hair as he hungrily took the full length of his dick into his mouth again. The brunet was hesitant at first, but quickly adjusted to the hard and deep pace Nagisa set for himself. He pushed his lover’s head against his cock and shamelessly thrust his hips into his eager mouth, the lewd slapping of skin against skin as noisy and wet as it would have been if they’d fucked bareback on the desk.

“Nagisa – I’m…” Rei warned in a strained tone to little avail. The blond pushed his face to the base of his boyfriend’s dick as he spoke, leaving him ready to burst in his throat. With a powerful jerk, he came as he pulled away, lining the back of Nagisa’s throat to the tip of his tongue with his warm white seed. Obligingly, he swallowed, but as soon as his boyfriend pulled out, he sputtered a cough. “Are you all right?” Rei asked as he rushed to fix his clothes. The blond nodded, but his boyfriend handed him his water bottle nonetheless.

“I’m fine,” he responded hoarsely, gratefully taking a sip. When he handed it back, the brunet looked properly chagrined.

“I can’t believe we did that here,” he continued. Nagisa certainly could. He’d gone to great lengths to please other partners (and enjoyed it, too), but it was a testament to Rei’s character that he wouldn’t ever think to suggest such a thing unless the blond was wholeheartedly willing and eager.

“It’s okay, no one will know,” Nagisa soothed as he pushed himself back up to his feet, his lover following soon after. As he reached over to Rei’s collar to adjust it, the attorney brushed down his messy blond hair. Just then, the writer’s phone vibrated loudly in his bag, the sudden sound causing them both to jump back from one another, and then proceed to offer sheepish grins at their mistake. “It’s Makoto,” Nagisa read from the screen. “He says he’s here.” Rei looked sorry to see him go but pressed a quick and passionate kiss to his lips.

“Meet me at my apartment tonight at six,” he implored, his hand wrapped around his boyfriend’s forearm. The blond’s creamy cheeks colored a pretty red as his lips brushed against his ear. He stepped away, composing himself to make it look like nothing untoward had happened while his blond beau continued to appear every bit as flustered as he felt. A moment later, there was a knock at the door and Makoto stepped inside.

“I thought you might be here,” he commented lightly, punctuating his statement with a handsome smile. “May I show you to my office?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied, trying to wipe the dazed look off his face. He had the sense to wave goodbye to Rei, acknowledging his proposition and allowing the happiness of the thought to push away his nerves about both of his upcoming meetings.

Makoto led him to a small conference room, rather than an office, down the hall with a collection of files already laid out on the large oak table. Nagisa drew out a plush chair and took a seat, the brunet man joining him soon after.

“How is your father?” he began conversationally as he slipped on a set of glasses and sorted through a select few documents. The blond was surprised to find there was real concern in Makoto’s voice and smiled gratefully.

“Better than they thought he’d be,” he responded, his relief evident despite the looming question of cancer. “They aren’t sure if the tumor is malignant, but we should find out tomorrow.” The attorney nodded thoughtfully.
“I’m glad you could meet me, considering the circumstances. I do not mean to rush you,” he admitted kindly, “but I wanted to file the suit as soon as possible to lessen your burden.” Nagisa murmured his thanks and received a nod of acknowledgment. “Thankfully, we have ample evidence and plenty of time to gather more. I filed the charges yesterday but getting a court date will take at least a month.” The younger man shrugged – he hadn’t expected the process to be fast by any means, and he would likely have a new place by then. “When we do get a date, you should expect to testify, though. Getting time off from your next job will be important,” he advised. The words sent a stab through the blond’s gut. His job. He’d forgotten to tell Rei about the contract infractions.

“Um, Makoto, about that,” he interrupted nervously as the attorney refocused his attention fully on Nagisa. “So, I talked with my sister last night, and she’s an officer so she knows about this stuff, I guess, and um, well, we realized that I was fired without a two weeks’ notice or severance pay or pay for my last article,” he rambled, embarrassed to admit he hadn’t demanded what he was owed. With each offense listed by the blond, his attorney’s eyebrows rose a bit higher until at last they took a dive and formed a considerably indignant look that he’d never seen on the easygoing man.

“That is unacceptable,” he declared in his lilted voice, leaning back in his chair. Nagisa was encouraged.

“My sister wants me to file a suit and I wondered if you could represent me,” he suggested. He backpedaled rather quickly when he realized how monumental the favor was. “I mean, I still can’t pay,” he amended, “and I know Elite is a huge organization, so if you don’t want to do it, then a suggestion for someone else is fine…”

“No, I’ll do it,” he replied insistently. His green eyes shone with determined ambition at the thought, and Nagisa was reminded that he’d taken on a huge fishing company – and won – only a week or two ago. “To be honest, I had planned to prepare you for questions you may be asked in relation to the housing case,” he admitted, “but those can be saved for later. This is more important. Tell me everything you remember about the incidents leading up to your termination.”

Nagisa regaled him with every detail that he could remember, starting with Brooke Westwood’s first post-release meeting where she demanded he recruit Satsuki Momoi to the troubles with his housing and father that led to his tardiness the day he was fired. Makoto asked no questions but took notes on a few details that the blond hadn’t even thought were critical to the story but that he’d included nonetheless. When he finished, the lawyer considered briefly the circumstances before dissecting the days apart, minute by minute.

