

(From) Beyond the Forest

NaNoWrimo 2022, 50k words.

Rated TS™ for Tastefully Suggestive™.

Written by Mei, inspired by the work of shunkanboy18

[Before reading, listen to 'Orange' in the playlist \(0:00 – 2:37\)](#)

Part one.



Chapter 1: Sun

1.1

At this time of the year, Shimazawa would still be somewhat warm. The tropical island of Tachitachi doesn't allow for typical winters –it was a chill at most during fall, and an annoying but ultimately harmless frost during winter.

As Nagisa thought of that, he silently cursed himself for letting Shun pick the country they would spend at the fewest the next 5 years at.

The heater is not working. It has never worked, not for them nor for the previous tenant of this one-bedroom apartment.

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle. He knew he had caught a cold. Not even the warmest of comforters or the reassuring coziness of a mug of hot cocoa could stop the onslaught of

bitter frosty wind coming at him from all directions. His boyfriend was fast asleep –lord save the poor soul who must deal with Shun in the morning – and completely unbothered.

The landlord has no clue of how to fix the darn heater. He's an elderly man in his 80s who's convinced Nagisa's name is *Nathan*, of all names, and wholeheartedly believe the two young adults are *very good friends* who sleep in the same bed and spend Valentine's Day together. As roommates.

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle. The neighbor next door fixed their AC for them for free last summer and now Shun is too shy to ask for help with the heater.

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle. Nagisa hates how his dad is paying his share of the rent for him. He can't complain about the place. He should be grateful he even has a roof to sleep under – in this economy! Have you *seen* how awful the yen to dollar conversion rate is nowadays? *Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle.*

"Nagisa."

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle.

"...The meds are in the cupboard on the bathroom," said the voice coming from under the half dozen blankets, "blow your nose."

"...Sorry."

"Mmh, go back to sleep."

Getting up from the bed, Nagisa was filled with a sudden burst of energy, as that grumpy-sounding noise was Shun-ese for *let's cuddle in bed for a bit longer*. Then, it's fine. The cold isn't that bad.

Who needs a heater? What a beautiful country, America. So full of wonderful opportunities during this season of winter.

Nagisa has no complaints.

It was only after they'd woken up and gotten out of their pajamas that Nagisa realized that actually, that was a lie.

It's not perfect. He misses how it was back then, it's true.

Waking up to dad's frantic attempts of getting him up in time for class. By the doorstep, meeting bright green eyes that never complained about his lateness. One (two!) big sisters ready to tease him for any fumble.

And the small building where they studied; not even a tenth of how large their university is. A pitiful attempt at a teacher's office, and an incredibly tiny infirmary that didn't have running water most days.

Looking back, it was all so... limited. Not the building or the lack of care or the experience of sharing a classroom with 7- to 9-year-olds, but the time. From the day it began to their graduation to the day they would leave the country--

It was always going to end.

Everything ends, of course. But in these moments, it felt like they would keep that everyday life forever. Nagisa didn't stop to think, for even a second, that one day everyone would---

"You get - you get that faraway look in your eyes sometimes."

Everyone would go their own ways, leaving behind Natsu and Hiichan. Chikasen's baby was born and he is adorable (that's a lie, every baby is born ugly and everyone just says they're cute out of politeness, as Shun says), but he took a break from teaching to help his wife and now he doesn't visit Shimazawa as much. Barely, really. The baby pictures are getting old.

"And it makes me feel --- sorry, when you do that, I feel that -"

Though they try to keep in touch, Megu-nee hasn't had time to do a video call in ages. Nagisa saw that her Binstagram profile picture shows her with long hair now, but the last time he saw her, it was very short. And Aya-nee is even harder to contact, what with her pretty much having a full-time job as a *community leader*. Recently, Natsu complained that she bailed on their promised weekly pizza party twice, and Nagisa had no idea of what to say to comfort him.

Sometimes, he wishes he could offer some flowers at the Tachitachi graveyard. Green ones. It's probably been empty for a while. Who's using their desks now?

"Nagisa, I think you're homesick."

"...Huh?"

Shun bit his lip. He looked up from his now room temperature attempt at real, not American yakisoba - and looked straight into his boyfriend's eyes.

"You're homesick. You miss Shimazawa. And that's fine. Even I do... um, not often. Not much. Not... a lot. But I..."

A pause.

"...I'm worried about you..." Shun said. "Do you want to go home?"

Nagisa blinked. Once, twice. "What?"

"I said, do you want to go home?"

He saw Shun's mouth moving, but he couldn't make out what he was saying.

Oh.

Nagisa turned around. He pointed at his left ear.

"Crap. Sorry. I keep forgetting" Shun grimaced, horrified.

"It's okay. I forgot too. The other day, I talked to my dad on the phone and it took me a few minutes to realize why he was sounding so quiet."

Shun apologized again. He always apologizes, even to people who don't deserve it. One time someone bumped into him so hard he was sent flying to the wall, but he was the one who apologized. For what? Existing? Nagisa does not want him to feel sorry for being alive.

"Sorry. Sorry, I said... I'm worried about you being homesick. Sometimes you look like you want to go back to Shimazawa."

Nagisa shook his head. "I don't want to go back."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely", Nagisa said, picking up some cold yakisoba noodles with his chopsticks, "I don't miss being there, I just wish everyone else could've come with us."

Even the weather, too. He doesn't miss the Shimazawan heat. He misses the fact that the heat meant they could play with water guns in the schoolyard. He misses celebrating Natsu's birthday and loitering by the riverside with Hiichan.

The cold meant they could go to the twins' and bundle up some blankets by her family's couch and eat snacks by the huge fireplace in her living room. It often turned into a sleepover, much to Shun's feigned annoyance. They all knew he secretly enjoyed it.

...And he misses his dad.

But if Nagisa thinks too much about it, he'll cry. And if he cries, Shun will also cry. He hates it when Shun cries.

Instead of bursting into tears, he offers Shun his chopsticks. "Let's not talk about Shimazawa. I'd rather feed you some noodles - hey, you need some weight or else one of those big blows of wind will knock you over."

Changing the subject.

Nagisa doesn't want to say that he dreamt of Miria Sentou's lifeless eyes calling him back into the forest, muttering promises of going back in time.

"...And I don't want to talk about it right now. Can we leave this for later?"

They promised each other they would be honest. That they'd communicate. But sometimes that's tough.

Nagisa doesn't fear Shun's reaction, he fears what will happen to himself if he were to say it aloud.

"Okay. That's alright. Yeah."

Taking a bite of the offered noodles, Shun mumbled under his breath.

And Nagisa laughed aloud, spilling some sauce on the table as he did, because that whispery tone and the slight blush on the other boy's cheek was Shun-ese for *I love you*.

1.2

They kissed for the first time two and a half years ago, almost three now.

Nagisa didn't tell anyone, preferring to respect his boyfriend's eyerolls at the twins' teasing and incessant questions, even though all he wanted was to scream to the skies that things finally *made sense*.

He had tried kissing before. Girls who claimed to like him a whole lot would boldly step in to do so because *he's too dense to realize what they want*; but he barely knew them, so he felt nothing.

Absolutely nothing. Holding hands, hugging, it was like getting cuddled by his grandma of all people. She's lovely and Nagisa loves her very much, but also, she's 87.

(There was – there was one guy, but it also didn't feel right. They were watching a movie in a friendly night out at the movies like two guy friends do. Next thing he knew, the guy was cuddling him and was getting too handsy for comfort. This time, he could only picture his grandpa's face.

"*Sorry, I thought you were....*", the guy mumbled, and at the time Nagisa didn't know what that meant. What *was* he?)

Why is that love songs talk so much about the sparks and the butterflies? He began to question if maybe everyone else was just making too big of a deal out of something that is just... there.

Maybe everyone he ever kissed had 'bad kissing skills', or whatever that meant. (*'Am I a bad kisser?'* he had googled one day, and then immediately cleared his search history.)

Sometimes, when his mind would just decide to make him as miserable as possible, he asked himself if he was incapable of loving at all.

...But kissing Shun made it all make sense.

The idols Megu-nee likes so much were so right when they said *'My affection is overflowing non-stop'* and *'Maybe flowers start to bloom when they feel such an emotion as this'*. They were so damn right.

Because – first, Shun was so polite about it. He asked if he could do it with the same amount of gentleness one uses to talk to a newborn kitten. It was just the two of them, reading manga on the floor of his bedroom, and he came out with that whispery, uncertain *can I* as if Nagisa could possibly refuse.

It was a small peck at first. Then another. Then a hand on his hair. Nagisa caught himself stroking the other boy's cheek, and he opened his eyes to see that he was bright red.

They both were, he thought – he could feel how disheveled his hair was and *hey this heat is overkill even for a Shimazawa summer*. He didn't say that aloud, thankfully, as he would never forgive his smartass brain for possibly ruining the chance of more kisses.

His boyfriend could be the worst kisser in the world for all Nagisa knows, but he wanted to keep doing it a bit longer. A lot longer. He could do with plenty more, he thought. Even if it's just a small peck, having the guy he liked so close to him felt *really really good*.

That didn't happen with the girls from school or the boy from the movies. It was completely different and frankly much better.

That's why, he'd rather claim that day on his bedroom floor as his first *real* kiss. The ones that came before it do not count, just like you don't count your grandma giving you a kiss on the cheek as a big intimacy win.

The certainty that yes, Nagisa *could* love and be loved by someone, and no, there's *nothing wrong with him* at all? That is a huge win. Life-changing. He almost wishes they could've kissed before that and gotten this over with. How much *lost time* do they need to recover? *Literally?*

(Before that, it was hugs and shy cheek kisses and sometimes Shun would fall asleep on his lap or shoulder. It's mostly the same now but with the added bonus that he can wake Shun up with a kiss instead of poking him awake.)

It felt great. Loving and being loved. It was perfect.

Nagisa had no complaints.

Turns out that was also a lie, however.

As the memories began to come back to him, a certain pit in his stomach also returned.

"...Who was the guy you kissed?," Nagisa had asked, with a more somber tone than he intended.

He could see the gears turning over Shun's head. It took him a minute to understand.

"Um..."

“You said you liked me since we were kids, so you ki- “

“Yeah, Yes. I did.”

“You kissed another guy while you were in love with me.”

He didn't mean to sound accusatory. Really. If anything, it's Nagisa's dense head's fault that they had only gotten together now. He doesn't blame Shun for not wanting to wait around for a guy who failed to realize he had a *fan club* dedicated for him in middle school.

He's not mad. He's not jealous. He's just curious, that's all.

Who was he? Did you like him? Did he like you? How many times did you kiss him? Do you still talk to him? Do I know him? How far did you go? Did he teach you how to kiss?! He did, didn't he?

Yep. Yep yep yep. Plain curiosity.

“It didn't mean anything,” Shun replied as Nagisa parroted more and more questions about this mysterious hot guy, “He was an online friend and we met up.”

(He didn't know what he looked like, but Nagisa was sure it had to be a hot guy. A total ikemen straight from a TV drama! Tall with and lean shoulders and shoulder-length dark silky hair and normal sized fingers, unlike Nagisa's which are too skinny for a dude.)

“He was older and we met up a few times.”

“Met up where?”

Silence.

“Where did you meet the hot ikemen with normal fingers, Shun?!”

“The *what?*,” Shun asked, his tone incredulous, “Normal fingers? What the hell are you talking about?”

Just answer the question!!

Finally, Shun got up from his seat, and sighed. He had that *I'm about to say something and I don't want you to be bothered with it* look, which could only mean that the guy not only had shoulder-length dark silky hair but was also a great kisser. Who was *hot*, remember that detail.

“...tel.”

“What?”

More mumbling.

“Say it clearly.”

“...We'd - we'd meet up at a motel. S-Sometimes.”

Shun's voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere outside the house.

"That's why I said it didn't mean anything... like, we didn't like each other that way. If anything, he helped me come to terms with my feelings."

Suddenly, he was far, far away. He was in a town nearby Shimazawa meeting up with an older experienced guy who would listen to his troubles---

"We haven't seen each other in years – I was, um, 15? Yeah... do you want me to tell you everything *everything*, or... um... please don't make me do that."

---While Nagisa was in Nani City.

The distance at that moment and back then felt like it was the same.

"Oh. Okay."

"Nagisa—"

"Sorry I'm acting so weird. I just... I don't know."

He doesn't know. It doesn't change anything. It doesn't change his feelings, or the fact that they're together now.

But he doesn't like to think that Shun was *vulnerable* and *open* with someone he barely knew at all, before he got to that point with him.

"...Sorry I didn't tell you before," Shun had whispered, moving his hand up and down the other boy's shoulder, "I wasn't trying to hide it... I legit haven't thought about that in *ages*."

Is it bad that Nagisa wants to be the first one to know things about him? Now *that's* an absolutely ugly and unnecessary emotion he does not want anyone to know he feels. He can't name it, but just the thought of it makes his skin crawl.

"Don't worry about it. I'm being silly and weird."

"You're not silly... I'd want to know too, if I were in your shoes."

Don't talk about your feelings like they're bad, his therapist had suggested. *We should work on validating them instead.*

But this isn't an emotion that SHOULD be validated! It's bad. He feels like he's a bad person for disliking Hot Guy™'s existence by principle, and he doesn't even know him. Ah, this is the worst. Bad bad bad bad.

"Would seeing a picture of him make you feel better?"

No, Nagisa's brain said, but Shun was already on his Twitter account opening up an old chat. He tapped on a picture, and gave him the phone.

"...Shun."

"Yeah?"

Another ugly feeling burst up from his chest.

“Was 15-year-old you blind?”

That made Shun laugh – *laugh, out loud!* – and Nagisa bets Decidedly Not Hot Guy™ never made him laugh like this.

“Hahahah!”

Next year, they’ll be leaving Shimazawa together. And what’s Not Hot Guy™ doing? Ah, he’s stuck at home with a boring 9 to 5? Being a better than average kisser doesn’t pay off, does it?!

(Later, Shun joked – in that ironic and eye-rollish tone of this – that this was exactly how he felt whenever Nagisa would talk about that Miyawaki Sakura lookalike Facebook friend of his.

“What? I don’t care about her.”

“Exactly.”)

1.3

There was also the first they slept in the same bed together – *get your head out of the gutter, Aya-nee* – Nagisa had to physically drag Shun to the bed. He wasn’t sure if the other boy was too shy or a bit too worried about possible boundaries that he couldn’t get a read of, but whenever the chance appeared, Shun would turn around and insist on sleeping on the floor.

It’s fine, I like the futon. It’s comfy. Don’t worry about me.

Nagisa knew that was a whole bunch of lies.

First of all, nobody likes sleeping on the floor, no matter how much they say it’s fine. Also, Nagisa *wants* to see how it feels like to sleep with someone else - *in the same bed, I said!* – his aunt and his uncle sleep in separate beds even though they’ve been married for 30 years because they just can’t fall asleep next to someone else. What if he’s like that too?

Second, that futon is 15 years old and no amount of washing or drying would ever save it. It always smells like a muddy wet dog. No sane human being would enjoy spending the entire night in that thing.

“Stay.” Nagisa had repeated, firm and certain.

Shun kept looking at the ceiling. “I can stay in the futon.”

“No, you can’t. I... er, I wa...”

They’re both such idiots sometimes.

"I *want* to wake up with you tomorrow. Okay? Stay."

And he *still* looks unsure if it's really alright for him to get into the proper bed with Nagisa. Good lord, Aya was so right.

Sometimes you have to spell things out with Shun. He worries too much about hurting others' feelings, when it's really him how ends up the most hurt of them all.

"Nagisa, your bed is too small for two guys to sleep in."

"Too bad."

"You're a cover hog."

"It's summer, you'll deal with it."

And some things, such as the fact that no sane young man would refuse that, don't come naturally to him, Aya-nee had joked once, way before they started dating at all.

When he finally got in, under the light covers and next to Nagisa like he should've been this whole time ---

Warm.

Shun's still looking at the ceiling with his hands on his stomach like he's a vampire, but he's really warm and he smells good. Nagisa turned on his side, pressing his face against the dark-haired boy's arm, and thought, *my heart's so full.*

He's not like his aunt and uncle at all, he understood. He's never been comfier. He could sleep like this just fine.

"Shun... Shun, are you going to sleep like you're a vampire?"

"Just... just waiting for the meds to kick in. You can sleep first."

"Want me to tell you a bedtime story?"

He receives an elbow kick for the joke, but also, when Shun turned around, he spread his arms and now Nagisa's face was right on his chest instead of his arm.

"Don't say anything. Just sleep."

His heart is beating fast. Nagisa can't see his face, but he bets it's the same bright red from the first time they kissed. One of his hands is on Nagisa's hair now too, stroking the pink locks with so much care that it *hurts*.

He wondered what he should do with *his* own hands, but settled for hugging the other boy back.

"...I love you too."

Nagisa's still a cover hog and he still drools on Shun's pajamas every night.

They sleep on the same bed everyday now, it's bigger but still a bit tight. That's fine.

And Nagisa doesn't want to go back to how it was before ever again.

1.4

One evening, he got a text from some guy in his *Intro to Gastronomy* class asking if he'd like to have dinner with some of his pals.

Nagisa looked over at Shun, who was now sporting a shorter haircut and many piercings on his ears and (in Nagisa's honest non-biased opinion) a very nice pair of black jeans, and immediately went to type a *no thank you I already have plans*.

The phone buzzed before he could send it.

Hey, are you going to the dinner tonight? There's something I want to tell you.

Another buzz.

It's about your boyfriend.

"Don't worry about me. Go see your friends." Shun had reassured him, because he knows Nagisa bailed on more than one invitation this past month already.

"They're not my friends. This guy's a *friendly acquaintance* at most," Nagisa replied, "And this other girl has GOSSIP on you. I don't want to hear it."

"I thought you loved gossip."

"I like stupid gossip. Silly gossip, like hearing from the landlord that our neighbor's aunt's godson can't count to 20 yet –"

"He's *two*."

"-Exactly! Exactly. I don't wanna hear what other people think of us. I've had enough of that back home."

He stopped enjoying gossip so much when the Shimazawa populace started making them the victims instead. He tried to understand, he really did, that a bunch of middle-aged farmers who had never seen gay people before would not be exactly accepting of two guys holding hands on their way home from school.

But it was too much. Shun was sadly right.

Not even the fact that they had pretty much single handedly saved their village from complete destruction would convince these particulars villagers to show a shrewd of respect for them. Fine. Whatever.

"Now I'm curious what she thinks she knows about me."

“No.”

“Come on. Go have some fun.”

“I have fun when I’m *with you.*”

Shun scoffed. “I can’t believe I’m the one trying to convince you to leave the house. How the tables turn...”

A pause.

“...For real. Nagisa, go. You need friends.”

...He was right. Of course.

As much as it pained Nagisa, he also doesn’t think those guys will want anything to do with him if he keeps rejecting over and over...

And he secretly *does* want to know what the goss is. Dammit. Some habits never change.

The restaurant they chose was a busy and bustling one. The kind Shun and Hiichan hate with a passion.

Half a dozen people trying to fit in a table for two, and someone celebrating their birthday with a two-story chocolate cake – *I wish I were baking right now* – and a huge amount of people dressed in black for what Nagisa could only theorize was a goth meetup.

His classmates were sitting farther away from the entrance. *A relationship built simply on the fact that they sat close to each other on the first day of class*, Hiichan had commented with that dry tone of hers, and she was right. Nagisa could not imagine being as close to them as he is to the Game Club members.

Still, he greeted them, sat down next to the guy who invited him, and tried to make sense of their conversation.

Literally. English was never his best subject in school. He can handle one or two people talking at once, but any more than that and he’s lost.

He hoped no one would notice he was nodding and laughing along to jokes he couldn’t understand and saying *no way that happened* to stories he could only hear 50% of at most.

They are nice, but they’re not *maybe the exchange student is going to have some trouble* nice. And definitely not *he’s almost deaf in one ear, we should try to consider that before inviting him to such a noisy place* nice.

...Is that how Shun felt back then? It’s---

“Hey, can I talk to you outside?”

He only heard her because she made sure to lean over to his good ear.

“Sure.”

They went out, away from the noise and back out to the entrance.

It was night out. No stars in the sky – it’s going to rain tomorrow; they should take the laundry back inside. Don’t want a repeat of when they had to wear the same pants for an entire week.

“I have something to tell you. It’s important.”

The girl had a stern look on her face.

“What is it?”

“...It’s... you’re dating Chum from Computer Sciences, right?”

Chum and Nathan?!

“Shun. Yeah, why?”

“My friend takes a class with him on Tuesdays. I just thought you’d want to know – he’s, like, *hot*.”

He had no idea of what to say to that.

“...Yes?”

“I mean, that’s what my friend said – I’m not into gay dudes. He’s a guy too, so – like...” she said, enunciating her words slowly and carefully, “You should get rings. For your fingers.”

She pointed to her own ring finger, and made a circle around it. “Or else other guys are going to think he’s single. *Available*. You know?”

Oh.

Ah, right. Like promise rings. He never thought about that...

“Oh, um, thanks.”

“Be quick. *Fast*.”

...No, that’s a lie. He totally has fantasized about wearing cute matching rings together and posting a Binstagram story showing them off. One with a pink filter and a rainbow gif on the side. Shun would kill him, but it would be worth it. He wants to show off.

“Yeah, thanks. I got it.”

He had an excuse to go shopping for rings now. Nice.

Going out was worth it.

He got home a couple hours later. Just enough time to say that he was there, but not too long to put him out of commission for the rest of the night.

Nagisa doesn't know if it's him getting older or if it's the effort that it takes to keep up with English conversations, but he just doesn't have the social energy that his classmates seem to have. They were planning to go to another restaurant and then a *night club* after that. Just thinking about it tired him out.

"I'm home."

All the lights were off inside the apartment, except for the bathroom's. The shower was running, he could hear.

One knock. "Shun, I'm home."

Two knocks. According to my sources, you're a hit with the guys in college."

Three knocks.

...No response.

That's alright.

They have plenty of time to talk still, in a language that only the two of them share right now.

The best Saturdays are spent with him.

1.5

They're adults now.

Yes, they aren't teenagers trying to figure out how intimacy works anymore.

He doesn't get embarrassed with kisses and the prospect of cuddling, not any longer. He should be used to this.

*"Look at me?" his voice's too soft, too close, breathy and needy and there's no time, no way to **think**. Everything feels a lot at all at once.*

And what is he supposed to do? Just one longer than usual kiss and he's putty. It's like Shun knows exactly what to do to get to him.

He likes being close to Shun. He likes seeing expressions that nobody else is ever going to see on him, *ever*. There's knowledge that he's taking to his grave.

Joke's on him, though – so does Nagisa.

The CompSci guys know about the scar on Shun's neck, but they don't know, and they're never going to know, about the mole right under his clavicle. It's good that Shun likes to wear scarves and turtlenecks.

And the culinary arts peeps, too. They don't know that this one coat Nagisa likes to wear during autumn was Shun's and he just borrowed it forever. They're the same size. That's privileged information that he wants to keep to himself.

(It was embarrassing, back then, when Megu-nee noticed that they had each other's ties on. When she pointed it out, Nagisa just wanted to dig a hole and hide in it forever. If she noticed, then everyone did too, right?)