“You said that Ms. Westwood scolded you once before for being late?” he checked with a frown.

“Yes,” Nagisa replied. “I went for my lunch break to meet Rei. He wasn’t there, but Satsuki – his sister-in-law – was, so I asked her if she would model, and she said no. That’s why I was late getting back.”

“Do you remember what she said?” He clicked his pen and put it to paper, and the blond’s curiosity was piqued.

“Not exactly – something about how we shouldn’t be late if we’re professionals.”

“Nothing about a warning for you in particular?” he pressed.

“No, though I did feel rather like an example. It almost felt like she had a vendetta against me. I couldn’t have been more than ten minutes late after a failure to recruit a model, which she told me to do and which wasn’t anywhere near my job description. That’s always left up to photographers or the secretaries for the media relations department,” he huffed. His time as a secretary hadn’t been for
naught – as a personal assistant to Ms. Amakata, he’d often oversee these points of contact from the magazine. From time to time, he’d approve them on her behalf.

“A vendetta,” Makoto repeated. He flipped through his rapidly-filling notes. “You said it felt like she was watching you during that first meeting. Did she say anything that gave you that impression?”

“Yes,” Nagisa replied before he had the chance the think about it. “She was introducing herself and she looked at all of us, but at me the longest. She said, ‘I can certainly see why sales have been tanking.’” At the time, he hadn’t been able to place why he thought her gaze was lingering and had thought he was imagining it, but in a moment of clarity, he recalled the smallest of details. “I think she was looking at my skirt, and I was wearing a bit of makeup as well.”

“Do you think anyone else noticed?” Makoto pressed, tapping his pen against the pad.

“It’s possible,” Nagisa acknowledged, “but I’d probably have to ask my coworkers.”

“Ask them and see if they’ll check if others saw or heard something suspicious. If there are grounds for it, we may be able to press charges for discrimination in this case as well.”

“Discrimination?” The blond recoiled at the thought. “Can you even discriminate against someone – and I mean legally – for their clothing?”

“We’re filing against them for unlawful termination, primarily. If she thought your dress was inappropriate but did not send you warnings through human resources, then that is also a reason why you can sue. However,” he continued, his tone shifting to a more guarded stance, “if another coworker has heard something more explicit, shall we say, then yes, we have grounds to file discrimination charges – especially if your boss knew you are LGBT, which is a protected class in the U.K. It’ll be just the same as your landlord. We just need the evidence.” Nagisa gave a sharp nod to the comment, steeling himself at the idea of covertly getting information out of his former colleagues. Sensing the rise in his nerves, the attorney softened and sent him another soothing smile.

“If you think someone knows something, put them into contact with me,” he finished, setting aside his notepad. “We should spend the rest of our time going over the other case in order to prepare you.”

For their remaining hour, they did just that, Makoto occasionally instructing Nagisa’s uncertain and self-deprecating responses to his hard-ball questions. As lovely a man as he was, he was clearly a gifted actor and didn’t slack in his coaching. While the blond was grateful, it was more exhausting than he’d imagined, and by the end of it all, he was well looking forward to leaving, even though he’d just be heading to another meeting.

Once they wrapped up, Nagisa immediately left to wait for Amakata at the coffee shop. He’d hoped to run into Rei one last time – to what end, he wasn’t sure – but the door to his office was firmly shut in the universal sign for ‘I’m busy’. Nagisa had to wait until the evening, it seemed. And just as well – it sounded like he’d have some prepping to do beforehand.

Such thoughts kept him occupied as he pushed his way through the busy streets to the familiar café. He eagerly hopped into the warm brick storefront, stepping immediately into line and placing an order for his regular. He checked his phone as he waited, noting that he was almost an hour early, when a buzz alerted him to a text – a blurry photo of himself standing in line.

From: Momo Miko

nagiii is that u
His blond head whipped up from the message and searched the busy shop for his friend. After a moment, he found him frantically waving in a corner, sitting with another redheaded man that was much more muscular, slightly taller, and oozed confidence and curiosity. Nagisa didn’t even have to ask to know that this was Momo’s infamous older brother.

“Nagisa, come sit with us!” the younger Mikoshiba called, disturbing the peace of the café (much like he often did with Rei). As the blond approached, he took a moment to evaluate the brother. Though he looked like a hipster in an outfit composed of jeans, a flannel, and a thick vest, he was clearly the kind of man that only dressed like that because it was cool. And though he hated to admit it, the look was roguishly handsome and paired well with his crooked smile. With a jolt, he realized that Momo’s brother used to be exactly his type – though since meeting Rei, his tastes had shifted markedly.

“This must be the brother you’re always on about!” the blond began as he pulled out a seat beside them. Despite the attitude he oozed, the older man was polite when he stuck out his hand for Nagisa to shake.

“Seijuro Mikoshiba,” he introduced himself casually. “Thanks for lookin’ out for this kid all the time.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he replied, albeit a bit awkwardly. Momo knew that the blond had been dismissed, but maybe his brother didn’t get the memo. The younger redhead’s cheer slipped from his face, confirming his supposition.

“I was just telling Sei about how much I missed having you around,” he confessed, but it was clear by his tone that it wasn’t all they had been discussing.

“Yeah, I miss you too,” Nagisa admitted. The uncertainty of his future crept back into his mind, and he grew subdued. Seijuro poked Momo in the ribs to prompt him to continue. The younger redhead recoiled, but with distinct discomfort, pressed on.

“People are still… talking about it, I guess. To tell you the truth, the other day while I was getting a press release together to announce the change in editors, I heard Ms. Westwood on the phone.” He grimaced and, with his next words, Nagisa at last understood why the typically exuberant assistant was having such trouble with the topic: “I heard her call you a faggot and say some other… nasty things.”

It wasn’t as though Nagisa was particularly surprised that someone had called him that; it was the kind of taunt that followed him often in his small-town school. But that it could follow him to his career? To a professional publication? It was unthinkable. And poor Momo, who had been a city boy all his life and had only just entered the working world… What a sad, harsh awakening it was for the redheaded boy. At least Nagisa had grown up with a hardened heart.

“I didn’t know what to do about it,” the younger man continued, his gold eyes blown wide like a kicked puppy, “so I was just asking Sei.” He wrapped his fingers around his cup of coffee and looked away, shame filling his gaze. “It made me feel really uncomfortable,” he admitted, though he didn’t include the reason why. Momo had never spoken about his sexual orientation or any similar matters in the short time he’d been interning for the magazine. Nobody had ever pressed him on the issue, though the blond felt a sorry sort of nostalgia, sensing that Momo was asking himself the same questions that Nagisa did when he was in university.

“All I could come up with was HR or some good ol’ investigative journalism,” Seijuro chipped in, distracting Nagisa from his thoughts. “But that might just be me sniffin’ around for a good story.” For a moment, the blond was taken aback by the idea, but somewhere in the back of his mind the
“Momo,” he began automatically, still thinking of how he could make things work, “would you be willing to tell that to a lawyer?” Makoto would likely need to speak with his coworkers anyways – he’d implied as much at their meeting.

“Like T.V.-crime-show style?” he clarified, taken aback at the idea. The elder Mikoshiba leaned in, a wicked grin forming on his face. It seemed like he’d already picked up the angle.

“Something like that,” Nagisa replied. “There were some issues with my severance pay,” he described evasively. Before he could even think whether he should say more, Seijuro put his hand up to stop him.

“I should tell you right now that I’m a freelance investigative journalist thirsty for any blood in the water,” he joked. “I might want to follow up on this before any other reporters get a whiff of it.”

Nagisa knew from his time with Rei that court filings were more often than not public domain – sometimes with redactions, sometimes not. If Momo’s brother was going to look for the story, he’d probably find it. But he was also aware that what he said to the press could make or break his case if he wasn’t careful. Besides, as a columnist he was a journalist himself (albeit in an incredibly different industry).

“Off the record – I’ll have to ask my lawyer if I’m allowed to say any more,” he quipped in response. One of Seijuro’s brows arched. Nagisa had confirmed that he was seeking legal action and had more importantly hinted at cooperation.

“I get it,” Seijuro replied. The blond had no doubt that he’d keep sniffing around. Whatever he turned up might even prove useful.

“Oh shoot,” Momo interjected after looking at his phone. “I have to get going or Westwood’ll be pissed.” He grimaced. “If I screw up one more time, it’ll be me on the chopping block.” Nagisa inferred that this had been the topic of conversation between the brothers before he showed up. Seijuro sent his little brother a sympathetic glance and ruffled his hair.

“Keep your chin up, kid,” he encouraged. “You, too, blondie.” The three of them shared wry grins, and the brothers left to hurry back to their respective workplaces. Nagisa texted Makoto’s contact information to Momo and vice versa, filling in the details of the conversation to his attorney.

Amakata arrived shortly after he finished writing to Makoto and made a beeline to her ex-employee with her much-needed 3pm coffee (black, two shots espresso, and a pinch of sugar, Nagisa recalled fondly). She was dressed in over-the-knee leather boots, a camel cape, and a trendy broad-brimmed burgundy hat. She looked nothing like she had the day they ran into each other at the pub. His old boss was once again impeccably put together, like that night had never happened. It was almost ironic that it would be the very thing they were to discuss.

“Nagisa, darling, how are you?” she asked as she gracefully slid into a chair next to him.

“Fired, evicted, and involved with more than attorney this time,” he quipped. Amakata laughed. “And in complete disbelief that you took me seriously, let alone remembered that night at the bar.”

“Always remember your ideas,” she stated. “Besides, I wrote it down. I always do that, too.” Without waiting for him to so much as sigh, she opened her laptop and showed off spreadsheets and documents that he couldn’t even begin to make sense of. “Anyhow, I’m starting my own magazine, as I should certainly hope you remember from this morning. I talked with Goro, and he said he’d do
our advertising, but that aside I’m going to use my savings to invest in –”


“For what, retirement?” Amakata retorted, arching her beautifully threaded brow. “I don’t think I’m nearly that old. Besides, I’ll be a busybody all my life. I’m not leaving the industry now. Not while I’m at my best.” The blond felt a pang in his heart at her determination. He should be looking for that bright future too, eagerly seeking his peak under his beloved editor’s guidance, but he just couldn’t picture that future… Not with the way things were.