Of course, they did. The stares got harsher.

*The want to leave Shimazawa only increased. He felt, on his skin, the **otherness** Shun had tried to explain to him before.*

There was a wall between them and the rest.)

His dad – it was funny, they never had to tell him they were dating at all. Dad was the one who would make the extra futon magically go away when Shun was staying over, and he'd pretend to believe Shun's *we're going to the café to study* excuse when they were going on a date. It was an inside joke that Shun only understood after they left Shimazawa.

"Your dad knew you were dating a guy *all this time*?"

"Nah, he just knew we were going out."

And really, that's all it is. Nagisa feels that he would've loved Shun if he were a girl too, as long as he was Shun. Girl, boy, neither. That's not what matters, not to him.

It's not like that for everyone; Megu-nee explained that. She can't fall in love with a guy no matter what. That's fine. It's cool that they are different in that way too.

Abnormality and normality, what is that anyway? The more he thought about it, the less sense it made.

...Everyone should be able to love whoever they want.

Being loved and loving others is a wonderful thing.

1.6

> Hey, you awake?

Yeah, what's up? <

> Had to cancel pizza night again : (Do you guys think you could pop in Minecraft tomorrow night to hang out with them?

Shun's got a meeting with a < client but I think I could play for a bit.

> Man, Natsu's gonna be so sad. I feel bad.

Nagisa sighed. It's the fourth time Aya had to cancel her plans with Hiichan and Natsu. She had no clue of how busy she would get once she graduated and officially started working on her Shimazawa revitalization project.

"Hey, Shun?"

"Yeah?"

"What use are we big brothers if we can't even offer a fun pizza night anymore?"

Shun looked at the phone, and shook his head. "Again?"

"Yeah... I'm worried about Natsu. What if he starts to believe we don't like him anymore?"

A huff.

"I wouldn't worry about that. The Game Club has successfully transformed his ego into something truly fearful."

"Shun, I'm *serious*. We promised them. What if they're really lonely? Or – or what if the kids at school are mean to them and they don't want to tell us because we're always busy with dumb adult stuff?!"

The *guilt* of leaving the two kids behind in Shimazawa never quite left him. The day they left, Natsu was trying *really really hard* not to cry, sniffing and claiming that he's a tough boy, and even Hiichan held on to Shun's coat tighter than usual as she hugged him goodbye.

"The *kids* are alright." Shun responded, enunciating the word 'kids' with a bit of a sarcastic side look. "We can stay up late tomorrow and play with them after my meeting."

"...Really? You can do that?"

"Sit down, big bro."

Sitting down on the couch next to the other man, Nagisa exhaled. Shun was reading an article on his laptop. *18 pages*. That professor is such a meanie.

Ah, how Nagisa wishes they could've taken everyone away from Shimazawa too. It's an impossible dream, he knows. They were bound to part ways eventually, weren't they? Megu-nee and Aya-nee are following their own individual dreams. Chikasen has different priorities and –

His thinking was interrupted by the arm around his shoulder.

"Leave that essay for later," Nagisa mumbled, leaning further into the touch, "This is an emergency."

"Aren't you the one who lonely?" Shun mumbled back, smiling faintly at that instant reaction, "Want me to give you a head pat?"

Nagisa puffed his cheeks; a habit he's learnt gets a small laugh out of Shun. Hearing Hikaru's voice in his head, he smiled as well.

There, there, Nagisa. It's okay. Pat pat.

She's probably grown taller. Taller than Natsu; Chikasen said that Natsu's mom and dad are short, so he'll probably grow up to be short too. Poor little guy.

Pat pat, Shun mouthed, his right hand petting Nagisa's now shoulder length hair.

"You like it this long?"

"Yeah, I like it."

He likes that he can put it up with a scrunchie now, and wear animal themed hairpins to keep his longer bangs in check. Also, it's cute.

He feels cute.

"...Remember when Dad caught me working at the pizzeria in drag?"

Shun grimaced, but Nagisa continued before he could speak. "It's not like it was a secret, he just never asked. Hahah.."

It's been a while since he last dressed up in girl's clothes, whatever that means. There's no reason to do it anymore. It's not as fun without Megu there to do their makeup and let him borrow her accessories.

"I just... it feels like we gave up on a lot to come here."

Shun hummed in response. *Keep talking.*

"My therapist keeps saying that it was good that we made this decision, and that once things calm down, we can go back to Shimazawa with a whole other worldview and stuff."

Pat pat.

"But what if we're *still* busy a few years from now, and – and we can barely keep in touch...? I don't want that..."

A smooch on the cheek, and he turns his head back to the laptop's screen.

They've reached the end of the text; it's only references and notes now. The laptop closes with a *clack*. Shun puts the device down on the floor and grabs Nagisa's cheeks.

"H-Hey—"

Pinch pinch pinch pinch.

"Leave the worrying to me."

"I can worrrsh—worry too!"

"Nope. That's my thing. C'mere, I think I might've transferred too much of my anxiety cells."

Right, Shun was the one who would worry about what ifs and whatnot...

"Transfer them away, please... I just wanna play Minecraft with them in peace... I'll start asking questions and they'll be like, Nagisa's so lame and adult-like now, it's no fun hanging out with him...."

Poor thing, Shun mumbles, reaching over to wrap his arms around Nagisa's shoulders. *C'mere.*

Oh.

....

Simply like that, his mind goes blank for a few seconds.

"This summer, Megu and Ooshima are going to spend the entire summer there."

Another.

"Aya's messy but she's taking good care of them."

Another, on the nose this time – it tickles.

"This isn't only your worry. Everyone else wants to protect them too..."

Boop.

"Why don't we log in now and build a surprise for Natsu?"

Nagisa manages a smile.

"Natsu hates it when we build stuff without his permission."

"Exactly."

It only hit him when he tried to go to sleep last night.

"Nagisa, let them take care of you too."

The last thing Chika-sensei told him before they left.

“It’s mutual. The feeling of wanting to protect them – it’s the same.”

...It’s still difficult for him.

Will it ever be easy to accept what they’re offering? That is –

....

The word seems as if it’s far, far away from him still.

On the tip of his tongue.

“They love you, you know.”

Love?

Love is...

Mom, what is that...?

1.7

They’re careful about their seating arrangements in public transport nowadays.

Shun used to sit by the window, his eyes closed, listening to music on his headphones. Nagisa would turn to look at him, and before he knew it, the vehicle would stop, and they had to leave.

Time goes by fast when you’re taking pictures of the same person in slightly different angles and filters to share with your group chat.

But that – that wasn’t why their attempts at public transportation were memorable. Far from it, that’s just another Tuesday for them. The bus, the train, sometimes an Uber when they’re feeling fancy.

There was one incident – one that, looking back, was so completely and profoundly *silly* – that made them change it so Nagisa would be the one who gets the window seat instead.

A kid, no older than 7, tried to show Nagisa her brand new doll. She talked and talked about how pretty it was and he if had any name suggestions, her momma bought it for her cuz she was very polite –

But Nagisa did not hear any of that.

It’s not like he can go around with a sign around his neck to warn people about the fact that his eardrum was (probably?) infected and ruptured a few years back and has shown no sign of... un-rupturing itself... since.

It was not any fun explaining *how* it happened; not to strangers, and not to the half dozen ear doctors that tried to treat him. It just suddenly started hurting one day, then next, he couldn't hear as well, and that was it. They were stumped.

I was shot at, beaten, and killed numerous times by different people in another timeline and now I can't hear in this one NEVER worked out for him. It got him several requests to head to the psych floor for an urgent consult, that it did.

There is no physical proof that any of these things ever happened to him; even the bruises that began to appear on his torso had *no explanation, there's nothing on the X-Ray; there's nothing wrong with your health and all we can do is give you painkillers.*

But the damage was done.

The poor kid on the bus – she had no idea. She went crying to her mom in tears that the man on the seat next to them was ignoring her and her cute new doll.

Nagisa felt absolutely *terrible* when he realized what was happening. He was the WORST. No amount of apologies and explanations would make the kid stop crying. She *didn't know*, of course she didn't.

...That's why Nagisa sits by the window now. Never again.

He wasn't the only one.

Everyone came out of that experience with scars and bruises and horrifying realizations.

Nagisa remembers the day he massacred Megumi in the village's clinic with that desk; there's not a day that goes by for him without remembering that. She had to be taken to the ER numerous times with complaints of *pain pain pain* that never went away –

But there's nothing. *Nothing*, not in her body, that would cause that pain. She was just a 19-year-old dealing with unexplainable chronic pain now, and it was *his fault*. He could've fought off the control and stopped, but he didn't.

"If you let the guilt of what happened in those loops take over you, that's just as bad."

A wise beyond her years Hikaru Wakabayashi seemed to know just what to say.

"If only it were that easy, Hiichan..."

The guilt – the memories themselves that assaulted him whenever he walked through those pebble roads – that was what ultimately lead him to leaving Shimazawa.

God, he can deal with the bigots and the no jobs and the shitty economy and even the *pain*, but the guilt was too much.

The village stopped being the place where he met his best friends and made wonderful memories, and became *hell*. Samsara.

Shun, Hiichan, Megu-nee, and... and Lea too. They all tried to warn him that Shimazawa wasn't that great.

The rose-tinted glasses were finally off, and he wanted *out*. *Now*.

Please, dad, I want to leave with Shun and Megu. Don't force me to stay. I think I'll die.

They were lucky they made it alive.

Not everyone did.

1.8

The past year they spent in America was challenging, not only in the communication and the *basic living necessities* aspect, but also in the fact that Nagisa cannot get a good night's sleep.

Most nights, he wakes up sweating from that same horrible recurring nightmare.

...The dream goes like this.

Nagisa's at the outskirts of Shimazawa's forest, by the large bridge that leads into the entrance. There's not a single sound; not even the streaming of the river under him produces any noise. The skies are blue and decorated with hundreds of stars.

He cannot move, for Miria Sentou's motionless body is staring a hole through his eyes. She says nothing. She does nothing. There is no warmth in her eyes, not anymore.

He didn't get a good look - didn't want to look - at what kind of expression Miria had on her face when she was killed, but he imagines it was one of complete apathy. Apathetic, unable to move, barely but a gathering of atoms that happened to form a living being; completely and utterly unable to react to what's around.

Around the third time he saw this dream, Nagisa realized that they were the same.

They were mirrors of each other. The imagery of him being a mime to Miria Sentou's lifeless corpse ingrained itself into his brain and would not go away. It did not make sense, for they were nothing alike.

Miria Sentou was cold and calculating and a fake. She used the people around her for her own gain, made promises and spewed out lies to further her plans. That was the Miria Sentou in his dreams.

The most painful realization of all, however, was that he never dreamt of Midoriko.

It hurts that Nagisa Amamiya wasn't nearly as close to Midoriko as he was to Lea Akimoto – Miria Sentou. Which one? They used to look different to him, but now they've morphed into one.

Midoriko was a kind girl and Nagisa liked her. A part of him wants to think that she's too gentle to haunt his dreams, but that's not how it works.

They just... they didn't understand – *she* didn't understand Nagisa Amamiya the way Lea Akimoto seemed to. The time they spent together was too short.

Guilt has seeped itself into his heart so much that he's reached the point where not dreaming enough about a dead girl made him sick to the stomach. *Horrible. Why did they have to go through that? Why did they have to hurt and kill and die time and time again? Who decided that it was them who had to do it...?*

No one has an answer to that, do they?

But...

...It's funny.

When they were kids, Nagisa was the one with the nightmares, and Shun slept just fine. By the time they met each other again, Shun had deep dark bags under his eyes at all times, and Nagisa slept like an angel.

Now, again, like it is some kind of astral joke – Shun's managed to find just the right combination of meds to get him to sleep peacefully but not get so tired during the day, while Nagisa often wakes up at night sweating from this cursed recurring nightmare. They are opposites, in synch with each other even when they were apart. As if it was fated that they'd end up *like that*. Balancing off each other.

It almost makes him smile; but Miria Sentou stares at him from the other side of the bridge, as if she knows he was trying to think of the man he loves in spite of this nightmare she's trapped him in.

It is as if joy itself is not allowed in her presence.

It is as if he could tell her any kind of lie and she would doubt him by instinct.

It is as if...

...As if they are opposites. In synch with each other even though she's long dead.

As if it was fated that they'd end up *like this*. Balancing off each other.

...Slowly but surely, the memories that were originally closed off began to show themselves.

Cold and warm.

Calculating and impulsive.

Alive. Dead.

Nagisa Amamiya. Miria Sentou.

Midoriko Akagi, Mio Usodame and Lea Akimoto wave at him from the other side of the bridge, turning away from him and head to the forest.

Don't go, he wants to scream, it's not worth it.

Nagisa....

Don't go.

Nagisa.

Wake up.

"...Wake up."

"Wake up. It's okay, I've got you."

He didn't realize he was crying until he felt the liquid going down his cheeks. Shun was holding him close, gently whispering *it's okay it's okay it's over*; he was very very warm and Nagisa felt cold, so cold it was like they weren't under both weighted blankets and a heavy comforter.

Shun never asked him what the nightmares were about when they were younger, and he still doesn't. They had a silent understanding of sorts that this was the one thing Nagisa did *not* want to talk about.

And he still hates crying in front of him. When it's other people, it's fine, a bit uncomfortable, but he's not scared of showing his uglier feelings anymore. It's just that Shun feels things *so deeply* that it's as if he was the one who was upset in the first place.

"Shh. I'll get you some water."

If someone were to shoot him in the chest, Nagisa believes that telling Shun about it would somehow make it so equal pain transferred itself to him.

Shun cares too much.

"There you go."

It's not a bad fact, but it's a sad one. No one wants their partner to hurt as much as they do.

Nagisa tries to not let that stop him from talking about his feelings, but it's not nice to wonder if maybe Miria Sentou will start haunting Shun's dreams as well if he knows about her reappearances.

"...Thanks. I-I'll be fine."

Shun hugs him again. He's colder now. He went to their freezing excuse of a kitchen to get him water.

Nagisa wants to cry again –

Because now he understands.

God, he understands.

1.9

Nagisa is loved. He is so, so loved.

That should be obvious, of course he is. But it took a long time for him to realize that.

Shun says it in his own Shun-ish way *all the time* if you pay attention. He's always been gentle and kind under that grumpy exterior he had to build to protect himself, *but with Nagisa*, Hikaru had commented, *he's got it bad*.

His dad tells him that everytime they talk. *I love you, have a good day, is everything alright? You can come back home if you hate it there. I'll always be here.*

Natsu's adorable insistence on making sure Nagisa knows he's still a member of the Game Club after he left, he's one of the *original members* and every kid who joins in has to know his name as Natsu's true nemesis.

He's come to learn that the twins show their affection with jokes and snarky comments and the never-ending teasing they enjoy so much. In that way, Aya-nee and Megu-nee are like walking and talking bags of affection.

And he's never heard Hiichan say *I love you* to them before, but he knows from the soft sparkle in her eyes when she talks about her big brothers and sisters –

That's love.

There is not a single human being on earth, Nagisa believed, who cannot be loved. Even the worst and most despicable collection of atoms and cells have been or will be loved by someone at some point.

But for a very long time, he thought he was *the* exception.

He was 7 and sobbing over his mom's harsh *I won't love you anymore if you don't shut up* when he started to doubt his capability to be loved.

He had unpacked most of it by the time they moved to America, yes. His mom was not exactly the loving figure seen on Mother's Day commercials and supermarket ads; she was always sighing about how *her son's too sensitive* and *her husband ran away*.

That... is not love.

And he's long grown sick of wondering what he would be like if Mom ever showed a sprinkle of affection, the *bare minimum care and worry* for a child that other Moms have. *It's supposed to be instinctual, mom. Did the alcohol fry off her brain THAT badly?*

...Alcohol.

She was always drinking. Day and night.

Beer, vodka, wine, gin, tequila – so often and so much that the faint smell of alcohol was enough to put Nagisa into *shutdown mode*.

And college students love drinking. Nagisa knows they think it's weird that he not only does not drink, but physically cannot be near anyone who recently drank.

It's fine.

He'd rather spend his Friday nights with the Game Club on their Minecraft server anyway.

(Shutdown mode is what he calls the time when a substitute teacher back in Shimazawa came to class with his coat stinking of alcohol and Nagisa stood there, paralyzed to the spot. Later, he tried to explain that it legitimately felt like he was going to die right then and there out of pure terror.

That is also when he noticed that Shun understood Nagisa better than Nagisa himself thought he did. A panic attack, he said.)

He hasn't heard from his Mom in years; isn't interested in forgiving the person who almost strangled him to death at the age of 17; isn't interested in talking to the woman who would lie that the bruises he would show up to school with were because he *fell off his bike*. He's not interested in knowing how she's doing. *She* never asked, ever, not when they lived together in that filthy apartment in the city.

...Ironically, their first big fight as a couple happened because of her.

"You know what? Mom could be a nun in the Vatican for all I care and I still wouldn't forgive her."

"She could show up here and grovel for forgiveness and I still wouldn't meet her eyes."

"She could win the Nobel Peace Prize and have the Pope himself recognize her as a Saint or whatever and I *still wouldn't forgive her.*"

"...Nagisa, that's your *mom* you're talking about."

They had spent so much time with one another and in synch, almost as if they were always together to being with, that they had forgotten that their own meanings of '*Mother*' could not be any more different.

Shun loved his mom very much. They are opposites in that way too.

The argument was resolved quickly in the end, and they both agreed to meet the other halfway when it comes to that subject, of course. It's not like Nagisa was looking to form the *I hate my mom* club with him, or anyone else. And Shun can cry as much as he needs when his mom's birthday comes around.

Because they love each other.

Love. *Love*, what a word.

It's something he deserves. He *needs*.

He can love, and he can be loved, no matter what Mom made him believe all these years. He's much more than the bruises he was forced to hide not to get her into trouble—

*(Because, God, he did love her. He did love Mom through it all, believing that she just had a different way of showing her affection. Kids always want to believe that, don't they? What else could he believe in, that his Mom **wanted** to hurt him that bad? No.)*

He's much more than the threats and the manipulation and the negligence.

He is more.

He is *loved*.

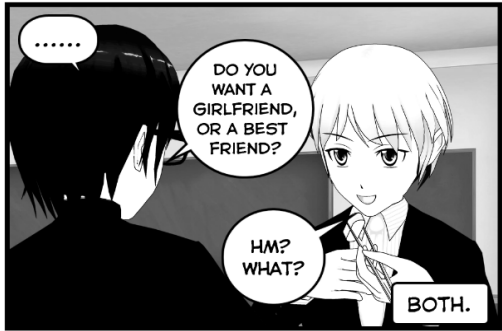
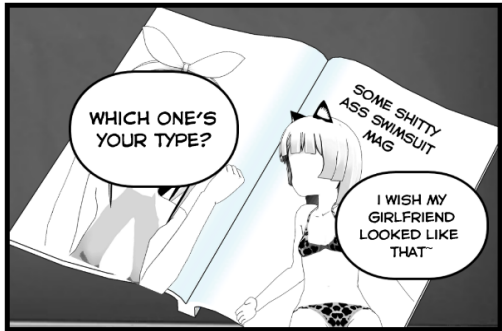
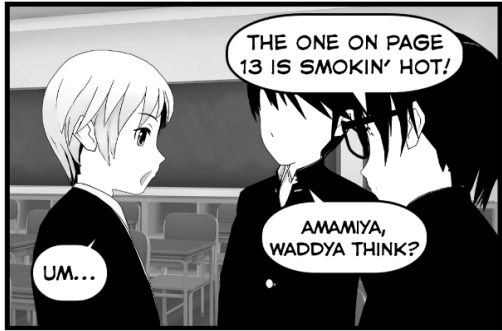
And everything else? Any trouble, pain, guilt, misunderstandings, or doubt he encounters from now on –

Knowing that there is love, it all becomes so much easier.

He is **loved**.

[Listen to Nagisa's section of the playlist \(2:37 – 13:57\)](#)

BEFORE SHIMAZAWA



Intermission

"Are we seriously taking a quiz from *Women's Love Magazine*?"

"It'll be fun!"

"Nagisa, we are men."

"I'll tier for you in the next Rui event. T2 at least."

"...Fine."

1. What's your partner's favorite TV show?

S: He's rewatching that show with the dumb girls and the blackmail. I don't remember the name and I don't want to know. It's so bad.

N: Shun hasn't watched TV alone in a while, but he really liked rewatching the original *Legend of Galactic Heroes*. I think it's kinda boring though.

2. What's your partner's favorite book?

S: ...I can't remember the last time I saw him pick up a book. Does fanfiction count? No? Hm.

N: I don't know what's up him and *The Catcher in The Rye*. It's always on his side of the bed during the weekends. Does he reread it? Is he reading it reaaaally slowly? WHAT IS THE TRUTH

3. What food does your partner like to cook?

S: Cakes, croissants, pizzas, tarts, flans, macarons. He can cook normal food too, but his passion is baking.

N: Cup noodles and fried tofu. I think he'd eat it everyday if he could...

4. What's their favorite color?

S: Pink and blue. Light green too, sadly.

N: Black and red! It matches his hairs and eyes.

5. What does your partner do at work?

S: He's studying Gastronomy. He petsits for a neighbor sometimes during the holidays.

N: He's a freelancer. He codes stuff for some small companies! He studies Computer Sciences too.

6. What's your partner's go-to social network?

S: Nagisa is addicted to Binstagram. He has three accounts; one is his personal one, the other is for his Youtube Channel, and the third one is for spying on Drag Race contestants. I managed to stop him from installing TikTok. You're welcome.

N: He's always on Twitter! He keeps refreshing it over and over. His friends talk to him from there, so I get it. He also has a Tumblr he hasn't used in a while. It's full of manga pictures and anime gifs.

7. What's your partner's favorite dessert?

S: Every single one of them.

N: Dark chocolate fondant cake with strawberries and vanilla ice cream on top!

8. What does your S.O. like to do in their spare time?

S: Consume terrible media. Work on his Youtube Channel. Video chat with the kids in Shimazawa. Bake, sew, cook, and read fanfiction. He does it all somehow.

N: (//ω//) (*//▽*) (//•/ω•//)

"Next up... Gigi Bengle here says that finding out someone's current state of mind regarding their dreams is important."

"Uh-huh..."

9. What does your partner want their life to look like in five years?

S: Open a bakery after graduation. Maybe in Shimazawa. I don't know. I'm trying to focus on the present now.

N: Work from home, eat hot chip all day, and lie. No, seriously though, we're both trying to get through the present before imagining how the future is going to look like. Things change too fast.

10. Would your partner ever relocate to accommodate your job?

S: He already did that for me.

N: I didn't move because of Shun. I wanted to leave too. I think he'd do it for me if we talked it out.

11. Would your partner ever want a long-distance relationship?

S: I don't think he'd want that. He's too social.

N: He'd be okay with it. Most of his friends live in the other side of the world.

12. Does your partner want to get married in the future?

S: Yeah.

N: Heheheheheh... yes...!

13. How does your partner feel about having kids?

S: He's going to have to learn how to take care of a plant first. Then a fish. Then a cat. We'll talk about it again when they survive long enough.