“Ms. Amakata, I’m really honored that you asked me to join you,” he prefaced. “But it’s just… My dad’s in the hospital and we’re short 2,000 pounds for his surgery fees, I got kicked out of my old place, and I don’t have an income right now. I can’t take a risk like that,” he responded miserably. Amakata’s pretty grin faded into a serious line.

“Things are that bad, huh?” She’d said as much when he first appealed to her for a paid position. Nagisa could feel tears welling in his eyes from the memory of the past coming to haunt his present situation. The older woman placed her soft hands on his and squeezed them gently. “I understand. The start-up part will be what’s hard. I’d love to hear your branding ideas, but if you feel like you’re not in a position to do that, then it’s fine.”

“Thanks,” he sniffled, managing to hold the tears back. “I still need a job, though, and the editor that replaced you probably won’t write me a recommendation.” Amakata laughed wryly.

“Of course they didn’t. Don’t worry, I can at least do that much for you. But once I get ahold of investors for this new magazine, I can guarantee you an income. So just don’t get too comfortable wherever you go next. I’m keeping that spot open for you.” Warmth diffused through Nagisa’s body as she loosened her grip and gave his hands a comfortable pat.

“I’d be happy to look over stuff when I have time,” he offered, “I just can’t make it my main work.”

“I understand. I wish you luck with whatever comes next.”

For a while, they chatted about little things – who and what would be on the runway at fashion week, what jobs Nagisa was aiming for, and a little bit about Rei. Nagisa couldn’t be long, though. He had to check on his father. He knew Emi had been in with him earlier during her long break. She had both the early and late shifts that day, so she would have just left for work as Nagisa left the coffee shop to catch the bus.

He arrived at the hospital to find his father considerably less groggy than he had been the previous day, but still not quite in top-notch condition. Whatever pain medication they’d given him had taken its toll. The room was brightened, however, by an elegant bouquet and small bowl of oranges. His father sat up a little at his entrance.

“How are you feeling, Dad?” Nagisa asked, hurrying to his father’s side. He gave a sleepy smile.

“A little more awake than yesterday. There’s not too much pain, thanks to this old thing,” he remarked, tipping his head to indicate the I.V.

“Did Emi bring those?” Nagisa inquired as he slipped out of his coat and scarf. He picked up an orange and started peeling it. To his surprise, his father shook his head.

“Maki did. She stopped by this morning before Emi got here.” The blond’s shock must have been evident on his face; his father frowned in response.
“I hope you two haven’t quarreled,” he responded. Chagrined, Nagisa got the feeling that his father had overheard their argument the day before, despite his best efforts to shield him from it. He focused on the fruit in his hands.

“Not particularly,” he automatically lied, like any child before a stern parent. He felt, rather than saw, the creases on Ken’s face deepen. His work on the peel faltered. “Well… maybe a little,” he finally confessed.

“You’re siblings,” the old man sighed, “so I can’t tell you not to bicker. But I wish you’d bicker a little bit less like children and a little bit more like adults. Children shouldn’t suffer for their parents’ mistakes.”

“But…” he protested, only to be cut off by a sharp gaze. His father hadn’t pulled out the military look in a long while.

“I wasn’t a perfect father, Nagisa. Your mother and stepfather aren’t perfect parents, either. You should love your family, but don’t idealize them. Rather, try to understand them.” The boy began to dislike the note of finality in his father’s voice as he recalled that the test results would come tomorrow. He couldn’t bring himself to voice his concern.

The sweet orange was finally freed of its peel. As he pulled a few of the wedges out, sticky juice dripped onto his hands. He plopped a slice in his mouth so he wouldn’t have to speak and offered the other half of to his father. It was a little tart, rare for the end of the season, but he found he liked it better that way.

When they finished their shared orange, Nagisa changed the topic.

“What were you and Rei talking about yesterday?” he asked nosily. He was restless when it came to the topic of his boyfriend. The attorney’s whispers echoed in his mind. ‘Meet me at my apartment tonight at six,’ he’d said, his breath hot against the blond’s ear. He glanced at the clock. It was past four; visiting hours would be over at five.

“Nothing to concern you with, dear,” his father replied, back to a lighter and almost playful tone. It did nothing, however, to soothe Nagisa’s nerves. Rei was his boyfriend. Of course he was concerned with it! Since when had his boyfriend and father been so close? Never mind the fact that he was rather pleased with the idea. He must have been making a face, because his father laughed at him. The nerve!

“I don’t even get a hint?” he protested, the older man’s hoarse chuckle still sounding throughout the room.

“It was a conversation between men, in confidence,” Ken insisted.

“I’m a man, too, don’t forget,” Nagisa retorted with a pout. The general shook his head, still grinning.

“You know what I meant,” he chastised. Nagisa certainly knew, but that wouldn’t stop him from sticking his nose in any place it most assuredly belonged. But it seemed like his father’s lips were sealed tight on the topic. Oh well, he thought. He could just pester Rei on the topic later.