N: Shun always complains about kids being noisy and how he doesn't get them. But! But, but but! He's really good with them! Seriously! If it's a quieter kid, then I think he'd get along perfectly. Also, I think he wants to have a family.

"We're gonna skip *questions about the past*. I don't think we need to go over that again. Let's go straight to *questions about values* next time."

"...Yeah."

Intermission End.

Chapter 2: Moon

2.1

Shun can hear the *sniffle sniffle sniffles* coming from the other side of the bed.

It's in the bathroom. The meds.

He can't communicate via telepathy, of course not, but he doesn't want to wake up.

He loves the cold because he can stay under the comforter in the mornings and no one can fault him for not being productive enough.

Sniffle sniffle sniffle.

The heater is not working. It has never worked, not for them nor for the previous tenant of this one-bedroom apartment.

Sniffle sniffle sniffle.

It's a cold. Shun knows what that sounds like; that's a classic cold. *Go get the meds*, he wills his brain to say. *In the bathroom.*

The landlord does not want to fix the heater. He's an elderly man in his 80s who pretends that no gay people live in the apartments he's renting out, putting on the façade that he's just an innocent, harmless guy. It fools his boyfriend, but Shun can see right through that.

All landlords are menaces.

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle.

If he really was as nice as Nagisa believes he is, then he wouldn't ask for so *much goddamn money*. What is WRONG with the yen to dollar conversion rate lately?

"...'gisa..."

Sniffle, sniffle, sniffle.

His brain manages to signal his mouth to speak at long last.

"...The meds are in the cupboard on the bathroom. Go blow your nose."

"...Sorry."

"Mmh, go back to sleep."

Do not tell anyone that Shun thinks this way, but the other fun bonus of winter is that it's a great excuse to get some extra hugs.

Who needs a heater? America sucks, and so do its landlords. Japan sucked too, in different ways. It sounds weird, but just having Nagisa close by is enough.

Shun doesn't care about the country, not as much as he thought he would.

Right now, he and Nagisa live in freaking *Seattle*.

And if that's where he has to be to stay with him, then stay he will.

It was only after they'd woken up and gotten out of their pajamas that Shun realized that Nagisa had his mind in a completely different place.

Nagisa worries about three things: one, he questions if leaving Natsu and Hikaru behind was a mistake. Two, he wants to ask Megu what brand of shampoo she recommends for longer hair, but he keeps forgetting to.

Three: The mere existence of Shimazawa village.

Shun tries to talk about it.

"You get - you get that faraway look in your eyes sometimes."

Be straightforward and honest, said one of these shitty relationship advice sites he stumbled into while worrying about his status as a *boyfriend one does not want to break up with after a month of dating*.

"And it makes me feel --- sorry, when you do that, I feel that -"

Easier said than done, Jean E. Walsh from *Weekly Love magazine*. He grew up being told that his opinions and feelings were weird and unnatural and *not how everyone else feels*. Try undoing THAT amount of damage yourself, Jean E. Walsh.

"Nagisa, I think you're homesick."

But this isn't about him.

"....Huh?"

Shun bit his lip. He looked up from his now room temperature attempt at real, not American yakisoba (*It sucks! They don't know how to make noodles!*) - and looked straight into his boyfriend's eyes.

"You're homesick. You miss Shimazawa. And that's fine. Even I do... um, not often. Not much. Not... a lot. But I..."

A pause.

"...I'm worried about you..." Shun said. "Do you want to go home?"

Nagisa blinked. Once, twice. "What?"

"I said, do you want to go home?"

Nagisa turned around. He pointed at his left ear.

There's nothing worse than a man who can't read the room. If I have to spell it out for him, then I know he's not smart enough to handle what's important.

Jean E. Walsh is *right*. He is the worst boyfriend known to man.

"Crap. Sorry. I keep forgetting, sorry –"

"It's okay. I forgot too. The other day, I talked to my dad on the phone and it took me a few minutes to realize why he was sounding so quiet."

Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid.

"Sorry. Sorry, I said... I'm worried about you being homesick. Sometimes you look like you want to go back to Shimazawa."

Nagisa shook his head. "I don't want to go back."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely", Nagisa said, picking up some cold yakisoba noodles with his chopsticks, "I don't miss being there, I just wish everyone else could've come with us."

Shun cannot agree. He understands, but he doesn't believe that would fix anything. It would be impossible in many ways. More problems would be created than solved.

"Let's not talk about Shimazawa. I'd rather feed you some noodles - hey, you need some weight or else one of those big blows of wind will knock you over."

Changing the subject. He doesn't want to talk about this.

"...And I don't want to talk about it right now. Can we leave this for later?"

That's alright.

They promised each other they would be honest. That they'd communicate.

That is possibly the biggest challenge Shun has to face. He, who hates challenges and would rather stay on his comfort zone at all times –

"Okay. That's alright. Yeah."

Taking a bite of the offered noodles, Shun mumbled under his breath. Nagisa laughed aloud, spilling some sauce on the table as he did. They had just finished cleaning that, but it's alright.

Shun loves him.

2.2

They kissed for the first time two and a half years ago, almost three now.

Shun didn't tell anyone, because it's none of their business. He likes his friends, he really does, but he's never understood those teen movies where everyone knows who kissed who, when, and how it was. He doesn't want to give relationship advice to Megu about *Kasumi Ooshima*, for the love of God.

The kiss...

It's *their* moment.

Let him have this. He's waited and wondered about it for too long to go telling the world. The first real *actual meaningful* kiss.

...Technically, his first kiss happened when he was 6 and playing with Kaori Ohnuma in the sandpit. She gave him a peck, giggled, and promptly moved away to a faraway town.

(He only remembers her name because the flower shop her parents owned showed up in the news years later. Turns out it was a money laundering scheme.)

He didn't have to kiss anyone to know that he liked boys. Other boys didn't get giddy at the thought of holding hands with their male friends. The sparks and the butterflies that Megu's idols sing about so much – that was not what he felt when he looked at girls.

That was enough to know he was different.

Oftentimes, he asked himself if that was a bad thing.

And as he grew up, he was forced to understand that it *was*. Society struggles to keep everyone in line with what's expected and supposedly morally good.

Being different warrants violence and humiliation.

Being different warrants family members never speaking to you again.

And most of all, it means that you are *the other*.

The alien.

When you're spotted in the skies, the whole world points at you and asks *what are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here, with us human beings? Go home.*

Shun only got the answer to that first question when he began to search for it – online, away from those inquisitive and judgmental eyes. There were more *aliens* on earth, everywhere.

It gave him a sense of belonging, finally. *Finally*. Not an alien, just *different*. Like putting on glasses for the first time, except there was no need for a fix. That's just how he is, and *that's fine*. *It's okay*, he learned, *to want to kiss a boy*.

And kiss he did.

It was just the two of them, reading manga on the floor of his bedroom. There could not be a moment more romantic, more descriptive of their personalities, than that. A stay-home date meant manga and snacks and sharing cool panels with each other, and he loved it.

"Can I?"

The one good piece of advice that the *Weekly Romance* magazine offered him was that *consent is hot*.

Jean E. Walker was so right. It's much better to ask for a kiss than to steal one.

"...Yeah."

He meant to do only a small peck, to check if it spooked Nagisa out, but he couldn't help himself. It was much better than he ever imagined, through all these years.

A hundred times more.

A thousand.

A hand on his hair. A warm and gentle hand on his cheek, and he could feel the heat going up his face.

Embarrassing. Don't look. I'm already uncool enough.

How much *lost time* did they need to recover? They were both so... so damn stupid. They shouldn't have waited so long.

Being able to love him openly like that was perfect.

For once in his life, even for just that moment where their lips met, Shun had nothing to be grumpy about.

"You're not silly... I'd want to know too, if I were your in your shoes."

He doesn't like talking about that past of his, but it worries him that Nagisa still doesn't want to show all of his feelings.

You talk about your feelings like they are bad, his therapist had commented. *We need put some work on validating them instead.*

They both had that problem, and they were working on it.

Nagisa is clearly jealous, and that's fine. Shun would even say that it's cute how much he cares. That he wanted to be his first.

"Was 15-year-old you blind?"

And Shun laughed; the laughter bubbled up from his chest and came out *light*. Because he was right, younger Shun was too lonely and lost to care about things like that. He just wanted to meet a fellow *alien*.

(Later, Shun explained that this was exactly how he felt whenever Nagisa would talk about that Miyazaki Sakura lookalike Facebook friend – who was friends with eraser-licker girl of all people.

"What? I don't care about her."

"Exactly.")

Maybe the rest of the world sees them as two aliens.

That's alright.

2.3

Shun does not think Nagisa understands how difficult it is to *imagine* sleeping in the same bed with him and simply falling asleep like he wants to.

It takes all the self-control he can muster for Shun to refuse.

It's fine, I like the futon. It's comfy. Don't worry about me.

"Stay." Nagisa had repeated, firm and certain, and still as dense as a bag of bricks.

Who's bad at reading the room now?

"I can stay in the futon."

"I *want* to wake up with you tomorrow. Okay? Stay."

Komishi-sama, are you seeing this?

"Nagisa, your bed is too small for two guys to sleep in."

"Too bad."

He tried. He really tried.

When he finally got in, under the light covers and next to Nagisa –

Oh, please, for the love of god, don't cuddle up to his arm. That's mean. That's too much. They are in Nagisa's bed just like Shun's stupid teenage brain wanted to be but not in this way. Why can't he understand?

Nagisa was probably thinking about how warm he is or something. Comparing himself to that aunt and uncle he talks about every single time someone mentions married couples.

A yawn. Nagisa is the kind of guy who gets sleepy when he's in bed with someone he likes. Of course. *Of course*. They just HAVE to be the exact opposite even in this aspect.

Shun has not had one day of peace as a guy since they started dating. None. Zero.

The fourth time he was invited to sleep over was when the futon mysteriously went missing.

"Aw, too bad. Guess we'll have to share the bed again!"

Nagisa was beaming, very obviously not worried at all about the mystery hanging before them. How does one lose an entire goddamn futon? Shun tried to look for it, but it really did... disappear.

Futon. Futon, a futon far away from Nagisa and his bed. Dreams, why must they stay dreams?

"Nagisa..."

He cannot sleep. Not when Nagisa is glued to him like a koala. Every night spent in the Amamiya household is *hell*.

He has no choice. He's got to spell it out, or else this cycle of sleepless madness will keep going.

Shun sat down on the floor on his knees, and motioned for Nagisa to do so as well. He did, still all smiles and *maybe we could watch something before we sleep*.

"Nagisa, listen to me. There's something you have to understand."

"Yeah?"

Shun took a deep breath.

Exhale.

Deep breath.

Exale.

"Nagisa, I am a guy and you're *killing me*."

There's a silence.

"...Huh?"

“I think. There is a gross misunderstanding between what I feel and what you feel when I come over. *Do you get it?*”

Nagisa blinks once, then twice. He does not get it.

“Most people. Don’t usually invite their boyfriends to their bedrooms, cuddle up to them, and then *fall asleep immediately*. Do you understand what I mean?”

Shun could visualize the puzzle pieces coming together over Nagisa’s head.

“Just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. We can cuddle. Just. Just be aware now, alright?”

That super eager, scarlet-colored nod was all he needed as a response.

Sleeping over at the Amamiya’s became viable at long last.

2.4

Neither of them had many friends from college. The people from Computer Sciences aren’t much into socializing, it turns out, and Nagisa can’t seem to have many kind words about his own classmates either. There’s the other exchange students too, but that group chat has been dead for almost a year.

It’s easier to stay in their own bubble. But that’s not good.

“Come on. Go have some fun.”

“I have fun when I’m *with you*.”

We can’t grow like this.

“Nagisa, go. You need friends.”

They don’t have to be super close friends, just... people he can count on if Shun’s not there for a reason or another.

As much as the thought of being shut-in with him forever sounds great to him, it wouldn’t make them happy. Nagisa thrives on making others laugh, on sharing his energy, on being there for those he cares about.

Shun thrives on...

Hm.

...He doesn’t know.

Cup noodles? The blue light his laptop emanates while he’s working?

Point is, they could not be any more different.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to come with me?”

“No. Too crowded.”

The restaurant Nagisa was invited to was downtown, and it was Saturday night. The Seattle Mariners had won their latest game, so people were going *nuts* on the drinking and celebrating.

That’s the complete recipe for a noisy, bustling, impossibly uncomfortable evening.

“Go have some fun. I’ll be awake when you come back.”

“Promise?” Nagisa asked, as if Shun was ever known for sleeping before midnight.

So spoiled.

“Yeah, promise.”

>Hey Shun, how are you? Did I ever tell you great you
look with that new haircut? Man, it really
did a thing for you.

What trouble did you get into this time, Kikuchi?<

>I really do like your hair.

Megumi.<

>I’m serious! It’s relevant, I promise.

>One of my friends who’s studying in the US is doing her portfolio
and she’s looking for some models to take pictures of

>She saw your picture and she wants you to model >:)

I’m not a model. Did she take a good look under my eyes?<

>She’ll edit that away. Come ooon, it could be fun

Ask Nagisa. He loves modeling for selfies.<

>I did recommend him, but she said

she’s looking more of a

>How did she say it

> Edgy look

Good night.<

>:^(

Shun sighed.

It's the second time someone's asked for him to *model* now. Is the *greasy hair on a twig* look popular with Americans or something?

He's had classmates ask for his number. Several, even from classes he doesn't take. It's like his harem anime protagonist arc decided to drop by a few years later than expected.

It's a pain, and he hates it. He doesn't want to be... noticed.

Perceived.

Being called handsome or cool or even *hot*. What's up with that?

Shun finds it hard to distinguish the nice stares from the bad ones. That is why, he keeps his head low.

The possibility of a panic attack is still too strong for him to be completely comfortable outside of their home. It's not even the attack itself that scares him, it's the *likelihood* of it coming out of nowhere and ruining his and everyone else's day.

20-year-old college student Shun Hiino is stronger than his high school counterpart, but not that strong.

Change will take time. Baby steps. He knows.

In a way, he's still an alien.

Mentally...

No, emotionally.

Cognitively?

...Ah, who cares.

Shun doesn't think he'll ever put on the earthling costume everyone's urging him to try on.

He won't be himself if he does.

2.5

They're adults now.

Being close is normal.

There's nothing more than that. As always, it's no one else's business but theirs.

The countryside's *if you tell one, by sundown twenty will know* mentality is strong in him. Nagisa's braver, of course he is – sometimes a bit too brave.

He loves sharing what's he up to on his Binstagram, which includes their dates and movie nights – *why?* He could just keep the pictures to himself. What if someone starts stalking them? What if these people liking and commenting on these posts are secretly *making fun of them?*

They have to meet each other halfway regarding that.

(Shun did end up making a Binstagram account just so Nagisa could tag him. It made him extremely happy...

They also send each other funny animal pictures. Shun doesn't mind that part.)

Another thing they're opposites on is –

"I would've fallen in love with you even if you were a girl. Or not. You'd still be you."

Shun doesn't believe in fate.

If he hadn't been born a guy, then he would have turned out completely different. So much could've been easier, or harder. Maybe his sad excuse of a father would have some sympathy for him.

He would've probably not had any interest in Nagisa too. Who knows? In that hypothetical universe, maybe Nagisa doesn't even exist.

Maybe his mom is alive and still cooking bad pasta for Shun there.

That 'Shun' was never suicidal or bullied.

That 'Shun' is still in Shimazawa, taking over someone's farm and building a family.

Nobody can tell whether such a world could exist.

The point is – he can't be romantic about it. It's a complete coincidence that they were born and got to meet each other, as they were, and chose to stay together.

Not even the knowledge that alternate timelines and whatever the hell else Hikaru was involved in are in fact, very real and very very scary – no, it does not change his beliefs. He'll listen to Ayame and Nagisa's dreamy-eyed discussions on fate and friendship and bonds, but he won't give his opinion on it. Nobody likes a party pooper.

He'd rather be thankful that out of the trillions of possibilities, they found each other somehow. The Game Club, Nagisa, everyone.

...The main topic was completely changed, wasn't it. That's a technique he's improved over the years thanks to the twins.

Shun just doesn't think it's anyone else's business but theirs.

...Stupid.

2.6

The 18-page article his *Database Administration* professor had the bright idea of forcing him to read was hurting his brain.

Who allowed this to be published? There is no argument being made, it's plainly spewing out facts and quotes.

He could've just googled all that and saved himself 30 minutes of his time.

"Leave that essay for later. This is an emergency."

Lonely rabbits will exhibit a number of attention-seeking behaviors, such as thumping, nipping, and persistent destructive tendencies.

"Want me to give you a head pat?"

Nagisa puffed his cheeks; he looks even more like a bunny when he does that, and it makes Shun laugh. The longer hair he's sporting is also soft like fur.

"You like it this long?" Shun asked – someone was burrowing their face on his arm and nodding.

When a bunny nudges you with its nose it is trying to tell you to do something. Often this means that it wants you to pet or play with it.

"Yeah, I like it."

Nagisa bought a package of rainbow scrunchies a couple months ago and has been a changed person since.

He's cute.

Shun always thought so.

...Then he brought up the drag incident back at the pizzeria. Shun was scared, horrified – no, MORTIFIED that Mr. Amamiya could draw the line at the dressing up like a girl for work thing. The gay thing is fine, the baking and sewing thing is fine, but a skirt? That could have been it.

The Amamiya men are kind, so it turned out alright – but Shun wonders if that episode wasn't the reason why Nagisa stopped wanting to try on different clothes as often.

The laptop closes with a *clack*.

Shun's always had trouble comforting others. He doesn't know what to do when a child starts crying in front of him, and can't tell if it's alright to offer Megu a cup of tea when she's ranting at him.

There's not a fits-all manual out there. What if he makes it *worse*? Saying *I'm sorry that happened* and *it sounds very sad* is all he knows to do. But that's not enough to help anyone, it's a rehearsed script that changes nothing for them.

That gets him the reputation of being *cold, antisocial, and uncaring*.

It's common sense, they say, that you have to offer a kid candy to make them stop crying. Every child loves candy, so offer them candy. Every child calms down when you say *there there, it's alright*.

Being near adults will help the child feel safer.

...Is that really it?

When *he* was a child, he didn't want candy or consolation or a crowd of strangers fussing over him.

He just wanted someone to hold his hand.

*(The recurring sight of a tall, suited man walking ahead, ignoring his child's calls to slow down, comes back to him then. Dad couldn't look back for even a second; and he was not deaf or ignorant, he was **negligent**.)*

"Leave the worrying to me."

But when it comes to Nagisa, it's different.

Shun's the writer of *that* manual. Comforting Nagisa is easy in that he's powered by kisses and pats and some long hugs.

"Why don't we log in now and build a surprise for Natsu?"

Rabbits get along well with their fellow furry friends. Consider finding a group of rabbits that have experience together, because you know that they will get along.

"Natsu hates it when we build stuff without his permission."

Last time they did a Minecraft night together, Natsu launched a full-on investigation on who was it that moved Hikaru's flower garden one block to the right.

"Exactly."

Inside the bathroom's cupboard, together with the pills and the band aids and the emergency kit, there's an old tube of ointment.

Scar Ointment Cream Natural Pure Essence.

He tried using that for six months straight, every day. It helped a little, but not enough to make it viable for him to go outside without a scarf or one these itchy turtlenecks on.

The marks on his neck show that this world's Shun hanged up on a noose and kicked away the stool underneath.

Except he didn't. Not unthinkable, possible – back then, it went through his mind daily. But he *didn't*.

I was shot at, beaten, and killed numerous times by different people in another timeline, but I guess the rope marks were what stuck.

It was a lie, but he had to tell his doctors that it was long ago and he regretted it; whatever they needed to hear to not send him straight to the psych ward with no other possible option.

The one they ended up with was freakin' *Scar Ointment Cream Natural Pure Essence*. All slimy and smelly. It would get on his phone and clothes and all over the bathroom sink. He hated it.

...Who was Shun to complain, though? He can hear and see just fine. The scar hasn't ached in years.

Having to cover it up is *nothing* compared to, say, Nagisa slowly going deaf on one ear because his boyfriend *shot him*.

Shun remembers.

He recalls not being in control, and he recalls the pistol cold and heavy on his hands. Midoriko Akagi's bad aim sending a resounding *bang* through the walls that covered the hospital. The nurses and patients running away, screaming – *he's got a gun*. He remembers it all vividly and *real*.

"He got shot at many, many times. Carrying that hypothetical guilt on you is not helpful. You don't know if it was your shot that hurt his ears, do you?"

A wise beyond her years Hikaru Wakabayashi seemed to know just what to say.

The soundwaves created when a bullet is shot are of a high decibel. Being too close to a gun can hurt one's ears, sometimes permanently. It's called *Hunter's Ears*, because hunters have to shoot in close range to hunt for prey.

What if it was his gun that did it? The other shots were bad, but what if was *Shun's* hit that ruptured the eardrum enough to cause permanent damage? What if the way he shot it was amateurish and it only made it *worse*?

What if, what if, what if, he loses his other ear's hearing too?

What if, what if, what if, Nagisa wakes up one day and realizes he would've been fine has it not been for his dad wanting to bring him closer to Shun?

To Shimazawa, that absolute *Samsara* of a swamp?

What if?

When these questions assault him, Shun feels like he is still that lonely middle schooler searching the skies for one, at least one, star that shone differently.

It would've been great if Shimazawa were as big as the universe.

Astronomers have too many planets to count. One small dimmed or slightly shiner star is not of any importance.

"Shun, Shun. What are you thinking about?"

What to say?

"What's on your mind? Tell me?"

What do you respond when he's on your lap looking down at you with these half-lidded eyes?

Would your life be simpler if I weren't in it? Is it though having to carry my baggage as well as yours? I'm sorry. I'm sorry you've explained that's not the case over and over but I still don't believe it.

It's hard; it's hard to trust that your weight on me is unconditional and not earned - it just is, I know, but at the same time I don't.

When the night is quieter than the memories, Shun imagines what kind of person Nagisa could've been if they had never met.

That Nagisa doesn't have to fill his kitchen cupboards with necessarily only blunt knives. He doesn't struggle with English and can wear both earphones and he doesn't compulsively search for Shun's breathing when he's asleep and and and---

"Kiss me? Please...?"

What to say to muffled, nervous, *needy* question?

"Yeah. C'mere...."

Is it selfish of him to wish that that hypothetical Nagisa wouldn't smell this sweet and feel this good pressed up against him?

Hm.

Questions, questions.

He is grateful that he is alive. Not all of them made it, after all.

And that's all he can be, right now, right here.

Not happy, angry, or guilty.

As he throws away the last tube of *Scar Ointment Cream Natural Pure Essence* in the trash, Shun concludes that he is, simply, grateful.

Perhaps one day he'll be more than that.

But for now, he is just that.

Grateful.

2.8

There is nothing like a night spent catching up with their friends at the Game Club's shared Minecraft server.

"But Megu-nee said that Nagisa likes Demi Lovato."

"Natsu, *that is not what that word means!!*"

"Did someone open the door to the chicken hut? There are chickens *everywhere!*"

"It's getting really late here, so I think we'll end it here for tonight."

Time zones make it difficult for them to hang out as often as they used to, but they manage. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Movie nights, daily text messages, the occasional gossip train with miles long contextual explanations of who cheated on who...

"You can sleep. I'll stay up listening to music."

"I can take my meds later."

"No, Shun, it's alright. Don't worry about me."

This would be a very great time for all if it wasn't for the fact that, every night they do Minecraft night, Nagisa's brain comes out with what seems to be *truly horrifying nightmares*.

Shun doesn't know what they are about, but they look like they're worse than the ones from when Nagisa was *living with his mother*. That's bad. That's very, very bad.

(He only learnt after they were dating that Nagisa's dreams back then involved him being chased by several different creatures through endless labyrinths. Sometimes they'd be shaped like an adult woman, or a giant high hell. He'd just keep running and running, forever, until he woke up.

*What could possibly be scarier than **that?**)*

Of course, it's ironic. When they were kids, Nagisa was the one with the nightmares, and Shun slept just fine. By the time they met each other again, Shun's insomnia was at its worst, but Nagisa would sleep dreaming of badly animated kid superheroes and cotton candy.

Nowadays, Shun has his little spot in the medicine cabinet that carry the hard-fought pills that keep his mood in check and regulates his sleep. Thank God. His insomnia is an annoyance, but not an outright incapacitating factor. He's grumpy, but not grumpy enough to hide under the covers for days in a row.

Nagisa is not as lucky.

"I'm scared of falling sleep. Hug me?"

Teary eyed and making himself *small*, like a scared cat. It's too dark to see what expression he's making, but the sniffing say it all.

"You're not gonna have a nightmare tonight."

"Promise?"

"I'll protect you."

Mom would say that when putting him to sleep – *a kiss on the forehead to keep the nightmares away* – and maybe she had something going there, because it worked.

Maybe it won't work for them now. It's worth a try.

"Sorry..."

Any silly-sounding charm is worth it, as long as he doesn't have to see his boyfriend like this any longer.

He's tried everything. White noise, scented candles – *scented candles!* What a waste of money that was – and a certain shady therapist suggested hypnosis but not even that got him to sleep in peace. By the time they were considering buying essential oils, Nagisa's nightmares had become too much of a weight on his shoulders.

He's still sniffing. Just the thought of going to sleep, of being vulnerable to those dreams, brings the other boy to tears.

Shun's heart breaks.

"...Want to hear something? One time when I couldn't sleep I put on some old anime drama CD to play. The comments on the video were like– um, everyone was like: *Wow, this is so calming and relaxing, I fell asleep so quick.* So I tried it out."

He pauses. The sniffing's calmed down somewhat.

"The first five minutes were just two characters talking. It went on, and on, and on. More boring than relaxing, in my opinion, but it wasn't *not helping*, you know?"

"Uh-huh..."

“The story was like... they met on the elevator at work and they became friends, and they went on some cafes and bonded over how much they liked cheesecake.”

“Cheesecake...”

“Yes, cheesecake.” *Pat pat.* “That was the start of this whole quest they on together to taste every single cheesecake in every café in town. That was ten minutes in, and I thought it was kind of cute, so I kept listening.”

Even breathing. He’s starting to relax at last.

“They became good friends... one of them tried to learn baking to give the other a birthday cheesecake... it was chill, and the plot was clearly coming to an end...”

Pat pat.

“But I was like... it’s weird, there are still 15 minutes left. What else would they possibly come up with? I kept listening, and...”

He’s asleep.

“...Good night.”

I’ll protect you, so don’t worry.

The next morning, Nagisa woke him up with an insistent shake on his shoulder.

“Shun. Shun, wake up. *Do they eat all the cheesecakes? Do they make it?*”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?! How does it end?”

If it wasn’t so early in the morning, he would laugh.

“What were the last 15 minutes about??? Shun! Shun, Shun, Shun –“

“Mm. Ask me later.”

Behind the teasing and the feigned annoyance there was something else, of course.

Love.

Love, what a word...

2.9

It is okay to love.

Perhaps that’s what Mom was trying to tell him with that sloppily written letter.

She tried to be like a 'mother' should by attempting to cook pasta and being a housewife and *staying quiet when her husband spoke*, didn't she?

Her way of loving was different too.

It is okay to be you.

It's possible people saw Mom as cold back then. Because her expressions were less evident and she didn't know what medicine to give for a flu, or that the fact that she would calm him down by pretending to cry with him.

She couldn't bake cookies for the kindergarten's festival like the other moms. Her health was too poor to play outside with him and she was as clueless as he was when it came to difficult homework.

She was the only mom that couldn't be there for the play his 1st grade class put on. Even Ms. Amamiya somehow made it there, but...

But, but...

But even so, even so --- she was a beacon of kindness and understanding and *affection*.

"It was lonely, wasn't it? Mom is so sorry, Shun.... Forgive me... I love you."

Because she *tried*. She ran to the clinic with him in her arms when he got sick. She studied half a dozen textbooks on *how to cook a motherly meal*. She'd watch him play on the yard even though she couldn't join in. And she'd always, *always* stay up studying with him.

It is okay to love.

What would she have done if she knew of what was happening at school back then? She wouldn't have the perfect solution, she never did.

Even a hug would be fine.

Even just a *that must've been so tough* would've been enough.

Shun would get it. He would.

That's how she loved him.

Mom, is it okay that I love too?

Even though I never listened to Komishi-sama. Even though dad won't spare me a single glance.

Even though I was a bad kid –

Is it okay that I'm alive?

He just wanted to be told that he could talk about her if he needed to.

Fighting over the meaning of *mother*, what good does that do?

It hurt that, with all the differences they have, that was the one thing they could not agree on.

Almost 7 years later, and only Chikasen has seen the letter –

“Nagisa, that’s your mom you’re talking about...”

“Are you saying I *should* forgive her?”

Hey, was it too naïve of him to want Nagisa to be the first one, other than him, to read it *for real*?

“That’s not it, it’s just – it’s your mom, you...”

Won’t you regret saying that when she’s gone?

It took a few minutes for Nagisa to respond.

“...Would you forgive your dad? If he came knocking on our door right now, right this moment – claiming that he’s changed and he’s sorry.”

“My dad would never –“

“*Would you forgive him?*”

Oh, and what if he would?

What if he craves for that bond still? What if he wishes he had that strong, knowledgeable male figure in his life?

What if he wishes he’d get a simple *how are you* instead of that damned automated message that sends him money even after he’s explained he **doesn’t fucking need it anymore?**

Is that so wrong? Is that so *unthinkable*?

“Nagisa.”

His emotions almost couldn’t keep up with his thoughts.

I’ll deal with my daddy issues when you deal with your mommy issues.

“What? What are you thinking of?”

No.

No, that’s so wrong.

That would be such a horrid, awful thing to say. The thought goes away immediately; it would hurt them both too much, and it was *untrue*.

Shun is much better than that.

“Can we... can we talk this out? Just... I – I miss my mom. That’s all.”

Honest. Kind. Selfless.

That is the form of love Mom had taught him, wasn't it?

“...Yeah. I – I get it. I didn't mean to...”, Nagisa finally replied, his own defensive expression seeming to relax.

Deep breaths. Inhale, exhale. Don't direct that anger towards him.

“...Yeah. Me too.”

The gentle smile and the hand tracing a circle on your shoulder. Immediately, he goes to comfort you instead of himself. He's selfless and trusting and firm.

You love him so, so much.

Shun can hear the turning of the pages coming from the other side of the bed.

Are you studying in bed? Go to your desk.

He can't communicate via telepathy, of course not, but he doesn't want to wake up.

He loves the cold because he can stay under the comforter in the mornings and no one can fault him for not being productive enough.

Flip, flip.

One of Nagisa's new friends' boyfriend offered to fix the heater. Their one-bedroom apartment is pure, warm, cozy heaven.

(Shun needs to ask why those two like to stare at his right hand so much. For once, it doesn't seem to be a weird American thing.)

Flip, flip.

The landlord is still a menace, though.

If he really was as nice as Nagisa believes he is, then he wouldn't ask for *so much goddamn money*. Is no one going to do anything about the yen to dollar conversion rate after all?

“...gisa...”

Flip, flip.

His brain manages to signal his mouth to speak at long last.

“...Desk. Go read.”

“...Sorry.”

“Mmh...”

America sucks, and so do its landlords. Japan sucked too, in different ways. It sounds weird, but just having Nagisa close by is enough.

Shun doesn't care about the country, not as much as he thought he would.

Right now, he and Nagisa live far away from their previous home.

But their friends – their family – are anxiously waiting for their return this summer.

“Nagisa?”

“Yeah?”

If this is where he must be to stay with him, then stay he will.

“I love you.”

“...I love you too.”

It is okay to love.

It is okay to be loved.

Envy, anger, sadness, guilt, terror, uncertainty –

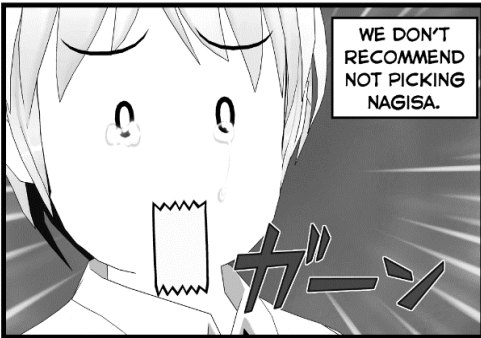
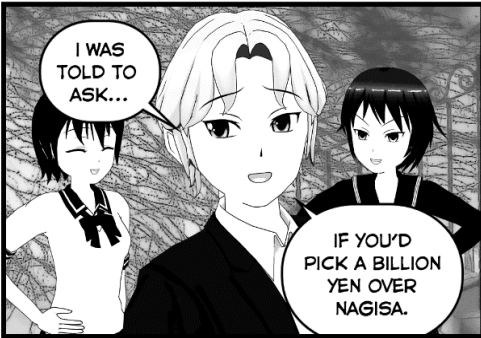
Everything, anything that stands before you –

If there is love, it can be overcome.

- S. H.

[Listen to Shun's section of the playlist \(13:58 – 24:09\)](#)

BETRAYAL



Part two.

INTERMISSION II

14. How important is family to your partner?

S: He likes them. Everyone on his dad's side of the family is nice and really loving, so I get it. He's close with his dad and grandparents.

N: Everyone in Shun's family sucks. He doesn't owe them loyalty or whatever.

15. Does your partner like to travel?

S: He likes to think about traveling, until I bring up the costs, the things we'd need to buy, the possible lack of internet...

N: Shun would stay home 24 hours a day if he could. I've been trying to get him to take walks with me, but he claims he *doesn't understand walks with no destination*. We just end up walking to the grocery store...

16. How does your partner feel about having pets?

S: He wants to bring home every single straight cat or dog he finds on the street, but we can't even take care of a plant – how are we going to care for a whole animal? Back in high school he tried to convince his dad to get him a pet ferret, too.

N: He wants a cat!! He totally does! He feeds the stray cat that hangs around or condo allll the time! I'm gonna convince him to adopt a kitten or two someday!

17. Who are the most important people in your partner's life?

S: His dad, and the Game Club members. Chika-sensei too.

N: Aya-nee, Megu-nee, Hiichan, Natsu, Chikasen... my dad, and me! Heheh.

18. What is your partner's favorite thing about their job?

S: He loves baking, so of course he'd adore studying it too. When he opens his own bakery, I think he'll have his life made.

N: He doesn't have to go outside to work, and communicates via writing most of the time. He loves computers. It's a very Shun-like job.

19. How does your partner like to spend their money?

S: We don't have a lot of money to spend. He spends it on ingredients for baking on the weekends.

N: We're trying to make ends meet. When he does get some extra money, he spends it on new games.

"Communication questions... we're going to nail this next one."

"Mm."

Intermission II end.



Chapter 3: Yūhikowashi-hen

(夕日壊し編, sunset-destroying chapter)

"Hey! Wake up."

"Nagisa! Your friend is waiting for you."

"NAGISA!"

...Oh, god. I stayed up too late reading that terrible webcomic again! I put on my uniform in a hurry and peeked at my phone's lockscreen.

Shoot! It's past 8 already! I'm going to be late to school."

It's not like the school here is awfully strict. We barely have an actual class anyway. It's just..."

"Everyday is fun at school...as long as my friends are there."

...And so, it begins again.

A memory neither of them could recall.

Do you want to see what happened inside the forest of time?

I warn you, however –

I always win.

Thursday, July 17th, 2016.

Nagisa woke up that day with an uncertain pit in his stomach.

It wasn't because Lea and Mao-chan were home sick with a cold or that he had gotten in an argument with his dad the previous day. No, that anxiety and guilt was different.

There was just something off about that morning; something uncanny. Not even the delicious meal they ordered together at the café near school was enough to calm his nerves.

Instinctively, automatically, he knew:

"...Aya-nee, maybe we should go straight home today."

His fellow game club members all looked at him in confusion.

"Whaat? Nagisa, you promised you'd play with us today! And eat!" Natsu complained. Mikoto nodded along, pouting over a mouthful of brownies.

"Are you unwell too? I'm afraid that my cold could have spread to you too..." Shio asked. She was the first member of the club who had caught a cold that month, and although she's recovered, she was feeling awful for spreading it.

Aya was already starting her whole *it's a game club rule that you can't go back on your word* spiel as well. "Oi, Nagisa... being a Game Club member is serious business, 'ya know? Are you doubting the sanctity of our club?!"

"No, that's not it... Aya-nee..."

Nagisa's head hurt. Everything felt like it was.... happening. At once.

He doesn't know how to explain that bad feeling, so how is he going to convince them to drop the activities for today?

"Sorry... I... I think I'm gonna head home."

His brain was screaming *go home go home go home*. As if his fight of flight instinct had activated, but there was no danger anywhere.

Shimazawa is a happy, peaceful village. There is nothing to be afraid of here.

The days were idyllic and the friendships he had made – and rekindled – were true and honest. Every day was fun.

Yes, his anxiety made no sense whatsoever.

Maybe he's really caught some kind of weird cold.

"Poor, poor Nagisa." Mikoto said, patting her older friend on the head. "Pat pat. There, there."

"Miichan..."

Forcing himself to smile, Nagisa apologized one more time.

"You can come up with a punishment for me for skipping out."

Aya raised her eyebrows. "Are you really okay? Really really?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about me."

That was enough to calm everyone down enough, though Shio insisted on reminding him to get his temperature taken just in case.

"Get well soon, Nagisa..."

Leaving his part of the bill on the table, Nagisa got up from his seat.

"I'll be fine. See you tomorrow, guys."

"See you tomorrow!"

"Take care!"

"Bye bye, Nagisa."

Ayame, Mikoto, Natsu, Shio. Everyone waved goodbye.

Shimazawa is a happy, peaceful village. There is nothing to be afraid of here.

As Nagisa headed out of the cafe, he told himself: It's the same as always.

The pebble roads, the chorus of cicadas in the afternoon. The birds and the sound of laughter from the children walking home from school.

His mind was playing tricks on him.

Everything would be alright.

>Nagisa, hello. Have you talked to Shun these past couple days? He hasn't responded to my messages and won't pick up the phone.

He hates phone calls, but yeah, it's weird he's not responding. <

>I'm worried about him.

I'm on my way to his house. Leave it to me, Chikasen. <

>Thank you. I'm glad he has a good friend to rely on.

Knock, knock. The Hiino household's doorbell was not working again. Shun's bad habit of not checking – or not caring to respond to – his messages was not good for poor Chikasen's health.

"What is it? Don't you have club stuff today?"

As the door opened, Nagisa let out a sigh of relief. Shun was alive and.... somewhat well, it seemed. As grumpy as always.

"Hey. I was just... uh, I have this weird feeling." Nagisa smiled weakly. "And I was worried. So... I wanted to say hi."

"Weird feeling?" Shun asked, opening the door further. Nagisa widened his eyes in surprise at the invitation.

"Yeah, it's like... you ever wake up *knowing* something's awful about to happen, even though it's not – " Nagisa started to explain, but then stopped.

Shun doesn't need to deal with any more troubles, especially not Nagisa's silly and dumb ones.

"Chikasen was worried, you know? Respond to his messages, or else he'll grow white hairs."

"...My bad. I will."

Entering the Hiino household, Nagisa took off his shoes, and looked around.

The living room was as messy as always, covered in trash bags and pizza boxes. The table, however, was mostly clean.

"Tell me more about it." Shun requested. He was grabbing two cups from a cupboard in the kitchen, which surprised Nagisa even more. "The feeling, I mean."

Hospitality? Shun? Maybe it IS the end of the world.

(He means that with all the affection in the world, of course. It's just that Shun has been less than friendly when it came to inviting Nagisa in. The boy even began to question if Shun wanted him around *at all*.)

Nagisa sat by the table. Then, he watched, with even MORE shock, as Shun prepared – *prepared!* – what looked to be two cups of hot chocolate.

“Whoa. What’s the occasion, chef Shun?”

Shun put down the cups on the table, and rolled his eyes. “...None. Just felt like making it.”

“Really? *Really really?* No special reason?”

“What are you trying to imply? Just try it already.”

He’s not sure what he was trying to say there either. Is it that bad to want to be treated different by Shun?

...Probably. It is, isn’t it. That’s weird.

“Thanks. Let’s see...”

You can’t go wrong with hot chocolate, Nagisa mumbled as he took his first sip. Then: *Oh, it’s good! What brand is this?*

Shun answered with the name of a difficult-to-pronounce foreign brand, and Nagisa could swear he the corners of his lips had turned up a tad bit.

“Mmm... I’m glad I came to Shimazawa after all. How could I keep living without tasting this?”

“...Don’t be so dramatic.”

“I’m not. I like being here.”

With you, Nagisa thought, but then quickly erased it from his mind. Instead, he settled for something else.

“With everyone from the Game Club, Chikasen, and dad too. Sure, there are some problems, but I’m happy here.”

Shun hummed. If he said something, Nagisa did not hear it.

“What about you, Shun?”

Taking a sip of chocolate from his cup, Shun opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He settled for nodding weakly instead.

Nagisa nodded back, smiling. “I like it...”

I like it here, a lot...

It's a wonderful every day.

"Nagisa..."

Yeah, nothing's ever going to change that.

"Nagisa."

I'm sure of it.

"Nagisa, can you hear me?"

Everything was dark.

Blinking once, twice, Nagisa attempted to get up.

His vision took a few seconds to unblur. A pounding, heavy headache made his whole body shudder in discomfort.

A chill went down his spine as he realized that it was quiet. Too quiet.

Not a single critter, bird, or even the wind made a sound.

"What...?"

He was not home in his bed. He could not remember falling asleep, or even leaving Shun's house. Laying on the cold hard floor, in an empty room that –

"Shun? Shun, are you here?"

This was Shun's room. The one that he never really used. Nagisa could not remember how he got there, or why he decided that sleeping there would be a good idea.

He reached for the phone in his pocket, and turned on the screen.

Saturday, July 19th, 2016. 10:40AM.

No.

No, it couldn't be.

That was *impossible*.

After all, on Thursday, he and the Game Club went to the café. And since then, he hasn't received a single message...? No, that's not it.

The phone isn't connecting. Not to the internet, not to the phonelines, nothing...!

What happened on those two days?! Why can't I remember anything?

He rushed to the door, and attempted to open it.

Clack clack clack.

“Shun! Shun, if you're there, open the door!”

There was something on the other side of the door keeping it from opening. Almost as if...

As if someone tried to keep me locked in.

“Someone! Anyone there?”

The silence did not give in to Nagisa's frantic calls.

Until –

Footsteps. Quick ones, echoing from the wooden floors.

Someone was running, approaching the side of the hallway where the abandoned bedroom was located.

“Nagisa!”

Hearing that voice, Nagisa allowed himself to breathe again.

“Shun! I'm in here!” he yelled.

Thank God. Thank God he's okay.

Shun yelled back. “Yeah, I can hear – why is there a desk in front of the door?”

The sound of moving furniture followed.

A desk? A whole desk? Why?

“I don't know, man! I woke up in here and –” Nagisa continued, but stopped at the sound of Shun's panting. “– Is it heavy? Can't you push it away?”

“I-I got it. I'm not that weak...” Shun grunted, mumbling a few *goddamnits* under his breath.

Screech. Screech. The high-pitched sound of the desk's legs being moved was all that could be heard.

A few moments later, Nagisa was able to open the door enough to get out of that room.

Shun was down on his knees, catching his breath. "Huff... huff..."

Nagisa offered him a hand. "Jesus, dude. You're really out of shape."

"I-I got you out... so don't... huff..."

Refusing Nagisa's help, Shun got up by himself, with much, much effort. He was panting even more now.

That wasn't mean to be teasing, I'm legitimately worried now...

"A-Alright, let's get you some water." Nagisa suggested, this time offering the other boy a shoulder instead. "We need to find out who locked me in there – hey, is your phone working?"

"N-No.."

"Dammit. We need to go looking for the others, then. It's way too quiet and I –"

"No."

A hand on his arm.

Another on his shoulder, forcing him to turn away from the stairs he was heading to.

And the frustratingly unreadable expression on the face of the person who was pulling him.

"...Nagisa, listen to me... we can't." Shun mumbled, his head hung low.

"What? What do you mean?" Nagisa demanded, trying to make Shun look into his eyes. "We need to see if Miichan and Natsu and Aya-nee and the others are alright!"

"No... Nagisa... listen."

A beat.

They made eye contact at least.

He was not prepared –

"Everyone's gone."

...

Nagisa blinked. Once, twice.

He could not believe it.

“What... what are you saying? Gone...?”

It’s a joke.

He’s pulling his leg, that has got to be it.

But Shun shook his head.

“Gone... as in, they’re... n-not...”

No, no, no, that can’t be true.

“Look at me! What happened?”

Shun gulped.

A deep breath, and –

No.

No, please...

“W-We... we might the only ones... left.”

Falling to his knees, Nagisa let out a scream.

Outside. There was a reason why Shun did not want him to go outside.

Why...

Why is that the scene before him did not shock him?

Red red red red red

Almost as if he was expecting it to happen –

*Bullet shells instead of pebbles,
motionless carcasses that do not belong to the cicadas –*

“W-Who...? For what purpose...?”

A peaceful happy village...!

He should have listened to his body. This is what it was trying to warn him of.

The village was...

Just like that time... no, which time?

“I – I don’t know...”

Shimazawa, it was...

“I’m so sorry.”

Again, Tachitachi’s remote village hidden by the forest was

Sinking in a sea

of scarlet blood.

Chapter 4: Two. Alone.

Walking around that abandoned, quiet village made Nagisa’s chest hurt.

What happened was not only an attack on the people of Shimazawa.

Because it was home. That was *their home*; in shambles, a shadow of its former self. Gone were the laughter of the children walking to school and the familiar hum of nearby tractors going through the wide-open fields and fields of crops.

The intel they had gathered was not comforting in the slightest.

1. Dozens of villagers were dead.
2. Weapons were scattered around the village’s roads; some loaded with ammo, some not.
3. The phone and internet lines were destroyed.

4. The bridge to the outside of Shimazawa was completely destroyed by what seemed to be hubris from a nearby building.
5. **They had no clue of what happened to their friends and classmates.**
6. **Nagisa's dad was nowhere to be seen.**

Were they alive? Hiding? Did they get away in time? No matter how much they looked, they could not find any answers.

Their loved ones were not among the corpses.