Pleased to see his father in high spirits, although apprehensive of his test results, Nagisa left the hospital right on time. The sun had already started to set, and his father was getting sleepy thanks to his pain medication. He caught another double decker heading to Hyde Park and decided he’d walk from there. He needed to burn off his spare energy.
What had he been thinking, having that morning on his mind while he was with his father? He’d spent the entire second half of their time together keeping thoughts of their raunchy business at bay. He hadn’t gotten off, so naturally he was frustrated, but his father in the hospital should have sobered him up immediately.

Nagisa shoved his hands in his pockets, his fingers coming into contact with the warmed metal of the key – Rei had given him a spare set while he’d stayed during the snowstorm. He hadn’t used them since their fight. His heart leapt to his throat when he recalled that he could’ve been going to his home rather than just his boyfriend’s apartment. The hurried walk through the park only made it pound harder against his chest. His ribs shuddered with every chilly breath.

At last, he made it to the enclosed garden just off Moscow Street. As he fumbled with the keys, he wondered what Rei was doing right now. He’d invited him over, but would careless comments cause them to rehash the entire fight in the first place? Were they over it? It hadn’t seemed like that was Rei’s intention in having him over.

Perhaps it would be the opposite. The attorney might spend the night comforting him, reminding his delicate heart that he was loved. The day’s “excitement” could have been too much for him to handle. It was possible nothing particularly untoward would be on the menu.

He inserted the key to the front door with a smooth click, but he couldn’t make himself turn it. His face burned as his emotions conflicted against the clamoring of his needs. Confusion, shame, and even a bit of lingering irritation at the memories of Rei’s anger swirled through his heart, pounding with exercise, through the frustratingly hot knot in his stomach that was both anxiety and arousal. Thankfully, the decision was made for him. The front door swung in, revealing the attorney likely fresh home from work.

Rei wore his shirt with the top buttons undone to reveal his collarbone and the sleeves rolled up to his elbow. His well-fitted trousers clung perfectly to his narrow hips. The blond couldn’t make himself look at his face – his gaze was permanently fixed on the dark skin peeping through his clothes.

“Nagisa, you’re early,” Rei commented, startling the younger man from his reverie. “Come in.” He stepped aside, and Nagisa crossed the threshold. He felt like he couldn’t do anything else. The attorney’s navy gaze had him pinned where he stood. “I just got home from shopping. I was making dinner,” he explained, waiting for Nagisa to reply. The blond opened his lips but made no sound.

“… Aren’t you going to say anything?” Rei wondered, his tone dominated by awkward concern.

“I’m worried if I do, it’ll be the wrong thing…” Nagisa admitted, battering down his conflicting emotions. He leaned against the closed door, his eyes still downcast.

“So you’re leaving it up to me,” Rei surmised. Nagisa grinned wryly when he realized he recognized the sound of the brunet’s eyebrow shooting up over the rim of his glasses.

“It’s your house, not mine,” the blond quipped, followed by a deep grimace. He so should not have brought that up. “Sorry – I didn’t mean it like that – it’s just – ugh, this is exactly what I meant.”

“Don’t be sorry. I love your smart mouth,” the brunet replied. Nagisa felt his warm hand along his cheek, drifting down to his chin and urging him to look up. His head moved, but his eyes remained downcast. “Won’t you look at me?” Rei asked sweetly. He couldn’t make himself do it.

“It should be your turn,” Nagisa insisted. “I’m always in your way, doing whatever I want. I’m never considerate. I’m childish. So you should say what you need to say tonight. Do it your way,” he insisted. He realized he was being vague, but a moment’s reflection couldn’t tell him whether he was
talking about reconciliation or something else entirely.

The attorney was ever full of surprises, however. His grip on Nagisa’s chin tightened. His cheek brushed Nagisa’s as he leaned to whisper in his ear.

“You don’t want me to do what I want tonight,” he asserted in a voice that made him absolutely sure he was ready for Rei to do whatever he wanted tonight. The blond was now certain what they were discussing. Nagisa acquiesced to the lawyer’s earlier request and turned his pleading rose-gold eyes onto his boyfriend’s face.

He wasn’t wearing his glasses, exposing the blond to the full brunt of his serious dark blue gaze. His knees went weak, but his lips parted as Rei withdrew his hands. He didn’t have to wait long, though – the attorney’s hands returned to his shoulders to slip his coat off.

“Turn around,” he ordered. Why did it feel like he was being stripped bare? Rei’s caressed his arms as the thick wool fell away. God, why was his touch so painfully gentle? The attorney hung it with care beside his suit jacket. Nagisa tried to face him, but Rei pressed him back against the wall with all his strength. Whatever prayer he’d uttered had been granted; this was happening here.

Rei’s lips latched onto the nape of his neck while his hands roughly roamed where they so pleased. Nagisa was helpless against them; his arms were shoved against the wall to support his weight.