That was a good thing. It was a good thing, and Nagisa had to repeat that to himself, over and over.

"Food." Shun said, handing Nagisa a bag of groceries. "I... I left money, just in case."

Stealing to survive. Scavenging the destroyed buildings to look for survivors. Gathering items that could be used to protect themselves.

This was the worst zombie apocalypse flick Nagisa had ever had the displeasure of watching.

"Thanks..." Nagisa replied. There was enough non-perishable food there to last them a while. "Water?"

"My fridge's still working. We could get some bottles and keep them there."

Rationing necessities.

How long will the lights stay on? How long until someone notices that *an entire community was annihilated in the span of a couple of days?*

...Does anyone really, truly care about Shimazawa enough to check on them? Did they ever *allow* outsiders to have the opportunity to care?

By the time they reached the village's clinic, Nagisa had thought enough about all these possibilities.

When Shun returned from the inside of the building, carrying medicine and two first aid kits, Nagisa called his attention by poking in the shoulder.

"They're alright." He affirmed. "They got away."

Shun did not nod. Of course he didn't. Pessimism was his middle name.

Still, Nagisa continued.

"You're allowed to not believe it, but I'm choosing to keep that hope, alright?"

It was much, much easier to imagine that Aya and Lea and the others had put their heads together and found a way to evacuate. With their friends, and Dad, and the kids too.

Yes, that was it.

It was just a matter of time before they returned to rescue him and Shun.

Shun sniffled. "Okay. You be the positive one, I'll be the existential dread one."

"Shush."

For now, it was going to be just the two of them. But they'll get out of this.

They will.

Saturday, July 19th, 2016. 1:23PM.

They had stopped near the riverside, hoping to maybe find a survivor hiding nearby. Nagisa claimed to see some bushes rustling there, but there was nobody there.

It was more likely to be a squirrel than an actual human survivor...

But Shun did not want to upset him, so he kept quiet.

After a few more minutes of walking around the river, Shun asked him a question.

"You hungry? It's past lunch time."

Nagisa's eyes lit up immediately. "We got food, we could eat here!" He replied, digging inside the grocery bag. "You know, I've wanted to this for a long time. You can't refuse the sandwiches!"

It brought a small, easily miss able smile to Shun's face. Then, he raised an eyebrow.

"Wanted what?"

Handing him a sandwich, Nagisa grinned. "Eating with you somewhere other than your house."

Oh, come on. That's not fair.

"...You're silly."

"Maybe I am. I've been told I'm a silly, stupid idiot – man, those sandwiches are pretty good."

Shun took a bite of his own sandwich. It was at least better than the run-off-the-mill prepackaged sandwiches one could buy at a convenience store, yes.

"Good, right?"

And then, he thought, *only Nagisa would be weird enough to be excited about refrigerated sandwiches in this kind of situation.*

"Mm. It's decent."

And who is he to complain, when he's fully let him do so?

“Next time, I want to have a picnic with everyone.”

Shun could scream and refuse to accept Nagisa’s frankly naïve belief that they would be rescued anytime soon. But how could he?

What right did he have to destroy his spirit? None.

Nagisa Amamiya was not drowning in despair.

And Shun Hiino would do anything to keep him that way.

Saturday, July 19th, 2016. 5:00PM.

Spending the night at the Amamiya household was impossible.

The windows had been broken into. Shelves and chairs and tables were down on the floor.

Even his bedroom was in complete disarray. The tatami doors looked as if they were clawed at –

There were bullet shells on the floor, but Shun chose to not point that out.

“...They were looking for me, weren’t they?”

Nagisa was already horrified enough.

“...Hey, you know what else I’ve always wanted to do with you? A sleepover, a-at your house...”

Shun’s house would have to be their resting place for the time being.

“It’ll be fun.”

Saturday, July 19th, 2016. 8:00PM.

Running around the village looking for answers was exhausting.

Nagisa simply did not feel like doing anything else after eating some of the cup noodles Shun had on his fridge.

That’s why the the two boys were lying on the floor, side by side, looking up at the ceiling. Shun muttered something about *déjà vu*, but Nagisa did not have the energy to ask why.

Instead, he asked a question of his own.

“Hey, Hiino’s your dad’s last name, right?”

“...That’s a sudden question.”

“My mom’s maiden name is Iwai.”

Nagisa turned to look at Shun. His eyes were still set on the ceiling, and he had his hands on his chest like a vampire. Then, he spoke again. “Yours?”

Shun pursed his lips. “Miyazawa. Her first name was Junko.”

Shun Miyazawa.

Nagisa nodded slowly. “Junko... Jun... ko. Jun-ko.”

Nagisa Iwai.

“Yeah. It’s written with the characters for ‘honesty’ (淳) and ‘good.’ (好)”

“Pretty.” Nagisa muttered. “I’d name my kid that.”

Nagisa Miyazawa...? Hiino –

“You’re thinking of something silly, aren’t you?” Shun muttered back, lightly kicking Nagisa’s side with his elbow. “Eyes on the wall, Amamiya.”

Yessir, Nagisa grunted, but there was a weird sensation on his chest that he couldn’t quite name.

He’s had enough of weird feelings – *bad feelings* – to last a lifetime now.

“Are you any sleepy at all?”

That made Shun click his tongue. “No.” And then, with a sarcastic chuckle, he continued. “I can’t sleep without taking melatonin.”

...

“What?”

Nagisa sat up, looking down at Shun’s face. “Since when?”

“Don’t look so shocked. Tons of people take pills to sleep.”

Another feeling.

Shun muttered a *lay down, silly*, and *there* was a silence for a few seconds as Nagisa thought of how to respond.

It bothered him a lot.

“Yeah, but I didn’t know *you* took them.”

Another silence. A long one that did not need to be as tense as Nagisa viewed it.

Shun clicked his tongue again. “Now you know.”

What else did he not know about Shun? A lot. He's changed a lot; no longer the friendly and athletic boy who had offered his hand to a much weaker and *slower* Nagisa back then.

"Nagisa?"

What does it mean when you want to know everything about someone?

...That thought would not leave his mind anytime soon, would it?

"Your mom's name is Sawako, right?"

"Sunako. In hiragana."

"Ah. I see."

Neither of them are going to sleep early tonight.

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 9:23AM.

They found themselves staring at what remained of the shack Mikoto and Natsu used to live in.

They could go inside, but the entrance was blocked by some pieces of wood – *awfully convenient*, Shun had commented.

The two boys were now trying to carry the wood away from the entrance, and failing spectacularly.

"B-Bet you regret quitting running now, huh?" Nagisa asked, in between huffs and puffs. He a show of flexing his non-existent arm muscles, which got an eyeroll and a huff from Shun.

"That's interesting you say that." Shun responded. "I don't see your *leg muscles* helping us right now."

Wow. Uncalled for.

...They managed to get the door unblocked, somehow, after much struggling.

Going inside, they carefully turned on their flashlights.

...And Nagisa yelped in surprise.

"What? What did you see—"

He was hoping to find clues as to where their friends could've gone.

A note, maybe some evidence of what they were up to before the attack occurred.

Or even remains.

That wasn't what they found.

Instead, what his flashlight shined at was –

*A familiar set of
braided green locks.*

It wasn't right.

It couldn't be.

“Shio?”

Chapter 5: A theory in sunlight

The girl sitting down with her back to the wall inside the kids' shack glared at them. Furiously, with as much intensity as her injured body could muster.

“Shio... you're hurt...”

“*Nagisa, don't.*” Shun ordered. “That's not Akagi.”

The girl grinned, and tilted her head. She stared at the flashlights as if commanding them to turn themselves off.

Shun was right.

Those hateful eyes could never belong to the Shio Akagi they had gotten to know the past few weeks.

“Who are you?” Nagisa asked, quietly approaching her as one would a scared cat. “What happened?”

The girl had no response to give. Shun stepped forward, putting himself in between her and Nagisa.

“You can't move, can you? You're too injured.”

Silence.

“W-We can help. We have medicine, back at the –“

“*Nagisa, don't. She's dangerous.*”

Nagisa widened his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Then, Shun shone his flashlight straight at the girl right hand.

Under the darkness, Nagisa had not noticed it before.

“W-Why...”

Covertly pointing it in their direction, the Shio lookalike was holding her gun by the trigger.

“We're leaving.” Shun whispered, grabbing Nagisa by the shoulder.

“But –“

“We're leaving.” He repeated, louder. “Now.”

As Shun pushed him to the door, Nagisa tried to look back at the girl.

But she did not look at him.

Instead, all he heard was a slow, pained chuckle.

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 12:23PM.

He was made fun of for being too trusting many, many times. For that reason, his classmates from the city thought it was funny to make him the butt of their jokes.

Assuming that people have it out for you always is the *normal*. The *obvious*.

Trusting seems to be considered something bad.

Nagisa could not understand, and he had no interest in understanding.

“I know you're worried about our safety,” Nagisa tried to explain to Shun, over a bowl of rice and fried tofu, “But it makes me sad to imagine that girl dying in there all alone.”

Shun sighed. “I don't want to risk it.”

Why did she have Shio's exact appearance? How did she survive the attack? Where did she come from?

There were too many questions. Too many unknowns. That's why Shun wanted Nagisa far, far away from that shack.

Nagisa understood that.

He did.

But it wasn't right.

Just like it wasn't right to keep a secret from Kyoka Kamishiro from the class next door that a friend of hers was spreading rumors about her online. Somehow, Nagisa got in more trouble with his peers for *telling the truth* than the culprit for *accusing a teenage girl of dating old men*.

It also wasn't right to prank that poor underclassman back in their junior year. Was Nagisa a party pooper for warning about the bucket of slime up on the door? Maybe. But it was better than humiliating him for no reason.

The point is, Nagisa did not like lying.

He hated it.

"...Hey, Shun? There's something I wanted to show you."

Nagisa reached into the bag he had put under the living room's table. Shun's eyes followed him, and widened at the sight of what he pulled out of it.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was outside the clinic. A whole bunch of those."

Shaking the bottle, Nagisa read the label out loud. He had recognized the name straight away.

Diazepam, 10mg. 100 tablets. For external use only.

"Remember that show about the girls who lie and the creepy text messages?"

Shun nodded. "Sadly." He hated that show with a passion.

"On the second or third season, they got drugged by someone and woke up not remembering anything from the previous night." Nagisa explained. "It was Diazepam. That made me think..."

"...Are you saying we were drugged?"

"Yeah. That would explain why we can't remember what happened."

Next, Nagisa opened his notebook. "I made a list of everything I remember eating and drinking on Thursday. Check this out."

You're really taking this seriously, Shun mumbled, and promptly received a pinch on the hand. *I can be serious too, you meanie.*

1. Woke up and ate the leftover bacon Dad had cooked last morning.
2. Tried out the onigiri Mikoto and Natsu made. Everyone from the club had a bite.
3. Shared my lunchbox with Aya-nee and Shio. Rice, gyoza, potato salad, boiled eggs.

"We can leave all of these out. I wouldn't poison myself, and neither would the kids, or my dad." Nagisa affirmed. "None of my friends would. With that, we're left with only one option."

4. Ate a croissant and had glass of iced tea at the café with everyone.

Shun frowned. "The café? The one near school?"

"That's the last thing I ate. It had to be there."

Looking back, there was something off about that café. Too empty, too... secluded. He didn't like the face that the old man who took their order made when they walked in, too.

"I want to go back there. See if I can find any evidence." He concluded, handing Shun the notebook.

Shun did not seem to like that idea. "But what about me? How did I did get poisoned?"

"I dunno. You should make a list too – " Nagisa began, but then stopped as he realized why Shun had asked that.

"Shun."

Shun looked down to the table. It confirmed Nagisa's suspicion.

"You didn't eat anything at all that day, did you."

It took the boy a few seconds to nod.

"...You're going to finish my rice while I go out."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Nagisa stopped him. "*Please*. I'll be fine. Eat the rice, Shun."

This explains why he's so weak. Goddamnit.

Nagisa knew that Shun was aware he could protect himself. The café was just a few minutes away.

There was nothing that could hurt them. Not anymore.

"...If you're not back in twenty minutes, I'm going to kill you."

"Oh? And if you don't finish this bowl in 20 minutes, I will double kill you."

They stared at each other, neither willing to back down.

Fine, they said in unison.

20 minutes. I'll hold you to that.

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 12:32AM.

The point is, Nagisa did not like lying.

He hated it –

Unless it was for the sake of doing the right thing.

“My friend Shio puts her hair up just like you. That’s why we were so shocked when we saw you.”

A distance of three meters, a packaged sandwich, and a bottle of water separating them.

“You can have these. Don’t worry about Shun and his scary frown, he’s just trying to keep us out of trouble. We’ve got something of a bad cop, good cop, thing going on.”

Not-Shio stared at him suspiciously.

“Do you have a name?”

Sheepish like a frightened animal, she nodded weakly, but did not speak.

“My name’s Nagisa. My grandma named me, ‘cuz she said that I was born very pink.” Nagisa laughed, brushing his hair. “She also hoped it’d be a calm kid and stuff.”

That got another weak nod from her. Nagisa looked around, thinking of what else to tell her. “Anyway, aah... my friends used to live here, ‘y know. Mikoto and Natsu.”

A blink. Then, another.

“They’re really nice kids. Miichan likes to pat our heads even though she’s so much smaller than us. And Natsu thinks he’s stronger than me, that brat, hahah...”

She tilted her head.

“Ah, we have this club that –”

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 12:42PM.

Oh no.

The twenty minutes were almost up. He still had to run back to the café.

“Ah, crap. If I don’t head back now, Shun will kill me.”

Putting his phone back in his bag, Nagisa got up, and turned to leave. “Bye. Take care of yourself, alright?”

A final nod, and he opened the door.

Nagisa hoped that the girl would eat what he had offered.

...It was for a good cause.

It was.

Nineteen minutes and forty seconds later, Nagisa was back at Shun’s house.

They had both kept their side of the promise. The bowl of rice was completely empty. Shun even had a few grains by his lip.

"I couldn't open the door to the café," Nagisa sighed, "And I don't know if... if I should, like, break the windows to get in."

Shun licked his lips, but the grain of rice was still there. For some reason, Nagisa's body moved to look away.

"...A-Anyway. My theory's like, kinda dumb, isn't it. Why would someone try to poison us specifically...?"

"Hm." Shun thought to himself, brushing some hair away from his face. "What if we weren't the only ones?"

"...What?"

Noticing Nagisa's frightened reaction, Shun backed down. "No, nevermind. I'm just thinking out loud."

The sound of running water came out of the sink. Nagisa stood by the kitchen's door, listening in.

What if they weren't...? Now that he thinks about it, he can't recall if the others ate their food before he left. They did, right? No... No, Mikoto hadn't touched her food...

A kidnapping? Conspiracy? Why? For what purpose?

"I'm just trying to understand." Nagisa exhaled, hugging himself. "What did the villagers – what did WE do wrong to warrant so much carnage? People don't even know Shimazawa exists."

No, get ahold of yourself. They have nothing to do with this. They are victims, just like him and Shun and every other Shimazawan who couldn't fight back.

There was no reason to doubt the Game Club. Zero.

"Nagisa?"

A beat. Nagisa's arms were tight around himself.

Aya-nee didn't order anything for herself at all.

"No, no, no..."

The Aya-nee who stole food from his lunchbox every single afternoon.

Stop.

That is just ridiculous.

Not realizing he had closed his eyes, Nagisa gasped. Enough, enough of that. It was not helping, and it was not true.

“...Sorry. Sorry, Shun. C-Can I...” Nagisa shook his head, furiously attempting to stop his stupid ridiculous brain. “I-I’ll lay down for a bit.”

Shun was still focused on doing the dishes. Nagisa turned, and headed to –

“Nagisa.” Shun called, his voice low.

Nagisa looked at him.

“You don’t have all the pieces of the puzzles yet. Don’t try to fit them all together before you know what the bigger picture is.”

Then, he turned his back to him, and turned on the sink’s water again. “Go rest.”

Nagisa had to smile at that.

He was glad Shun was with him, logical and introspective and worried. Careful and protective even though he himself isn’t in good shape.

He tries to hide it, but he’s very kind and gentle. He hadn’t changed in that regard.

...Ah, this, too, was something Nagisa had dreamed of for a long time; back in that two-bedroom apartment wearing the same uniform as every other person around him.

To have Shun by his side again.

“...Mm. Thanks.”

The fact that they had each other was his biggest comfort.

Shun knocked on the door to his bedroom. Opening it, his eyes met Nagisa’s.

“Nagisa? Nagisa, did you take the manga I was putting away?”

“Hmm? Which ones?”

“They’re by *Mayu Sakai*. The covers all have a blonde girl on them.” Shun scratched his head. “I had them on my desk, but now they’re gone.”

“I haven’t seen them.” Nagisa responded, sitting up. “I can help you look.”

“No... no, don’t worry. I was planning on getting rid of them anyway.”

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 6:12AM.

The girl flipped through the pages, running her eyes over the images.

“Waddya think? The illustrations are pretty, right?”

She nodded.

“You can’t read?”

She nodded again.

“That’s okay. Half the fun of manga is enjoying the cool panels anyway.”

Lying to Shun did not feel good.

But it was for a good cause.

“Pretty...”

It really was.

Chapter 5: A farce in moonlight

Shun knew that Nagisa was not poisoned at the café.

Not because there was no feasible motive for the old – and admittedly not friendly at all – man who ran the place to poison a bunch of students on their way home. No, it was not that.

God, he didn’t mean to keep it a secret. He didn’t. He wanted to tell him the moment he woke up, explain why and how and apologize as many times as he needed –

Shun knew what it was.

It was the hot chocolate.

It was Shun’s hot chocolate that knocked them out on Thursday.

He was certain, because he was the one who dissolved the pills in the drinks before he served them.

I just wanted to keep him safe.

He had also woken up with a horrible feeling that day. However, he knew where it was coming from, as in the previous night, he was assaulted with horrific, vivid memories of times that had not yet passed.

He saw it all.

The sea of corpses, the weapons, the screaming.

The villager's behavior. Nagisa's disappearance. Akimoto by the forest. A death by the riverside. Executions carried out –

And, most of all, most frustratingly, he could only watch as Nagisa ran off to rescue those who were left behind in that warzone.

What the fuck are you doing?! Nagisa!

He had always been selfless, but Shun wasn't.

Stupid, stupid, stupid Nagisa and his hero complex. Always looking to save others, but never himself. It was no wonder Shun remembered him getting killed so many times.

I'll be back! Shun, please, I have to go help them!

He never comes back. He never makes it. If he doesn't die then, then he dies later, right in front of Shun, weakly laughing like his existence wasn't important.

Trying to save the others would get him killed.

Running off would get him killed.

If Shun let him out of his sight on Thursday, then he would be gone by Saturday.

"Mmm... I'm glad I came to Shimazawa after all. How could I keep living without tasting this?"

"...Don't be so dramatic."

"I'm not. I like being here."

Stupid, selfless idiot. A ridiculous boy who believes his life isn't precious. That kindness is fatal.

Shun could not bear to see him die in vain again.

Sunday, July 20th, 2016. 1:00AM.

Nagisa was fast asleep, snoring and drooling on the futon. Their current situation did not stop him from sleeping the moment his head hit the pillow.

Alone with his thoughts, Shun tried to understand what led them to what seemed to be a gruesome, unstoppable fate.

Many Shimazawa villagers would believe that it was Komishi-sama who destroyed the village. They had been bad, or something. Because Komishi-sama was only good when they did that. They say... or whatever.

There were legends and myths and supposed true stories, passed down by Shun's ancestors to his grandparents, about Komishi-sama's anger and absolute power over *life itself*.

They would dry the fields during harvest season, or blast lighting on households, leaving dozens homeless. Grandpa claimed that there were even lynchings and witch hunts back in his day, when people looked for the person who was to blame for so much disgrace and chose to nip the problem in the bud.

(The victims, of course, were always the *suspicious women* or the *men who did not get married by a certain age*. The *outsiders*. Yes, surely, those people were to blame for Komishi-sama's rage.)

But there was one myth that Shun absolutely hated. It was told to him like a freaking bedtime story, of all things, and it was horrid.

Grandma claimed that the people who were sacrificed in order to appease Komishi-sama did not bleed when they died. Instead, their blood would be sucked by the clouds.

A few seasons later, the blood would show itself in the village's sunset: the skies were no longer blue, they were scarlet. That was Komishi-sama, painting the skies red with blood to show that the villagers had done the right thing.

Who the fuck thought telling a kid that story at night was a good idea?

For a long time, Shun disliked sunsets. After a certain age, he began to dislike Komishi-sama. Then, the people in the village.

Finally, Shimazawa itself. The swamps, the fields, the pebble roads. He despised it all.

It was almost like an astral joke that all those people he hated and the sights he had come to dislike were gone now.

Ah, Komishi-sama, was it you? Did you choose to punish them again, this time with *complete and utter decimation*? Or did you look down at Shun and go: *hey, he's right actually, this place can burn?*

"Shun... you awake?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"...Just checkin'... good night..."

No, that couldn't be it.

Shimazawa... Komishi-sama...

He wanted to burn with it too, didn't he?

What a joke.

[Villain.](#)

He had not slept a wink since the last time Nagisa spoke to him.

Because, because – ah, he disliked keeping secrets from him. He was already keeping too many secrets and telling too many lies to everyone his life.

But Nagisa...

Imagining Nagisa's face once he finds out that Shun is *another liar, another person who thought he could use Nagisa's unconditional trust* –

It's too much. It's too painful, he doesn't want to do it. He doesn't want to think about the expressions he'll make and the tears he'll shed when he inevitably finds out the truth.

That Shun knew what was going to happen on Thursday.

That Shun played along with his café poisoning theory.

And...

"Nagisa?"

....

Silence. He was asleep.

Nagisa...

Shun... didn't want to see him cry.

Nodding along to Nagisa's hope that they would all be okay, Shun hated himself very much for his cowardice.

It wasn't true. It was impossible.

Not over the horrifying image of Mao Akiba's corpse laying under the pile of rubble inside the clinic. Not over that, not over any other corpses Shun will surely find as the days go on.

The ones behind the attack on Shimazawa would not stop until every single villager was accounted for. They would scratch, break, destroy their way to the last remaining survivor.

"Shun... wazzit...?"

The hot chocolate plan had a thousand flaws. It was a miracle that it worked; that the attackers gave up on breaking in Shun's house and moved on to the next victims.

"Just checking if you were alive. Go back to sleep."

Spiritual intervention? A God who's not Komishi-sama feeling pity for them and handing them a chance?

Shun knew it was luck. Plain and simple, they got *lucky*.

"Mmmkay. Took your meds?"

"Yes."

"Not working?"

"No."

Something was shuffling.

"W-What are you doing, Nagisa –"

A hand, sleepily reaching out to him from the floor.

"Shake hands. Sleepy." Nagisa mumbled.

"There is no need for that." Shun responded, mechanically.

The hand began to wave at him.

"Sleeeep."

He had no choice.

"...Fine."

Luck... he's lucky, that's all it is. He won't read too much into it. It was another lucky roll of dice, yes.

Yep.

"Countin' sheep helps me..."

His hand was warm and soft, a bit smaller and thinner than his, but he already knew that because he had spent an inordinate amount of time looking at it before.

"U-Uhum. I-I'll try that."

"Yay..." Nagisa giggled, and Shun wanted to cry a little bit.

All of this will come to an end soon.

"Good night..."

All he can do is nod along and pretend that he knows as much as Nagisa does. That the village is gone and they're alone. That they do not know why they woke up two days later and their friends are nowhere to be seen.

Slowly, steadily building up. Lies upon lies, a pile of deceit.

"...Yeah. Good night."

Monday, July 20th, 2016. 11:02AM.

Nagisa was *merciless* when it came to their mealtimes now.

"You know that gif of Bugs Bunny trying to flex? That's you." He commented, putting a bowl of his best attempt at katsudon on the table.

"Okay, now you're being mean."

"You were being mean to *yourself*. That's much worse."

He skipped a few meals, *sometimes*. It wasn't that big of a deal. He was alive, wasn't he?

Shun was about to mutter a comeback, but then, he realized what Nagisa was wearing.

"Nagisa."

"What? You can't talk yourself out of this one, young man!"

"*Nagisa.*"

"I made this for you with our limited ingredients, don't let the food go to waste—"

"*Nagisa, why the fuck are you wearing my pants?*"

A beat.

Nagisa tilted his head, and shrugged, as if that was not a big deal.

"The pair I was wearing was starting to smell."

Grandpa was right, Komishi-sama does punish sinners. This? It had to be some kind of torture for his lies.

"What do you want me to do, take them off?" Nagisa asked, and got an instant *NO!* from Shun, who had his face burried in his hands.

"No. No, keep them on. Just... warn me next time."

That was the end of that conversation. *Surely*, Shun thought, *there must be some clothes over at the Amamiyas' house that they can take.*

Some pants, toiletries, pants, coats –

"Earth to Shun! Food. Table. Eat!"

Torture. Torture torture torture. At age six, he would cry at his grandparent's stories. Now, at eighteen, he'd rather have his blood seeped out by clouds and used as paint for the sky than go through this ever again.

All he could think of he as the ate the delicious, flavorful meal Nagisa had made for them, was –

I'm going to lose it, here, alone with him, and he's going to hate me forever.

"...A shirt is fine, and that's all."

"Okay."

"The red one's off limits."

"I know. It's your favorite."

The food was good. The cicadas weren't too noisy. It wasn't too hot or too cold, just the ideal weather.

...The pants looked nice on him.

They washed the dishes together and sat down by the bed.

Looking at nothing and talking of nothing special at all, it was a perfectly simple moment.

There was no reason to worry about what the neighbors would say if they spotted Nagisa in his bedroom.

The greatest guilt of all did not only come from the piles upon piles of lies he had told Nagisa.

Because deep inside, Shun felt some of gratitude.

That it was them, and only them, that were left. Besides himself, this even gave him some amount of *courage*. Short-lived, but it was there, after years of dormancy.

"Shun," Nagisa laughed, reaching his hand up high, "Okay, okay, give it back."

Trying to fight off his smile muscles, Shun kept his right arm raised high.

"I got it, I'll share it with you, g-give it back!"

He was waving around the snack Nagisa had been looking forward to eating after lunch, up high, knowing Nagisa could not reach it sitting down.

Shun had the genius idea of going even further.

"Ask nicely."

Nagisa laughed again, still trying to grab the food. "What? I'm always nice."

"You compared me to *Bugs Bunny*."

"And I meant it."

"Okay, no snack for you then."

Nagisa rolled his eyes, still giggling. “Fine, I promise I’ll never compare you to Bugs Bunny again if you give me my food back.”

Then, Shun had an even more genius idea. Truly the work of a mastermind; one that only that the guts to show himself thanks to that sudden burst of courage.

Shun pretended to be serious, furrowed his brows, and hummed. Then, he spoke.

“Beg.”

There was a silence.

It took a few moments for the other boy to react.

“Wh—”

Shun laughed. A loud, open laughter that he had not heard coming from his lips in a long time.

“I’m sorr – your face! You’ve gotta see your face!”

Nagisa held his hands up defensively, as if Shun had just accused him of something scandalous.

“Hey! Hey, dude, you can’t –”

Contorting himself in laughter, Shun let go off the snack, and threw it to Nagisa. The very, very red faced Nagisa.

“You can’t just say that to people, man.” He muttered, looking like he wanted to dig himself a hole and hide it in for a couple years.

What a genius Shun was.

“You told me Natsu looked like a tomato that time, but now you’re –”

“Shut up!” Nagisa protested, but soon broke out into a smile too. “You’re evil!”

Laughter filled the room.

Everything felt right, light, and *easy*.

As if there was nothing wrong in the world.

Nothing at all.

...Evil?

...

Is it bad?

Is it bad that he doesn't regret serving that chocolate?

Is it bad that Shun did not mind too much that the world around them had burned down?

...Of course it is.

There was no question. That is selfish, evil, and petty.

The perfect motive and means for the antagonist of a shounen manga, set on the destroying the world for the sake of his own happiness.

Standing on the mountain of deceit, alone –

Those small moments of joys had its days counted.

He will die a villain, won't he? The exact kind of villain he was accused of being.

...

Chapter 6: Moment

"Niina."

"My name's Niina."

After a few days of bringing food, water, and medicine to the abandoned shack, Nagisa had finally learned a few things about the girl.

Nagisa looked up at her, and smiled. "That's a nice name."

The two were meeting up in secret there, early in the morning, before Shun would wake up. Nagisa mostly watched her eat and drink as he talked and talked about anything that came to his mind.

"Your leg's looking better. Do you think you can get up?"

"Can't." She shook her head, and hid her left leg with her blanket. "Hurts."

He learned a few more things about her. For example, she did not like being looked at. Any sudden movements would frighten her, so it was necessary to move calmly.

Niina also hated being touched. Nagisa was not allowed to do so, or else, she would pull out her gun at him.

His hope was that she would eventually trust him enough to let him carry her away from that filthy shack and into somewhere safer, or at least *cleaner*, but so far, that was not an option.

As he thought of the progress he had made so far, he picked up his phone, and sighed.

Wednesday, July 22th, 2016. 8:07AM.

Any longer and Shun would get suspicious.

“Oh man, I should get going now. I hope Shun’s not awake yet.”

Niina’s green braids moved as she shifted in her corner of the shaft.

“Why do you all lie?”

Moving to get up, Nagisa stopped.

“What?” He blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You and your friend. Why do you lie to each other?”

Taking a moment to think, Nagisa tried to word his response in the best way possible.

“I’m lying to him because he wouldn’t let me see you otherwise.”

“Lying’s bad.”

“It is, but it’s – personally, I’m okay with lying or keeping things hidden in order to help someone.”

Mostly okay. It hurt keeping secrets from Shun. It hurt so much, there were a few times where he almost blurted it all out.

He couldn’t. Niina needed his help; she had no means of retrieving food, water, or medicine by herself. But at the same time, Shun had been very clear that Nagisa was to stay away from that shack.

“Why?”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

He knows what it feels like.

Helping someone who’s out of options and too scared to ask for aid is something he can’t *not* do.

Niina shifted again. “You’re weird.”

Nagisa patted his (*Shun’s*) pants as he got up. “I guess I am.”

Opening the door to the outside, Nagisa shrugged. "Bye bye, Niina-chan."

Then, he paused, looking down at the empty juice boxes on Niina's feet.

"I'll bring you more of that peach juice tomorrow."

"Yes. Goodbye, Nagisa."

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 3:40PM.

Nagisa beamed as he examined the items Shun had brought from his latest haul. Without the internet or television to keep them occupied and Shun's manga growing old quick, this was just what they needed.

"One round of Uno." Nagisa smirked.

Shun raised his eyebrows. "Just one?"

"Yeah, you know. To keep things fair. Whoever loses, loses."

Little did Shun know what the past month Nagisa had spent battling against the Game Club member's incredible Uno skills had turned him into a true master of the game.

"But if you wanna make things more fun, whoever loses has to accept a punishment!" Nagisa announced, repeating Ayame's usual pre-game speech. "Waddya think?"

This was payback for that time with the snack. He was going to beat him.

"Alright." Shun shrugged, opening the Uno package. "Let's do it."

"Heh. Your funeral!"

Shun shuffled the cards, and gave a few to himself and Nagisa. He motioned for Nagisa to start.

Looking down at his cards, Nagisa smirked. He had a pretty good hand to start with; a few +2s and some numbers that could carry him through the beginning.

He can't control what cards he'll get, but he can try to lead Shun into using cards that will ultimately allow Nagisa to win.

"That's the secret to Uno. Always be one step ahead of your opponent."

Lad had whispered that to him a month ago, after Nagisa lost five times in a row in their daily game.

"You're throwing out the cards that make sense to you. But you have to use the cards that'll make your opponent confuse themselves about what your goal is."

"What do you mean?"

“Well... for example, if you keep using number match cards but no color match cards, they’ll think you don’t have that particular color. But you do. That’ll throw them off your trail, and you’ll catch them by surprise.”

Everyone in the Game Club took Uno extremely seriously. Nagisa nodded along.

“Hey! Lea-chan, you can’t give advice to the newbie! He’s gotta learn on his own!” Aya chided.

“Nagisa?”

Hearing that, Natsu smirked. “Heh. It doesn’t matter if you have allies or even if you cheat. You can’t beat me!”

Lea winked to Nagisa. “We can practice together after school if you want.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

“Nagisa!”

“Oi, you hear me?”

“H-Huh?”

Suddenly, Nagisa was no longer in their classroom during lunchtime.

“Nagisa, it’s your turn.”

Ah. He was at Shun’s house. That’s right.

“Are you daydreaming?”

Right. That was a memory.

The Game Club is not here. It’s just him and Shun.

It’s been like that for almost a week. There was no sign of the others; no clue to their whereabouts or even if they got away in time.

But they did. Yes, they did. Everyone’s alive and just waiting for the right moment to come rescue them.

He has to leave it at that.

“...S-Sorry, I... I was just thinking of the best way to destroy you.” Nagisa muttered, putting down a card.

“Liars get a +4.” Shun smugly announced, putting down two cards at once. “Oh wait, it’s a plus eight.”

Nagisa almost screamed.

“What the heck! You really are EVIL!”

Shun scoffed. "Your turn again."

Crap. Crap crap crap. Of course Shun's good at Uno too...! He was a member of the Game Club, years before Nagisa showed up!

Their skills level are at least two years apart...

"Uno."

...Is what Nagisa would've whined about if he hadn't religiously studied the game almost everyday since moving to Shimazawa.

"What? How –"

"Change order, change order, change order. Plus two, plus two... oh look, your plus eight got me so many red fives."

Shun stared in horror as Nagisa quickly got rid of all his cards, one after the other. He had three cards left. Nagisa had one.

"How the hell... how did you..."

It was a complete and utter massacre.

"Your turn, Shun." Nagisa grinned.

Shun looked down at his cards. The furrow on his brows could only mean that there was no way he could turn this around.

"...Skip."

"HECK YEAH! TAKE THAT! YEAAH!" Nagisa screamed, slamming down his last card on the table. "I WIN!!"

Thank you, Lea, for your wise advice. This is the moment I've been waiting for more whole life.

"You lost, so that means you have to do the punishment!"

Nagisa looked down at Shun. He had his arms crossed and an eyeroll just waiting to be deployed.

"Fine. Ugh... just don't make me do anything weird." Shun reluctantly agreed. "I'll end you if you do."

Nagisa smiled wickedly. Without saying another word, he reached for the bag of goodies *he* had collected earlier in the day. His haul from the Shimazawa equivalent of a 100-yen store...

“Put this on.” Nagisa commanded, getting his phone, and opening the camera app. “Do it, do it!”

Shun stared at the pair of cat ears on the table like they were made of radioactive waste.

“No.”

“We agreed on this! Put. It. On.”

Freakin’ club rules, Shun muttered as he slowly picked up the offending item. *More fun, my ass...*

“Say cheese – no, say *nya!*”

“Rot in hell.”

Nagisa laughed out loud at the utterly miserable expression Shun had on, and took as many pictures as he could.

Tap, tap tap. Shun got more and more annoyed with each picture. By the last one, he was almost flipping Nagisa off.

“Aah, this has been a great day. I’ll back up these up on my laptop one day.”

“I hope you have to wear wet socks for the rest of your life.”

Another bout of laughter, and Shun rolled his eyes repeatedly, but Nagisa suspected at least some of it was feigned rather than genuine annoyance.

At least he hoped so.

“Ah, Shun!” Nagisa suddenly recalled then. “I just remembered. I wanna try out a drink.”

Taking it as a sign that he could take off the cat ears, Shun sighed, and picked up the glass that had been left abandoned on the table.

“Which one? Isn’t it expired?”

“This one. Look...”

Nagisa quickly headed to the kitchen.

A few moments later, he was back in the living room, smiling widely.

“Feel like drinking some hot chocolate?”

Thursday, July 23rd, 2016. 6:41AM.

Nagisa had brought another change of bandages for Niina's infected leg. He pretended to be focused on reading the label of the potato chips on the floor as she slowly removed her old bandages.

Keeping her gun aimed at him even then, she didn't want to explain how she got so badly injured. Other than her leg, there were also the scratches on her arms and the seemingly broken fingers in both her hands. The ugly, bleeding gash on her face that she covered with a few band aids and treated with antiseptic a few days ago, too –

Huh.

It was good to know that the medicine was working fast.

"I brought some more juice." Nagisa said, carefully placing the drinks in front of Niina. "Peach's my favorite too."

Niina shook her head, muttering *not thirsty*, and Nagisa became very concerned.

From what he could see, she hadn't eaten anything since last night. Did she get sick of the juice? Is the water too warm?

Could the infection be getting *worse*, not better?

"Niina-chan. Could I look at your injury a bit closer?" It was a risky question, but he had to be sure. "Please? I won't touch you; I'll just shine a light on it. Make sure it's healing fine."

"No." Niina covered herself with the blanket, hiding her legs underneath. "Stay away."

"Niina-chan –"

"I said stay back!" She screamed, picking up the gun. Her voice echoed through the room.

Nagisa held his hands up and backed away. "O-Okay, I'm sorry. I get it. P-Put that down, okay?"

A hiss. Niina kept her aim steady until Nagisa was completely still, on the floor, and as far away as possible.

"Sorry."

"Leave. *Now*. I'll shoot your brains out!"

She's in a bad mood. It happens.

"...Okay. Bye-bye, Niina-chan."

Nagisa won't give up on her, no matter how much she pushes him away.

"Out."

He will return tomorrow. With more stuff from the first aid kit Shun got from the clinic.

Niina's right leg needs tighter bandages to heal properly.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 3:41PM.

Crash.

The glass Shun had been carrying fell to the floor, its pieces flying all around the room. He bent down, cursing to himself.

"Wait, don't pick it up with your hands. You could hurt yourself—"

Nagisa ran to his side, but it was too late. Shun's thumb was already bleeding from one of the fallen sharper edges.

"Slow down —"

But he didn't stop.

"Shun. Shun, *slow down.*"

Nagisa had to grab his shaky, sweaty hands to stop him from hurting himself any further.

"I-I'm sorry... I'm sorry, I..." Shun muttered, his eyes covered by his long bangs as he looked down to the floor. "*I'm so sorry.*"

Something in the conversation they were having just now made Shun extremely anxious. Nagisa could tell as much.

"Look at me." Nagisa whispered. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. No, no, no, you haven't done anything wrong," Shun insisted, looking up at the other boy with what could only be described as *desperation*.

"Then what happened?"

Shun's lips trembled. He slowly got up, and Nagisa followed his lead.

There was a silence as the two of them looked at each other. Shun had his arms around himself, tight, tight, as if it was the sole thing keeping him in place.

"What happened?" Nagisa repeated, softer this time.

"I - I... I'm..." Shun gasped. "*I'm so sorry.*"

He was panting. Fast and heavy, as if he couldn't get any air in his lungs. *An asthma attack? Since when did he have asthma?*

"I-I'm so, so, so sorry. I wanted to tell..." Another gasp. And another; short and rapid. Tears began to well up in his eyes. "I-I can't do this anymore, I'm so sorry...!"

Nagisa moved to touch Shun, but he jerked away. “D-Don’t. Don’t. I-I have to... tell you...”

“W-What can I do? Tell me.”

A sob. Another gasp. Shun managed to whimper the word water loud enough to make Nagisa run to the kitchen.

He couldn’t understand. Running the conversation on his head repeatedly, Nagisa tried to pinpoint what was it that bothered Shun so much –

It didn’t make sense.

They were talking about what to have for their snack. – just that.

About the packet with the difficult to pronounce brand Nagisa had found on the back of the kitchen’s cupboard the previous day.

Nothing special.

It was just that.

Chocolate.

About a half hour passed before Shun calmed down completely.

His heartbeat was going back to its normal rate. Nagisa knew that because, at some point, he reached out for his wrist and did not let go.

Shun inhaled, and exhaled. Once, twice, thrice.

On the fourth time, he looked down at Nagisa’s hands on his arms and sniffled.

“Let go.”

Nagisa obeyed. Gently, he placed the cup of water on Shun’s hands again. “Better?”

Shun nodded weakly.

“Do you want to talk about it? It’s been almost a week now so I understand, I’ve also been worried about what’s going on – “

“Nagisa.”

“ – And I was thinking that my theory with the café and stuff was very dumb, wasn’t it? Hahah...” Nagisa laughed, getting up from the couch. “Looking back, there was there cold Lea and Mao-chan were recovering from, and I was feeling unwell that day, so –“

“It was me.”

“ – Being paranoid about other people like that won’t do us any good. And I – sorry, what did you say –“

“Nagisa, it was me.”

...

“H-Huh?”

What?

Buzzing.

In his ears, by the windows, outside –

What was he saying?

My vision is a blur.

“I knocked you out with the Diazepam.”

No, no, why is everything blurry?

Shun’s right in front of me, yet I can’t tell his face apart from the backdrop.

Is he the one speaking to me?

“The hot chocolate I made for us was full of it. I knew it would shut you down.”

That voice was not coming from Shun’s mouth. It was from someone else, far, far away.

“I knew Shimazawa would be attacked that day. I knew, that’s why I put us to sleep.”

Because –

Shun would never deceive him.

Shun would never keep such an important thing from him

And Shun, Shun would never, ever –

“You knew, and you didn’t do anything to help the others?”

He would never abandon his friends.

*That's not how he is. Not how he **was**.*

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"What the fuck... What the fuck were you thinking?!"

They never shouted at each other. Ever.

But he couldn't understand.

"SHUN, PEOPLE ARE DEAD!"

"There was nothing we could do to save th –"

"YOU DON'T KNOW THAT! YOU DON'T KNOW UNTIL YOU TRY!"

"YOU WERE GOING TO DIE!"

Anger, sadness, shock, fear, confusion –

All the ugly, ugly emotions he hated himself for feeling and disliked to show just as much.

They bursted out, one after the other.

Nagisa bit his lip tightly, roughly; so strongly he could taste his own blood.

"You lied to me."

Am I a joke to you? You, too, thought it would be okay to deceive me?

Was it funny to observe me being such a naïve, stupid idiot?

"I'm sorry. I wanted to protect you."

I was so stupid.

So, so very stupid.

*Leaving people behind to save only them both. Deceiving, deceiving, for what purpose?
Pride?*

“I can’t believe you. You’re – you knew what was going to happen...”

“Nagisa, wait –”

“YOU LIED TO ME!”

That final shout, like the roar of an animal, silenced everything and everyone.

Turning away, he refused to show the other boy the tears leaking from his eyes and the sobs threatening to leave his mouth.

Nagisa couldn’t understand.

How could Shun believe that their lives were more important than the others’?

That’s why –

“NAGISA!”

There was nothing else either of them could say.

That’s why...

He had to go.

Away, away from him.

But where? The shack. He doesn’t know. Won’t look there.

Sniff away the tears, you’re a boy, aren’t you?

It’s not the usual time, so Niina would be frightened, but he had to go there.

A knock on the door.

No response.

“Niina-chan...”

He opens the door carefully. Slowly, winking away the tears and the questions and the *regret*.

What else was he missing? How stupid could he be?

A memory came to him then. Lea lied to him. Aya lied to him. Natsu lied to him. Shio and Mao-chan were lying too.

Naïve stupid idiot.

Everyone lies; everyone thinks of themselves before others. He has always been the one in the wrong. As long as he continues to be himself, he will never not be looked down upon.

Shun was supposed to be different. Shun was supposed to be his – what? His *what*? A childhood friend he barely recognizes anymore? An acquaintance that won't let him in?

“Niina-chan –“

But thinking about that in that place –

It turned out to be, of course, another stupid decision.

Bang.

One shot to the wall.

Bang.

Another, barely missing his shoulder.

Bang.

The final shot landed on the floor.

Nagisa was seeing double.

Nagisa was seeing double.

There were two of them.

There were two of them.

One Niina on the floor, her leg left bandaged and her forehead covered in band-aids.

Another Niina standing up, her right leg bandaged, aiming a pistol at him.

Peach juice scattered around the shack; manga volumes dirtied with dust and mud.

Stupid. Shun was right about her all along.

He was so stupid.

All he could mutter was a *since when?* He got no response, though his gut told him it the answer would be *always*.

“Get out of here. Now!”

“Do not come back here ever again.”

Everyone lies.

Everyone, everyone, everyone.

He had no phone with him. No way to check the time.

The cicadas had stopped chirping. Everything was quiet.

“Stupid...”

Running off with no direction in sight? No. Instinctively, Nagisa’s legs brought him to that place.

The schoolhouse where he had met everyone. Where he made countless memories, always filled with smiles and laughter.

Now it was empty, abandoned. Rubble and broken pieces of wood covered the halls. The door to the classroom was blocked off with chairs and desks, and the infirmary was inaccessible.

All that remained of the school was the tiny, sparsely decorated teacher’s room.

Nothing and no one made a sound.

Alone, he finally allowed himself to let go. Not from the stinging, dull pain coming from the ankle he injured when he ran away from the shack.

Nagisa allowed himself to scream –

For the friends he knew were not alive.

For the help he knew was not coming.

And, most of all, for the affection still in him that furiously attempted to excuse the truth.

Chapter 7: You.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 3:50PM.

Shun did not want to wait for Nagisa to come back.

He wanted to run after him, grab his hand, and explain *everything*. From the beginning with the prophetic dreams and the worries and the chocolate.

But he could not move.

It was if he was looking down on his own body from up high; screaming and yelling at himself to go out that door.

Shun thought: *I want him to burn. For being weak and hurting Nagisa in the worst way possible.* He thought: *I want him to hurt as much as I hurt.*

It was that thought again. It never left. Always there in the background; in place of a shadow, it followed him during the day and haunted during the night.

But then, he thought:

He does not matter to me.

I do not care for him. Not as much as I care for Nagisa.

That realization was what allowed the boy down on the floor to take a step forward, and brought Shun back to him. Yes, they were the same people, though it didn't feel like it a second ago – they are one, and they will not die.

He could not die yet. Not like this. Not now.

Not without apologizing.

And so, he ran.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 4:13PM.

When they were kids, they would run laps around the school during the week and race to the park in the weekends. Shun was always faster, while Nagisa would lag behind, panting. All for the sake of earning him the chance to not be the butt of the joke when it came to the games of tag their classmates would insist on inviting him to.