The attorney’s quick fingers undid the button and zipper of the blond’s jeans and shoved his underwear away from his hips. His unusual insistence was arousing. Coupled with the fact that Nagisa hadn’t been properly serviced this afternoon, he was already hard. He groaned in frustration, only to be interrupted by the presence of Rei’s other hand snaking around to silence him. They slipped through his open lips with little resistance and stroked his tongue. He only removed them only once they were fully soaked.

Rei gave a slight prod at the smaller man’s entrance, but the blond flinched. It really had been a while. But that didn’t mean he wanted his boyfriend to withdraw his hand entirely. Now his moans faded into simpering whines. He sent a lewd glance back at Rei, only to find his boyfriend distracted; from his trouser pockets, he pulled out a condom and a packet of lubricant.

“D-did you plan this?” Nagisa tried to tease, taken aback at the idea that his goody-two-shoes man would want to mess around by the front door.

A crack sounded before the pain registered; the blonde let out an involuntary moan as a deep sting spread over his exposed backside. Over his shoulder he met his boyfriend’s stare, dominant but reserved; Nagisa knew he wouldn’t keep going if he said something, but he wasn’t about to. Rei had spanked him, and he had enjoyed it.

When it was clear the blond was waiting for more, the attorney rolled his shoulders back and relaxed a bit. His sharp collarbone shone with sweat under the backlit yellow lighting of the kitchen. He tenderly massaged the spot that he’d struck, but his voice still held the tone of control.

“We’re doing things my way tonight?” he confirmed. Nagisa nodded. Quick as lightning, Rei slapped his ass again. The younger man yelped. “Then tonight, I’m not to be teased,” he ordered. The stinging sensation blossomed into warmth. His mouth watered. Again, he nodded. The attorney’s hand returned to stroking him softly, and against his back the blond felt the weight of his lover’s body. “Are you ready for me, then?” His breath tickled Nagisa’s ear and his fingers returned to playing with his entrance.

“Yes,” he replied emphatically. The attorney messily coated him with the lukewarm gel from the
packet and shoved his first finger in to the knuckle. He sucked in a breath between his teeth; what was normally a quick pinch lasted longer after a month without sex. Another slap on his backside distracted him from the pain and he released his breath with a noisy moan. He pushed his hips back desperately, trying to force Rei’s finger onto his prostate.

The attorney was feeling stingy, however, and refused to oblige his boyfriend with what he so desperately needed. His other hand tightened its grip on the blond’s creamy ass while a second finger made its way inside. He couldn’t relieve himself of the burning sensation by touching himself; his arms on the wall were all that was holding him steady.

Tepid lubricant dripped onto his backside and around the brunet’s fingers. Finally, the two already present began to stretch him while the third scooped the gel into his hole. Nagisa had no sooner relaxed, used to this feeling, when Rei began thrusting his hand rapidly.

“Oh Christ, yes,” he groaned as his boyfriend furiously fingerfucked him by the door. The brunet knew exactly where to brush against to maximize Nagisa’s pleasure. Precum wept from the head of his erect dick and dripped onto the floor. He was sure if anything touched him further, he’d cum right then and there.

Rei removed his fingers as quick as he’d shoved them in. Already the blond’s body was throbbing with need. He felt rather than saw the head of his boyfriend’s penis press against his entrance, but it went no further. Nagisa groaned, endlessly frustrated by what he assumed was Rei’s simultaneous need for permission and lusty torture. He’d have to take it into his own hands. Biting his lower lip, he pushed his ass back against his boyfriend’s dick.

The younger man exhaled from between his teeth as he felt himself expand to accommodate his lover’s size. He used the wall to help him gradually slide back and forth, slowly getting used to the sensation of fullness. He had no sooner fully relaxed around Rei than his boyfriend began wildly thrusting as though he couldn’t hold back his need any longer. It was a testament to his sharp skills of observation that he knew the exact moment to start plowing the blonde hard against the wall.

“Oh God,” Nagisa moaned desperately between breaths. His nails scratched the fine wallpaper as he struggled to find purchase. From thrust to thrust, the younger man felt his boyfriend’s zipper scrape against his asshole. He hadn’t even bothered to take them off. The brunet’s hands wrapped around his torso; one tugged mercilessly at his nipples while the other finally palmed his hard dick.

“You’re mine, body and soul,” Rei declared huskily, pumping Nagisa’s cock as his own continued to pound his ass. The blond could only whimper in reply; the forceful attentions his boyfriend was making had him entirely captivated. “I love how you fit in the palm of my hand,” he continued, sloppily jerking him off. The writer couldn’t muster the will to respond. “And how I fit perfectly inside you.” His thumb pressed against the head of his member.

“Oh?” he prompted. “Are you implying I started some sort of unsavory activity while I was at work?” Nagisa’s face flushed red with embarrassment, irritation, and lustful heat at the memory.
“You… encouraged… it,” he griped between breaths. Rei ceased toying with his nipples to slap his ass again. The writer groaned in frustration.

“By the time I’m done with you tonight, you won’t even remember your name, let alone your smart attitude,” the attorney promised. Nagisa was about to respond that the brunet had just said he loved that, when his hands replaced themselves at the blond’s hips, nails digging into his skin. Without pause, Rei launched into his previous pace, fast and hot and unyielding. His lover’s complaint was lost in noisy moans.