There was no pity or sympathy, only an insatiable need to laugh at the weaker ones. They only invited him because they knew he was slow and alone.

Nagisa told him, years later, that school was something that made him miserable back then. He had no energy, no motivation, and no friends. No adults to rely on, only a mother who Shun never got quite a good look at, and a group of teachers who could not tell their heads apart from their elbows.

But Nagisa only had praises to sing when it came to Shimazawa's school.

As if he had finally found a place where he belonged, excitedly blabbering on and on about how much he had and how much he looked forward for the next day. He could not look at the poor infrastructure and the subpar materials or the lack of teachers, as if trying to convince himself of something.

So of course, that would be the place he would run away to.

"Nagisa?"

Shun called out his name as he approached the remains of the schoolhouse, but got no response.

The air seemed to get heavier the closer he got to the building. The characteristic smell he could not name - the one made him sick to his stomach and unable to leave his house - was no longer there.

Wood that rotten with time and fallen pieces of metal.

A bucket of water, scissors, the locker, laughter echoing -

Gone.

All that was left were the memories. Besides everything, the cicadas chirped on as always.

If it were any other way, he would not step foot inside the school ever again.

"Nagisa, are you there?"

Boarded up doors and broken windows. Bullet shells on the floor. Near the back entrance, there was -

Crack.

Something was under his foot. Plastic.

The trampled-on doll's open eyes stared up at him with a wide smile.

Left behind in a hurry.

There were children here.

With that realization coming over him, the door at the end of the hall creaked open slightly.

No. Enough.

He stopped himself from picking up the destroyed toy.

Despairing over the lost will not bring them back.

Mom's death already taught him that lesson. Shed tears will dry and even regrets will become but fading memories.

He had to focus on the living. He knew that.

Living. Living, to live. Alive. When she left, he did not believe he would make it to eighteen.

He did not believe he'd ever hear Nagisa's voice again.

...He wanted to hear it.

He wants to hear him call out his name, even if it's full of bitterness and resentment. Even if it's in an admonishing shout covered in anger.

He knew what he had to say, and also what he wanted to say. Those were two different things, and one of them would change everything for certain.

Even just a *don't look at me* is fine. Even a disgusted *I don't feel that way* would be enough.

I can't forgive you for abandoning our friends, he'll say. *You're selfish for saving yourself*, too. That's fine.

The door still creaks. The cicadas cry out to the skies.

"Nagisa..."

Down on the floor with his head covered by his arms. Sniffling.

Even though he never wanted to be the one who'd make him cry like he did when they were kids. He was the one who would dry his tears and make him smile, back then.

"I'm sorry."

Shun just wanted to hear his hear voice again.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 4:19PM.

"You were right."

Spilling all the secrets he had been keeping since this all began, Nagisa told him everything. About the girl on the shack and the manga and the food.

Everything.

"Niina-chan was not alone," he muttered. "She was deceiving me all along. They were. I'm so fucking stupid."

His leg was hurt. Red and swollen. "I knew it was dangerous, but I did it anyway. I knew she had a gun, I knew she didn't trust me. B-But I still..."

The ointment Shun applied on him was cold and slimy. He hissed under his touch, and Shun mumbled an apology.

Not the one he had to make, but an apology stil.

"Did you bring that knowing I'd get in trouble by myself?" Nagisa asked quietly.

"Better safe than sorry." Shun responded, spreading the ointment around the swollen area. "We'll bandage it and get some painkillers at home."

Ah, Shun wished Nagisa would stop muttering the words *stupid* and *idiot*, as he was not stupid, nor was he *a naïve idiot*.

"I don't think they'll be coming after us. They looked more terrified than anything." Nagisa finished, sighing.

He was *trusting*. *Hopeful*. *Loving*. So much so that he picked the possibility of saving the life of a girl he didn't even know over *staying safe*.

All the things Nagisa disliked himself for, Shun admired.

"I was scared," Shun began, taking a deep a breath. "That you'd run off ahead of us."

Nagisa looked at him. Shun continued.

"That you'd see someone in danger and put your life at risk. That you'd get hurt and not call for help because of something like..." Shun trailed off, motioning to Nagisa. "Like, *I'll put them in danger if they come after me.*"

“That does sound like me.” Nagisa cringed, but then softened his expression. “You were trying to protect me.”

“Yeah... but I know it was wrong. I wasn’t thinking straight.” Shun sighed. “And I was – I wanted to tell you that I did it, but I didn’t want you to hate me.”

Shun wrapped the bandages around Nagisa’s leg slowly. The cicadas were beginning to calm down.

“Shun.”

“Shun, I would *never* hate you.”

The silence between them felt like it lasted hours.

It was Shun who broke it, with a scoff and another slow wrap around the leg.

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m serious. It’s impossible for me to hate you.”

Why? The question died on Shun’s lips. He let Nagisa continue.

“I don’t know what your eerily accurate dreams told you, but I’ll never be mad enough at you to *hate* you.”

“Even if I killed a man?”

“*Especially* if you killed a man. He’d probably be at fault anyway.” Nagisa smiled weakly. “Point is, don’t lie to me anymore. *Please.*”

Nagisa’s leg was tightly wrapped and secure now. Shun patted it softly and met his eyes at last.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Shun could not promise that he’d keep no more lies, but that was left unspoken.

“Can you get up?” He asked, offering the other boy a hand.

Nagisa nodded. “Yeah. I’ll just... not put too much pressure on it. Gimme your shoulder.”

With his help, he managed to get up, and hold on to Shun’s shoulder. With a grunt, Nagisa tried to take a few steps.

“Ow... ow, ow... o-okay, we might have to go very, very slowly.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

Carefully, leisurely, they took their time crossing the room.

Nagisa took a deep breath as they left the room and entered the hallway. Shun let him set the pace. They were not in any hurry –

Clack.

They stopped.

Nagisa looked down to their feet. "Did we step on –"

"Sorry, let go for a second." Shun interrupted. "Don't step on it."

Shun bent down and picked up the doll on the floor. Nagisa had stepped on its head, deforming it into a half-circle.

The two looked at each other. From the pitiful look on Nagisa's face, they must have been thinking the same thing. Shun grimaced.

"Bury it somewhere pretty." Nagisa muttered, approaching his shoulder again. "We'll get some flowers."

Then, he smiled. "We'll get out of here, and we'll find out what happened."

"...Yeah."

"We will. I promise."

"Yeah..."

I like the you that's hopeful even when the darkness is intense.

Chapter 8: Two. Together.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 5:50PM.

Slowly waddling their way through the pebble roads, they stopped to look up at the sky.

The sun was coming down. The previously bright blue sky began to mesh with auburn and scarlet tones, and a light breeze drifted through.

"We're sitting down." Shun announced. "We've been walking for too long. Your other leg will thank me."

"You wouldn't have anything to eat on your pocket, would you?"

"Not unless you want to eat ointment."

"Yeah, no thanks."

Nagisa muttered a few *owch, ow, ows* as he sat down on the bench.

Another breeze passed through. It was getting colder, not much, but enough to know that the day was coming to an end.

The sunset colored the sky a deep orange. Gazing at it, Shun was reminded of a lot of things.

“My grandparents used to tell me that the sky changed colors because God would dye them with blood.”

“What the *fuck*?”

“ I know.”

Nagisa widened his eyes, incredulous. “Komishi-sama? The same Komishi-sama that everyone adores? The one that they made a whole *festival* for?”

“Yes. Complicated, isn’t it?”

Everything about Shimazawa was complicated. There was not a single thing about its history or the beliefs of its people that would not make an outsider’s head spin.

“Man, my grandpa would tell me like, stories about dragons and princesses and stuff.” Nagisa quipped, also looking up at the sky. “Weren’t many local legends to share about that city.”

“Ah, yes. Nani City, home to countless myths such as the larger than usual sewer rat and the disappearing hair ties.”

Nagisa scoffed, but then paused. “Wait. Hair ties?”

“They always go missing.”

“*You put your hair up? When?*” He asked, his voice higher than it should be. “Pictures or it didn’t happen.”

“Do you think I spend all day at home with my hair sticking to my neck? *In summer?*”

Nagisa looked as if Shun had just made a major revelation that would change the fate of the world forever, his eyes wide and his mouth open in an ‘o’ shape.

Shun fought off a smile. “It’s just hair.”

“I just realized I haven’t seen the back of your neck once since I moved here.”

And – ah, that was unfair, the way he said it. It was not good for Shun’s heart; not good for the side of him that held a tiny, minuscule bit of hope in some part of his icy heart.

Instead of quipping back at him, he settled on kicking the other boy’s arm with his elbow and muttering a *silly* under his breath.

The hand he put over his own nape lingered there for a few seconds. He took it back once Nagisa turned to face him completely.

“Okay, close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Just do it. I wanna see something.”

Nagisa insisted a few more times before Shun agreed.

He's going to play some kind of prank on him. That's what always happened when Natsu or Aya asked someone to close their eyes.

"Keep 'em closed."

Shun nodded, and prepared himself for whatever payback Nagisa had just come up with.

He waited.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 6:17PM.

Nagisa took a deep breath. Shun's eyes were closed shut. He wasn't going to see anything, so there was no reason to be worried. He knew what he was doing. Kind of.

Slowly, Nagisa raised his left hand. He placed it over the other boy's mouth, covering it completely.

Then, he pressed his lips against the back of his hand.

...

His breath was caught on his throat. Shun's long eyelashes were close enough that he could touch them. There's a small mole on his forehead he had never noticed before.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump. Indirect. Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

There's a lot he could do right now. He could say something. Could reach to the side and touch Shun's hand, or squeeze the shoulder he let him borrow while walking. He could hug him. See if he felt as warm as Nagisa did.

Or he could lean in and take his own hand away.

If you do, it won't be indirect anymore.

...

No. No, he can't do that.

"Okay, you can open them now." Nagisa announced, taking his hand away and leaning back.

Shun opened his eyes, blinking quickly. "What did you do? Was that your hand?"

"Nothing. It's a secret." Nagisa smiled. "I'll leave it for some other time."

Shun rolled his eyes. "You were going to write something on my face, weren't you?"

"Who knows?"

"You were. That's the oldest prank in the book."

“Whooo knows?” Nagisa sang, turning to face the sky again. “You’ll have to wait to find out.”

Ba-dump. Ba-dump.

He had to find something to distract himself and tune out his pounding heartbeat.

“Let’s stay like this for a bit longer. The breeze’s nice.” He murmured. “Just a bit more.”

“...Okay.” Shun murmured back.

The sunset was bright orange and just as pretty.

Friday, July 24th, 2016. 6:30PM.

It was getting dark. About time they got started on dinner, too.

Nagisa got up, cringing over the pain on his leg. “O-Okay, bear with me there. Shoulder, please.”

Shun complied. Then, after a beat: “Shimazawa doesn’t have bears.”

That got him an elbow kick to his side, and a wide, cheeky smile.

They filled the walk back home with their usual banter, taking breaks along the way.

Turning the next corner, they would arrive at Shun’s street. Nagisa thought of maybe attempting to cook some pasta with tomato sauce for him. He needs some carbs. And proper vitamins.

Heated vegetables and pasta and a store-bought dark chocolate cupcake for dessert. Nagisa mentally made a list of the ingredients he’d need to make that happen.

Afterwards, they’d call it a day and examine that bridge one more time. Maybe they could fix it themselves; it would be difficult to gather the materials and would take some time, but it’s better than being sitting ducks. Nagisa’s fixed a roof before, how tough can a bridge be?

...Hm. That’s not right. He’s never held a hammer before in his life. Weird.

“I can make fried tofu,” Shun said, suddenly. “Sometimes. I could try. I mean – today. Dinner. Your leg’s hurt”

“It’s okay, I already have a menu in mind.”

“No, it’s not that. I – um.” Shun coughed. “I want to make it.”

“For me?”

Shun did not respond, but Nagisa took that as a yes.

“Fried tofu and veggies then. Greens.” He affirmed. “Don’t look at me like that, they’re good for you.”

“Fine.”

“Cover your nose while you eat or something.”

“I said fine.”

He’s just like a kid. Nagisa laughed. “There’ll be dessert.”

Finally, they turned the corner. Shun reached for the keys on his pocket and

Bang.

Shun reached for the keys on his pocket and

reached for the keys on his pocket and

fell.

Eyes widened in shock.

Shun fell.

As if in slow motion, slowly, face down. To the ground.

“S-Shun...?”

Nagisa turned around. Blinked once, twice.

A green-haired girl wearing a swimsuit aimed at him.

Shun was on the ground.

Approaching quickly. Feet hitting the gravel.

“Shun, p-please answer me...”

Shun was not responding.

Gun. There’s a gun aimed straight at him –

Bang.

Two. Swimsuit fell down as braids’ bullet hit her straight in the chest.

“Shun...?”

Shun was not responding. The girl scowled.

“I must thank you for saving Niina’s life.”

What did she say? Shun was not responding. He was on the ground. Face down.

“But you have to get away from this village. Komishi-sama will make you regret otherwise.”

Aiming at her own head, she repeated. “Komishi-sama will make you regret otherwise.”

There was the final shot then.

Bang.

Echoing.

Resounding in the empty streets, in Nagisa’s ears.

Two identical corpses down on the ground.

“W-What... the fuck...”

There were not two, but three. More guns than the ones they retrieved. Bullets. Komishi-sama.

“H-Hey, Shun...?”

But none of that mattered, because Shun was not responding.

The deep wound on the back of his head colored his hair crimson. Nagisa turned him on his back, with his hands shaking and a sob threatening to break out –

Even though just a second ago, they were talking. Smiling. Bantering, like always, like they’ve done every single day so naturally in the past week they spent together.

Open, lifeless eyes.

He was not responding. He was not responding. He was not responding. He was not responding.

“W-Why...”

They were going to get out of there together.

They were going to find out what happened and search for their friends.

“S-So why... why is this...”

Nagisa’s sobs came out one after the other. The world felt like it was shaking – blurry, unreal, dream-like. This was not happening. Not to him. Not to him. Not to Shun.

"We... we were supposed to be together forever..."

That was all that he wanted.

The incessant questions of whether he was coming to school or not; the frustrating attempts to understand what was going through his mind. The food, the sleepovers, the games, the teasing, the visits, the touches.

At the core of it all was his desire to be with Shun.

Everything else was just greed.

He was not responding. He was not responding. He was not responding. He was not responding.

Shun was not responding, and this was not a dream.

The corpse before him was as real as his unceasing wails.

Shun was not responding.

Alone, Nagisa screamed in agony.

Shun was not responding.

Chapter 9: One. Alone.

Steadily, he became colder.

Nagisa regretted not having hugged him before, when he had his eyes closed on that bench. He regretted not having taken his hand on his while he could feel a heartbeat pulsing from his wrist.

Limp, cold, motionless. Chapped lips that were once pink turned white and so, so frigid.

He wants to hear him call out his name, one last time, even if were weak and full of pain. Even if was in a whimper covered in regret.

An eyeroll and a click of his tongue. That would be fine. Anything, anything he could do that was meant to keep others away but only brought them closer.

Under that tough exterior, he was just a boy, wasn't he?

...

Nagisa could no longer notice the bright oranges and scarlets in the sky; it's a dull grey now, so dull dull dull dull dull. Not a star in the sky, not a cloud in sight.

That he would leave him in such a day brought him to even more tears.

"Hey, Shun...?"

....

"Shun..."

I'm sorry for not realizing how much pain you were in.

I'm sorry for forcing you to let me in.

I'm sorry for not listening.

I'm sorry for being so stupid.

I'm sorry for not holding your hand.

I'm sorry for not leaning into your touch.

I'm sorry for not thanking you.

I'm sorry for not being brave enough to meet your eyes.

I'm sorry for not telling you all this in time.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Two hands cupping his cheeks. The mole and the long eyelashes are clearly visible on his now paler skin.

Late. He was too late.

"Hey, Shun..."

It's too late to explain what it means to him. Too late to wonder about what could have been.

Slow caresses. Tears falling down to his forehead.

"I... I love you."

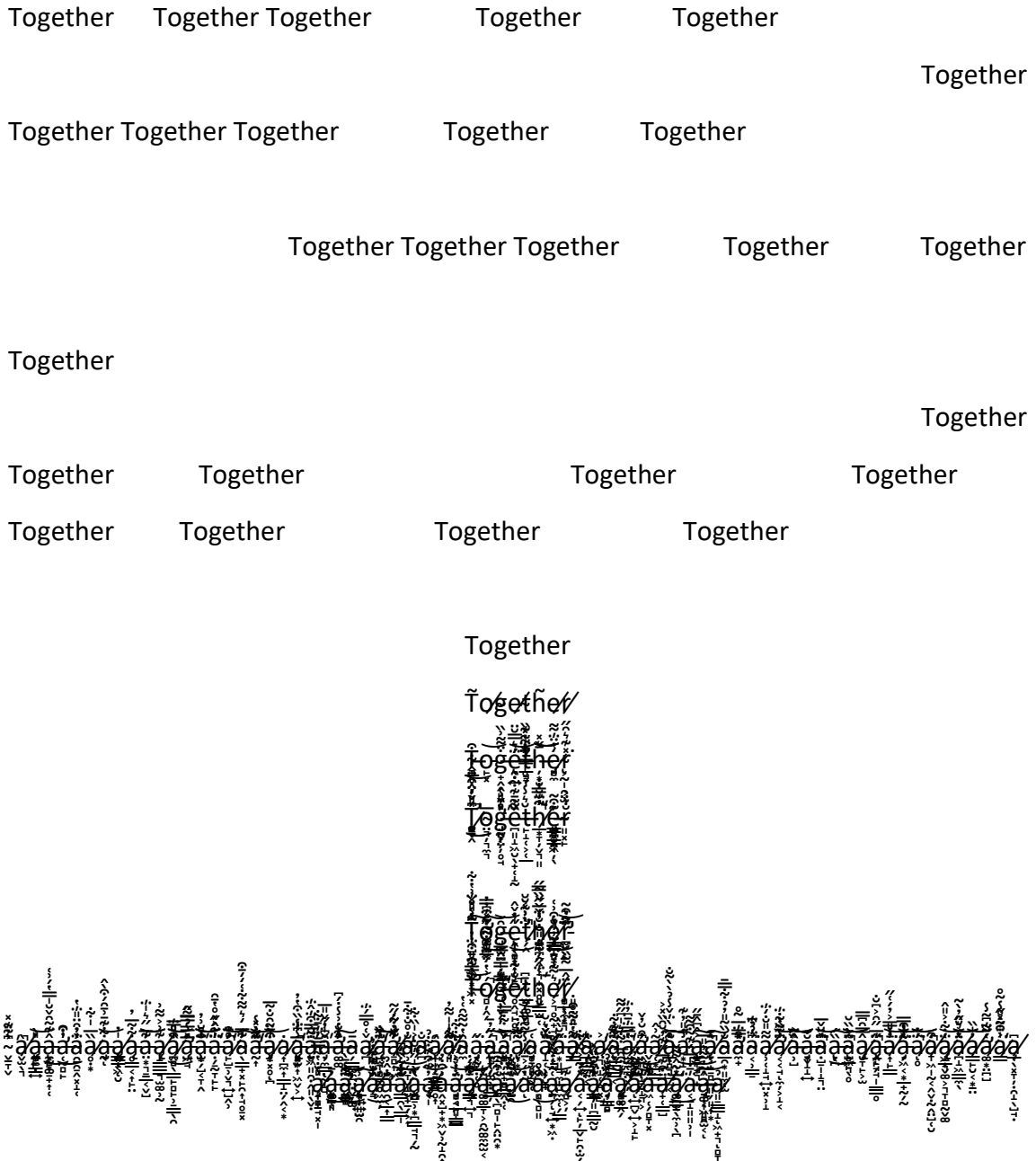
Most of all, I'm sorry that my cowardice only left me now.

Saturday, July 25th, 2016.

They are going home together.

They are home together.

They will stay home together.



*A broken marionette, a silver carriage
An hourglass of Samsara, a coral castle –
A half-formed wish, scales that tip arbitrarily
The girl's boundary wavering between reality and illusion
As if irreversible time repeats days and nights
The surface and depths of her consciousness
deftly replaces the cast of characters*

The white side of the checkboard has no more pieces.

"It is my win again."

*Since I can live for but an instant, I am not strong
But since I can live for eternity, I am not dull
I'm only... screaming and embracing myself*

The queen and the queen, face to face with each other.

"How many more times will you have to lose? You're pitiful."

*Turning and turning, the nightmarish sound of the bells
A system for following the path towards death;
life is a device for continuously birthing illusions*

*Turning and turning, the neverending sound of the bells...
I had the feeling
That Komishi-sama was watching me from somewhere...*

タナトスの幻想, Sound Horizon –

[Listen to Aun no Beats – it's the song that inspired his whole arc. \(31:53\)](#)

Thursday, July 17th, 2016.

And so, it begins again.

Circles upon circles of pain and regret.

Isn't it stupid? Isn't it cruel?

If only I could use some magic, I'd change the way the sun sets.

"Hey! Wake up."

"Nagisa! Your friend is waiting for you."

"NAGISA!"

...Oh, god. I stayed up too late reading that terrible webcomic again! I put on my uniform in a hurry and peeked at my phone's lockscreen.

"Shoot! It's past 8 already! I'm going to be late to school."

It's not like the school here is awfully strict. We barely have an actual class anyway. It's just..."

"Everyday is fun at school...as long as my friends are there."

Magic is not real, though.

So there's no point to such a childish wish.

Aren't you just tricking yourself?

Part three.

In the end, they broke out of it. They did.

The village began to move on, looking to the future instead of despairing over the present and suffering over the past.

They, too, learned to mourn and regret and to accept. Accept that the empty desks would be used again and that the flowers would wilt someday.

When night ends, so comes the sun again –



Chapter 10: Sunrise

The grief was there, but slowly, slowly, it transformed into something else.

Most days, it was simply... numbness.

And it was on was one of these days that the two of them sat down to have a very serious talk.

Very, very serious and important. So important, Nagisa could not focus on anything else the entire morning.

Because Shun had called him to a corner before they arrived in class and said *I want to talk when we get home, don't worry about it though* and it could only mean one of two things:

He was considering breaking up with him and this conversation would be the make or break for them.

Or...

He found out about the YouTube channel, and that Nagisa filmed a few episodes in his fancy computer room.

Both were terrifying.

"Soo the two lovebirds are ditchin' club activities again, eh?" Aya had teased them, unaware of Nagisa's impending doom.

Natsu snickered from the other side of the desk.

"Heh. You won't ever be ready to defeat my secret technique if you keep skipping out on--"

Thankfully, Hikaru covered Natsu's mouth with her hand, stopping his gloating. "Don't worry about us, I'll keep Natsu in line."

"As the game's club leader, I will allow this... for the last time! Next time, you'll get pranked! Both of you are--"

"Guys."

Aya's speech, cut short by Chikasen moving to their side and shaking his head, did not need to be finished for them to understand that this had to be The Last Time they ditched on the club.

"Everyone, I'll leave the key here. Lock up the classroom after you leave, alright?"

"Are you going home to write your nobel, Chikasen?"