Nagisa was at the mercy of wanton pleasure. His spent dick began to stir with the wild, relentless stimulation in his ass as it slapped against Rei’s hips. But even the sumptuous blond had his breaking point; his palms, sweaty from the endless heat, were slipping. His knees shook with his own weight. His lover’s hands were all that kept him remotely steady.

“Rei, I…” he panted, wet with sweat and his cum, “I’m…” He felt his lover relinquish his grip only slightly and began to slip down the wall. He couldn’t let it end like this, but he was in no position to make the rules.

“Hold on,” the attorney replied, somewhat back to his senses. He pulled out of Nagisa, who whined at the loss as he sank to his knees on the cool floor. “Should’ve taken off your sweater,” he commented, chagrined at his own conduct. He peeled it away from the blond’s soaked skin, his hands once more tender and loving. The shock of cold air gave him some relief, though he was rather impressed that Rei had managed to keep his cool while still fully dressed.

The attorney bent down at his side and kissed him hard, guiding Nagisa’s arms around his neck. The blond hummed into the kiss, curious about his love’s intentions, and tightened his grip. The older man wrapped his arms around the blond’s waist and hoisted him into the air. When the writer gasped, Rei pulled away just far enough for their lips to still brush.

“Hold on to me tight,” he ordered, pushing Nagisa’s back against the wall this time. He maneuvered his strong arms under his thighs, effectively shoving them spread-eagle and exposing his gaping hole once more to the numbing pleasure of his throbbing cock.

Rei was slower but deeper with his position, both allowing Nagisa’s exhausted body to recover while still feeling the throes of his boyfriend’s need. His small, pale hands roamed around his lover’s exposed neck, trailed down his collarbone, and undid the remaining buttons on his white shirt. His teeth languidly latched onto his skin, leaving dark red hickeys where they could. The lawyer grunted, thrusting harder and deliberately.

“I’m so close, Nagisa,” he murmured hoarsely. The blond flexed his hole around Rei’s thick member.

“Cum inside me,” he demanded desperately, eager to be filled by his lover’s hot seed. He buried his face into the crook of his boyfriend’s face as with a final powerful push, he rode his orgasm into the blond.

“Christ, you’re so perfect,” Rei groaned. Exhausted, he slipped out of Nagisa, taking care to set him down gently. They leaned against the wall together, gathering their breath and their thoughts both. The blond had the wherewithal to remember that his boyfriend had used a condom and, consequently, he did not have cum running down his thighs. And thanks to Rei’s endless attentions, he was now again at half-mast, so to speak. He kissed the underside of the older man’s chin insistently and sent him a lewd glance.

“You used a rubber,” Nagisa protested, stroking his boyfriend’s sweaty shirt. Rei breathed deeply –
whether it was a sigh of exasperation or continued arousal, the writer couldn’t tell.

“Don’t tell me you mean you want to go again,” he murmured as Nagisa’s lips reached his Adam’s apple. His voice vibrated pleasantly against his kiss.

“I can’t hardly stand,” he responded evasively. “So take me to bed. Make me forget everything,” he begged. Rei obliged; a moment later, the blond found himself swept up in his arms bridal-style. Nagisa’s hand slipped down to his chest to toy with his dark nipples.

“I did say that,” the attorney responded with a chuckle. “I suppose I have no choice but take responsibility.”

Nagisa awoke tangled in his boyfriend’s white sheets, but with the chrome comforter securely tugged over his prone body. Beside him he heard the beat of fingers against keys and in the background, the pitter-patter of a downpour against window panes. He stirred slightly and made a sleepy squeak, trying to burrow further in the covers to protect himself from the oncoming morning chill.

The sound of the computer keys stopped temporarily. The small tuft of blond hair that was still visible was greeted by a warm hand. Eventually, Nagisa’s face was coaxed out.

“Did I wake you?” Rei asked, his face filled with affection. He was illuminated more by the screen of his laptop than the light outside; not only was it cloudy, but the curtains were mostly drawn, too.

“’S fine,” Nagisa replied, scooching his body closer to the warmth of his boyfriend. He made a spot for his head on Rei’s thigh, behind his computer. “I thought you had work today,” he mumbled around a yawn.

“I took a sick day, but I’ll still work from home. How are you feeling?”

“Sleepy,” the blond replied. He had no sense at all of what time it must be, but considering how late they’d stayed up pleasuring one another, he imagined he’d slept in a little too much. He guessed his assessment would change as soon as he moved further than an inch. The blond could already feel the tightness of his muscles from repeatedly wild bouts of sex, compounded by a night spent in a chilled room.

All things considered, it didn’t take terribly long for Nagisa to stir himself fully awake. Rei was typing too much. He should have been keeping his hand stroking the downy blond head in his lap. Too used to his lover to resist for long, the older man snapped the laptop shut and set it aside.

“Yes?” Rei prompted, an eyebrow arched over the rim of his red glasses. The blond forced his pained body upright and moved to straddle his boyfriend. He made sure to take the covers with him. The attorney steadied him at the hips.

“Last night was wild,” Nagisa said, wrapping his arms around Rei’s neck. The room was enough proof of the fact; decorative pillows were scattered around the floor, the attorney’s wrinkled remnants of his suit piled on top of them. A few spent condoms were littered on the ground – it took more coaxing than he’d thought to get Rei to do him raw.

“You better not be asking me to go again,” Rei warned. “I don’t have the stamina of a teenager.” The blond laughed wryly.

“I do have limits, even though I started it,” he joked. The brunet kissed his neck. “I’m just curious what set you off. I thought we were gonna talk, then you go and pull lube and condoms out of nowhere,” he exaggerated. Rei sighed in exasperation against the spot he’d just kissed.
“You’re right that you started it,” he griped, stroking Nagisa’s sore back. “And I thought we might talk too, and then maybe after…” He blushed and the blond giggled. “I don’t know. I remembered fighting, but after what we did that afternoon, I couldn’t make myself bring it up.”

“We were on the same page then,” Nagisa laughed. “Wild messy make-up sex was just what we needed, right?” Rei shot him a cocky grin reminiscent of his dominant attitude that night.

“I rather enjoyed making you eat your words. Call me bad at sex after that, and I’d be hard pressed to teach you another lesson,” the older man proclaimed. Nagisa flushed deeply at this new side to his dorky lawyer’s personality.

“About that, Rei, I know I can’t take it back, but I really didn’t mean it,” he replied apologetically. The brunet waved him off.

“I know. It’s in the past. We said all that we said, and what’s done is done. I probably shouldn’t have mentioned it, but it’s better to let you know I forgive you,” he explained. Nagisa smiled at his lover, once again bright as the sun. They kissed softly.

“I’m glad you brought it up. I guess while we’re on the topic, I should add that for you, I’ll be a slut any time, any place,” he flirted. Most of the sexual tension in his words had dissipated; they were both physically exhausted and now their argument felt much behind them.

“I surmised as much yesterday,” Rei retorted, clearly embarrassed at his boyfriend’s bold words. Now that was the nerd the blond had fallen for. “But we need to stop flouting. I think I still have some of your clothes around. Get dressed – we have to clean up the mess we left.” Nagisa let out an entirely different type of groan as his boyfriend gently pushed him off and left the bed. He turned up the thermostat, dressed himself, and immediately switched his focus to the room.

Nagisa noticed that Rei had already left him painkillers and water on the bedside table, as was just like him to do. With a soft smile and the easy feeling that everything would be fine, he too prepared for the rest of the day to come.

While the attorney was busy in the bedroom, the blond went down to the entrance to pick up his clothes. He pulled his phone out from the pocket of his coat – the battery had died in the course of the night – and plugged it in by the kitchen. The least he could do was make breakfast for his boyfriend as thanks for everything else he’d done.

He had just finished setting some eggs to boil and putting bread in the toaster when his newly revived phone began to ring. He checked the screen and almost dropped the eggs on the floor. Hospital flashed across the screen as he hurried to pick up.

“Hello? Nagisa Hazuki speaking!” he practically shouted into the receiver.

“Mr. Hazuki? This is Dr. Bingham speaking. I have the test results for your father.” The blond’s heart throbbed against his chest. He shut his eyes tight. The blood roared in his ears. When a set of soft fingers touched him, he jumped a mile high. Rei had come down from his room. The concern in his gaze told him that he’d guessed what call it was Nagisa was receiving.

“They’re back?” the blond asked uselessly. Oh God, he prayed, please don’t let this be happening.

“Yes. We have good news and unexpectedly good news. The good news is that the test results are negative, and your father does not have cancer.” Nagisa released a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. He leaned back weakly against Rei’s chest.

“Thank God,” he sighed into the receiver. “But wait – if that’s the regular good news… What’s the
unexpected part?” he asked.

“This is a little bit complicated,” the doctor began, “but your father sustained a back injury while deployed in the 2000s that left him paralyzed from the waist down, according to my charts. It looks like his spine was broken, but, well our X-rays have improved immensely since then… We think it was actually just a crack and severe bruising. The shock of the incident and the growing hemangioma that hemorrhaged – the reason for his emergency surgery – probably hid the fact that it was bruising and a crack. It'll be hard to fully explain without the images in front of you, but the gist of it is that we think he can actually regain limited function in his lower body.”

Nagisa just about dropped the phone. That wasn’t anywhere near what he’d expected to hear. The rest of the call was just about a blur; the doctor wanted him to come in tomorrow afternoon, they could go over the images, he would explain in detail… But the technical hardly mattered. His father might recover. He could live an independent life.

His emotions overwhelmed him. Relief. Unbridled joy. Confusion. The tide of his feelings barreled over him like nothing he’d felt before. He didn’t even realize when the call had ended. He didn’t even hear Rei’s voice asking him if everything was all right. For a moment, Nagisa leaned all of his weight against his lover’s chest, his ear pressed against the beat of his heart, and felt peace.

Chapter End Notes

bet you thought you'd seen the last of me

note: this chapter's name came from the phrase "modus operandi", more commonly referred to in crime shows as M.O. "Moda" is Spanish and Latin for fashion, so it's a little play on words for you guys!

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