It's a novel, the older members responded, in a chorus. Natsu shrugged.

"You guys are sooo lame lately."

They said their goodbyes, and that was it. Nagisa was not ready for this.

"Don't think you're freed from us, though. You'll just have to spill the beans later~"

Thanks a lot, Megu. Now that's one more thing to worry about.

If they break up, then the Game Club will be all awkward and weird for months.

If Shun kills him for the YouTube channel thing, then they'll mourn him for perhaps an equal amount of months.

There is no winning here.

The usual bike ride, down the fields and the swamps of an autumn-colored Shimazawa, was as quiet as usual.

This stretch of the road was straight, wide, and empty of pedestrians, allowing him to ride faster with no fear of causing an accident.

Shun held on tight to Nagisa. A confirmation that he was okay with speeding up.

Usually, the wind hitting his face, and the excitement of riding so fast, was something therapeutic. The pressure of Shun's hands on his waist felt good. Listening to the sounds of the birds and the critters around them was relaxing.

But this time, his mind was somewhere else entirely.

“Hey, Shun? Can I ask... what is that you wanted to talk about?”

“It’s not something we should discuss on a bike.” Shun said, his tone even and non-preoccupied.

*Oh crap oh crap oh crap. That’s **bad**.*

They kept riding.

“Dude, you’re scaring me,” Nagisa responded after a pause, letting out a nervous laugh, “you’ve gotta know what goes through someone’s mind when you say something like that.”

“It’s, it’s like – we just – I just need to say it loud.”

Oh crap oh crap oh crap?!

“Uh... uh-huh... is it like, related to a certain website where people, ‘y know, post –”

“Nagisa, eyes on the road.”

He needs to know! The suspense is going to kill him!

“ItwasNatsu’sidealdidn’tmeantodoitwithoutyourpermission”

Please don’t kill me.

Right as he blurted that out, he stopped the bike, and turned to look at Shun.

With the corners of his mouth turned down, and an eyebrow raised slightly higher than the other, his face was a mixture of Shun-branded annoyance and confusion.

“Nagisa. Nagisa, tell me the truth.” Shun said, with that tone he only uses when critiquing Aya’s shenanigans.

“YES?!” Nagisa screamed in response, his voice echoing through the empty fields.

Shun raised both eyebrows this time.

“What did you and Natsu do behind my back?”

Okay, so, that wasn't it. Shun did not know that his office was being used as a set for Nagisa's brand new review channel.

Nagisa had to explain everything to him. He wasn't even *that* annoyed, just bothered by the fact that Natsu was in there without warning. *Don't let the kids in, who knows what they'll do to my hardware?*

And that's fair. Not even Nagisa is allowed to touch that expensive tech stuff. Why are there so many wires? Why does everything light up? He doesn't need to know.

Anyway – Shun is not killing him.

...Which means it's the break up theory.

They're totally breaking up, aren't they.

They are. Nagisa can feel it in his bones as Shun hands him a cup of hot chocolate; this is not a *let's warm up and watch some bad TV dramas together* hot chocolate, this is a *I'm about to give you some very bad news* hot chocolate.

Shun sits next to him. He turns to look into his eyes; red ones meet purple-brownish ones and stay there, unmoving. Nagisa's breath is caught on his throat.

And, and there's a hand trailing up his back now – a preparing gesture for what's about to come, surely.

Nagisa gulps. Shun opens his mouth to speak.

"So... I was thinking, we –"

"Y-Yeah?"

The hot chocolate is not the one shaking, it's Nagisa's hands that are.

He didn't use to be his anxious and uncertain. He didn't. This was a new change, and he doesn't like it *at all*.

*I just got used to going to school and being in class and existing without Lea and Mao-chan and Shio around, my life needs new structure and YOU are that new structure with the morning bike rides and the good night calls and the movie nights; **please** don't break up with me. I can't handle it. I can't.*

"Shun, I don't want to br–"

"Can we make a few promises?"

...

Huh?

"P-Promises?"

Shun nods. The hand that wasn't trailing up the other boy's back moves up to cup his cheek, feather-light and... uncertain. Tentative.

As if he himself was unsure of what he was doing.

“I – I’m about to say something I put a lot of thought into... so please listen.”

Nagisa nodded.

Shun stroked his cheek slowly, carefully –

“I spent most of my life lying.”

Almost in a whisper, as if sharing a secret, he spoke.

“To myself, and to others. My family, even my mom...” Shun paused, letting the word *mom* sink in, “...She didn’t know. I was too scared to tell her.”

He continued.

“Even Aya and Megu – everyone. Even now, there are things I can’t tell them. I-I hate this side of me the most. It’s cowardly and messy and –“

No, stop. Don’t talk about yourself like that.

“ – I’m trying. I’m trying to change. I don’t want to lie to you, about anything. I want to be 100% honest with you.”

Both hands are on his cheeks now. Nagisa didn’t notice them move; he’s too focused on the pair of red, puffy eyes before him.

“Shun, it’s alright... Me too. I want to be completely open with you too.”

If Nagisa starts crying as well, then Shun will feel guilty and withdraw himself. That’s how he works.

Shun will always, always put Nagisa’s feelings in higher regard than his.

Right now, he is... clumsily trying to make his own feelings hold importance for himself, isn’t he?

“Shun...” Nagisa whispered, enveloping his arms around the dark-haired boy, “We can promise that... Man, of course I’m okay with that. We’ll always be honest with each other.”

The look Shun gave him then was *teary eyed, relieved and light*. It almost put him to tears.

“It’s *okay*. I understand what you mean.”

How could he think this was going to be their breakup, when it’s clear that this is the last things on either of their minds? When the *belonging* and the *structure* and the *affection* Shun offers to him goes both ways?

He’s trying so, so hard. To convey. To *feel*. This was the same boy who would push others away in fear that they would get hurt – *offended, disgusted, persecuted* – by his mere existence.

“It’s – it’s a promise, then?”

Nagisa loves him so much.

“We’ll pinky swear on it.”

The usual bike ride, down the fields and the swamps of an autumn-colored Shimazawa, was as quiet as usual.

This stretch of the road was straight, wide, and empty of pedestrians. It would be perfect for time to speed up, but Shun was not holding on to Nagisa’s waist.

In Shun-ese, it translates to *I’d rather keep the current speed.*

For Nagisa, the wind hitting his face, and the excitement of riding so fast, was something therapeutic. Listening to the sounds of the birds and the critters around them was relaxing.

That idyllic, joyful everyday with Shun by his side was like a dream that he could never reach out to.

But it is real.

Nagisa was reminded then, as he turned a corner on the now pebble-filled road, of a quote from the excerpt from the draft Chika-sensei let them read.

Our feelings are as certain as the fact that the sun will always rise in the new morning, aren’t they?

Chapter 11: 青春

(Seishun; youth)

October 2016.

Nagisa’s search history has certainly been judging him since he and Shun began dating. There is a Wikihow article for everything, it turns out.

He can’t exactly ask the others for advice – the twins share everything and Aya has no filter, Natsu and Hiichan are *nine*, and asking his Dad or Chikasen would be the equivalent of dancing on a carpet made of Legos.

So he can’t help it. He has to search somewhere else for answers to essential questions such as:

What to wear to a café date? What to not eat on a café date? Top 50 things not to do on a date? Ways to date successfully? How many dates before a goodbye kiss is acceptable?

Among other things. He keeps the tabs open when they're together. You know, just in case he needs to double-check he's not accidentally breaking any Dating Rules™. Those exist. They have to, right?

He woke up on that nondescript Saturday morning, and certified that he had his *10 best chances to hold someone's hand on a date* article open. It was important, very, very important, as this was going to be their 10th official date. According to Jean E. Walker from *Love Weekly*, that's an extremely big deal.

Couples tend to be more certain that they like each other around the three-month mark, which works out to approximately 10-12 dates if you're seeing each other once a week. This is in keeping with the long-standing theory of the ten-date rule.

So, tenth date. Important. Essential. This has to go well, not because he's afraid Shun will break up with him or anything, but rather because he wants him to be *more certain* that a break up is not coming soon.

Nagisa would need a 3 week notice before it happens, *if it happens*, to deal with it in a respectable way.

...Also according to Jean E. Walker, being *too much* into a guy is supposed to be bad. Girls are supposed to make the guy wonder, or something, so they can't be *too in love*. She can't also be *not be too in love*, because then the guy will think she doesn't have any interest at all.

But he's not a girl, so how does that work? Huh?? Nobody who writes these articles considers that!

"Nagisa, there's smoke coming out of your head."

"Huh?"

Dad clapped, breaking Nagisa out of his trance. There was a warm bowl of rice just waiting to be eaten in front of him now. "What's got you so worried? I thought you were excited to hang out with Shun today."

Nagisa groaned. "Dad, this is not just a simple hang out. It's like, the final boss of hang outs." He explained, making air quotes at the word *hang out*. "Don't tell Shun I told you this, or he's killing me."

"My lips are sealed." Dad laughed. "I think you've leveled up enough to defeat this boss, son."

"Not according to Jean E. Walker."

"Who?"

“Nothing. Nevermind.” Nagisa mumbled, picking up his chopsticks with one hand and his phone in the other. “Just thinking out loud.”

But then, he stopped.

A brand new question had just been posted to the page he was scrolling on. Nagisa read it, and widened his eyes.

Q: A guy I'm dating hasn't made me his girlfriend after seven weeks. What should I do?

Anonymous 1: If he doesn't know what you two are by that point, then he's not a keeper.

Anonymous 2: He's cheating on you. Dump him.

Anonymous 3: Troll question, obv. Mods?

“Dad?” Nagisa asked, his voice low. “What’s it called when you’re dating?”

Dad hummed. “Boyfriend? Girlfriend?”

“What about before that?”

“...Uh.”

Nagisa had never stopped to think about that. Oh, God.

They never officially said it, did they? It just happened, and they started calling their time alone *dates*.

Oh no.

>Megu-nee

>Megu-nee I need your help but you

CAN'T tell anyone else about it

IS THIS GOSSIP<

>NO THIS IS SERIOUS!

>I'M LOSING MY MIND MEGU-NEE

Ok ok omg<

I'll try to help<

>ok so I

...

Nagisa?<

NAGISA SPEAK TO ME<

oh god<

Last read 2:13PM.

F<

What the hell was he doing?

He's got to sort this out himself. Involving Megu in this would just end up making him dependent on her when it came to that kind of stuff.

Nagisa was born with a working brain and has full capability of expressing himself using his words. It's not like this is a stranger either, this is *Shun*. He can do this.

He can totally do this without messing up their extremely important 10th date.

Yep. Yep yep yep.

Yep.

He cannot do this.

Nagisa took one look at Shun as he opened the door, and told himself *I can't do this*.

He had *never* seen Shun with his hair up before.

"Hair."

"What?"

Now his mouth wasn't connecting to his brain. This is terrible. No good at all.

"N-Nothing. Haven't seen you with your, uh, your hair like that. Before."

Shun put his hand on his head and shrugged. "Didn't I tell you before that I do this when it gets sticky?"

Did he? Nagisa can't remember that. In fact, his mind is a complete field of white noise at the moment.

“Um... sorry you came all the way here.”

“What?”

Shun sighed. “I was just going to message you. I got a rush order from a previous client and it’s – sorry. I can’t go the town with you.”

Oh. No 10th date? Not today?

“O-Oh...”

“If you want to stay, you can – well, it would be really boring to watch me work, wouldn’t it... sorry. I don’t know what I’m –“

“I’d love to watch you work!” Nagisa interrupted. “I’ll be quiet.”

“Are you sure? It’s literally just me typing on the laptop for hours.”

Date at the movies or not, Nagisa wants to spend time with Shun. Even if they’re in separate areas of the same room doing their own thing...

...He’s got it bad, doesn’t he?

“Okay... come in then.”

Taking off his shoes, Nagisa entered Shun’s house.

He had been hanging out there a lot lately, both with the Game Club and just with Shun. Mostly Shun.

(That was one of the things about going on dates with Shun. The amount of places he feels comfortable enough to go are very limited, though that’s slowly been increasing. Stay-in dates are the most common with them, be it bingeing movies or eating something special or even just chatting until night.

It’s nice. Nagisa’s going to convince him to go to the Zoo one day though. It’s more about the animals than the people there.)

The living room was blissfully clean. It was no longer the ceiling-to-floor trashbags dump it once was.

“Actually, this is perfect. I have something for you.” Shun said, as he searched for something on the table. “Here.”

Nagisa looked at the folder he was handed. “What’s this?”

“Remember that friend I made on Twitter a few months ago?”

“The one who was crying over voice message about an idol graduation or the one who *accidentally* sent you –“

“Neither of these.” Shun scoffed, sternly stopping the other boy in his tracks. “I mean the one who’s trying to land a gig as an actor in Tokyo.”

Nagisa opened the folder. Shun continued to explain. "He got his hands on what his agent described to be, and I quote, *the worst pilot ever written.*"

"Worse than *Gibby*?" Nagisa gasped.

"See for yourself. They said it was so bad they didn't care if it leaked."

As Nagisa sat down to appreciate what was sure to be a true masterpiece, Shun opened his laptop. "Have fun. I'll tell you when I'm done."

Nagisa did not respond. Seeing him so entranced in the script, Shun grinned.

Comey, The Teenage Witch

Pilot

INT. Arya's kitchen - Day.

ARYA, a brown-haired teenage girl, goes down the stairs. She's wearing neon green pants. Her brother, MICKEY - a younger boy in his early 10s - leans over the kitchen and sighs.

MICKEY

Arya, I keep telling you. At this point, not even a miracle can save your fashion taste.

ARYA

Oh, shut up, Mickey! You just don't understand. All the pretty girls in Violetwood High are wearing these.

Mickey sighs. He takes a drink of his coffee, and watches as Arya puts on her also neon green coat on. Then, he widens his eyes, as she retrieves large pink earrings shaped like bowling balls from her pocket.

MICKEY

Mother of God! Get these away from my face!

Arya dangles the earrings in front of Mickey's face. (Laugh track.) He squirms in terror, for the earrings are too hideous. Arya then throws the earrings at the boy, and he runs away, screaming.

ARYA

Hah. Boys are such cowards! (Laugh track)

"Shun. Shun, did you read this before you gave it to me?"

"Shh. Working."

Sorry, Nagisa mumbled.

INT. Violetwood High Hallway - Day.

Fade in to Arya and her friend, Emilia, putting their notebooks in their lockers. A laugh track plays as the camera slowly zooms out, revealing that Emilia is wearing an identical neon green outfit.

Emilia turns to Arya and grins.

EMILIA

Did you hear about the new transfer student?

ARYA

No, what's she like?

EMILIA

I haven't met her yet, but my sister said she's... unique.

ARYA

Unique how?

Emilia opens her mouth to respond, but she's interrupted by a sudden noise.

The principal, MR. FOTZ, walks in. He is very irritated, stomping his feet as he heads to the lockers.

MR. FOTZ

You two! If you see that new girl Comey, tell her to come to my office IMMEDIATELY!

ARYA

Whoa! What's wrong, Mr. Fotz? Never seen you so angry before.

Mr. Fotz runs his hands through his bald head. Emilia and Arya look at each other, confused.

MR. FOTZ

Just... just tell her. I don't have time for this! If I don't make it to this dinner, wife's gonna cheat on me with the lawnmower again.

A laugh track. No one questions what Mr. Fotz has just said as he leaves, still stomping his feet angrily.

Tack tack tack tack. Shun types away on his laptop. Nagisa looks at the amount of pages left, and smiles.

This is bad, no, *funny* bad, which he loves very much. He's got a whole Youtube channel dedicated to reviewing and discussing bad media, after all. (*Yes, there are dozens of them. Dozens!*)

Shun knows how much he enjoys this kind of stuff, and he bothered to print it out for him, didn't he?

Adorable. With his hair up like that and this surprise he had for Nagisa, he might just win *Lover Knows Best's* Boyfriend of The Year award. Both the *Best Gifts* and *Handsomest* categories too.

INT. Arya's Apartment - Night.

We fade in to Arya's apartment. The lights are off as Arya walks in through the door, and screams.

There is a girl she had never seen before on her couch. COMEY's orange hair flutters as she gets up and smiles widely at Arya.

COMEY

Hey there!

ARYA

WHO ARE YOU? HOW DID YOU GET INSIDE?!

COMEY

I'm Comey, the teenage witch! (Cheering track plays on loop for a few seconds.)

ARYA

The new student? You're Comey? How did you get in here - wait, where's my brother?

Comey points to the ceiling. The camera focus on Mickey, who is hanging from the ceiling like one of the lights.

(Laugh track.)

ARYA

MICKEY! OH MY GOD, MICKEY, WAKE UP!

COMEY

Don't worry, he'll be fine. This happens sometimes. (Laugh track.)

Then, a blue cat walks into frame. Arya screams.

ARYA

Cat! Cat! I'm deadly allergic to cats!

Comey picks up the cat.

COMEY

She's not a real cat, no need to panic!

ARYA

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, SHE'S NOT A REAL CAT?!

COMEY

It's a long story. Would you like to hear it?

"Nagisa? If you want something to drink, there's iced tea in the fridge." Shun asked, stretching his hands up high.

Nagisa took his eyes away from the script, and shook his head. "Nah, thanks. Hey, Shun, did they tell you what's like... the point of this show?"

"It's supposed to be about a witch who improves people's lives with magic. Makes no sense, right?"

"Zero. I am obsessed."

Shun chuckled, and Nagisa wished he was sitting next to him so he could hear him more clearly. It's become more common to see him laugh these past months, but still.

Saying something like *I want to memorize that* would be creepy, so Nagisa simply smiled back and flipped through the script's page.

There were dozens of pages left still. This story was going nowhere and the gags weren't very original. A beautiful piece of bad media, yes, but not the best Nagisa has seen when it comes to rejected pilot scripts.

"Do you mind if I skip to the last scene?"

"Nope."

Perfect.

INT. Arya's Apartment - Night.

MICKEY

Oh, Arya, I'm so sorry.

Arya sniffles. She shakes her head.

ARYA

It's okay, Mickey. I understand now why you made a blood pact with Comey the teenage witch...

Camera pans to Arya's neon green outfit, now left in a corner of the room, abandoned.

ARYA

It was the only way to stop the Neon Wizard from brainwashing the female youth of Violetwood with his terrible fashion opinions. (Laugh track.)

Mickey and Arya hug. An 'awww' track plays.

EMILIA

But, what happened to Comey? We haven't seen her since we left the Neon Wizard's underground lair.

Mickey and Arya look at each other, and then at Emilia. They smile.

ARYA

Wherever she is, I'm sure she's alright. Comey the teenage witch's gonna keep on helping people with her magic.

MICKEY

Yeah. Her and that weird cat of hers.

The trio look at the window and sigh. For a moment, they see something twinkle in the sky, but it quickly disappears.

CREDITS ROLL.

Ah, what a masterpiece.

Truly, the work of our generation.

It had been about half an hour since Shun got started on his work. Nagisa flipped through the script once more, and came to his conclusion.

“What do you mean this wasn’t picked up? So much potential!” Nagisa laughed aloud, interrupting Shun’s typing again.

This time, however, Nagisa wasn’t shushed. Instead, Shun got up and walked over to his side. He sat down on the couch, next to Nagisa, and sighed.

“Dunno. Probably because it’s boring and aimless,” he mumbled. “Like this goddamn project.”

“Take a break then. Can’t be worth it wasting your weekend on it.” Nagisa responded, putting the script down. “It’s not good for your eyes to stare at the screen for so long.”

“Mm.”

Shun had his hands covering his eyes. Nagisa turned to face him, hoping to maybe offer him some tea –

Instead, he yelped.

In the half second Nagisa stopped to think about what to offer, Shun had moved to place his head on his chest. His arms wrapped around his torso tightly, as if he were holding on to him for support.

“U-Um, Shun?”

“Mm.”

The lights were on, and it was still day outside. This was unusual for him.

Ah.

...It wasn’t about the project itself, was it.

“That bad?” Nagisa whispered. “They weren’t mean to you, were they?”

Shun didn’t respond.

He’s upset on our 10th date and it’s not even my fault. Ah, I hate this.

“Who do I have to fight?”

A huff. "Don't."

"I'm serious. Aya-nee and I could take them on."

He hugged him back, wrapping his hands around's Shun's neck. There was nothing covering it, not a shirt nor a scarf or even his hair. Then, Nagisa felt Shun's head shake.

In this position, Shun must be able to hear his heartbeat clearly.

"Exciting script?" Shun quipped, nuzzling his head further. Nagisa reacted by pulling lightly on his hair and whispering *smartass*.

What followed was a silence interrupted only by Shun's breathing and the occasional sighing.

Nagisa hummed.

10th date. Had to cancel the movie because of work. We stayed in and did different things in the same room.

But he held on to me with the lights on for the first time.

*That's a much better milestone than any other that those sites swore was **essential** or whatever other buzzword they could come up with.*

"Stay over? Please?"

It's so much more important.

He would have other opportunities to ask him *what are we*.

That was the last of his worries at the moment. In fact, he didn't care what label Shun had in mind about them.

Rules are made to be broken. They'll sort that out some other time.

Nagisa's current predicament was much, much more dangerous.

"Uno."

Shun was winning in Uno again.

"Crap."

Last time he won, he had Nagisa do his laundry for a week. And the previous time, too, Nagisa had to *not wear his favorite blazer to school for five days straight*. People went and THANKED him for doing that, too!

There was no way out. It was Shun's win again.

"Okay. Okay, let's end this already. Have mercy on me."

Shun grinned. Another win, another punishment for the loser. Nagisa's sole comfort was that Shun disliked punishments that involved other people, unlike Aya, whose favorite ones always included a poor unsuspecting villager or two.

"This time it's payback," Shun smirked, retrieving something from a plastic bag. "For that time with the cat ears."

Of all the things to remember from the loops, of course it had to be that! Nagisa didn't even get to keep the pictures, and he barely recalls what that looked like. It's so unfair.

"Enjoy your bunny ears."

Huh. That's not so bad.

"I thought you were going to have me write a 20-page essay on the history of algebra or something."

In fact, these are pretty cute. Fluffy on top. A bit tight on his head, but that's to be expected. Decent quality for a 100-yen store haul.

"Are you taking pictures?"

"No."

"What! I want to see how I look!" Nagisa exclaimed, picking up his phone. "I can put on a bunny nose filter too."

"As long as you don't take them off." Shun grumbled, seemingly unbothered by Nagisa's reaction.

The point of a punishment was to embarrass the loser, so that didn't make much sense. Did he run out of chores to make him do?

Not that Nagisa had any complaints. It was the perfect excuse to try out some new filters, and sneak in some pictures of Shun disguised as selfies too.

(He has a collection of these. Shun hates having his picture taken, and when he has no choice, he refuses to smile or makes the weirdest face possible. They have ZERO couple pictures. Nothing to decorate Nagisa's homescreen with. Zilch. Nada.)

The one they took a few months back when the Game Club got together at the school during Summer vacation had Shun in it, next to Aya and Nagisa, who had their fingers on the sides of his mouth, forcing him into a smile.)

...Though it's worth a try, isn't it? If he doesn't want to, then he'll say so. It's not like they're back to hiding their feelings and keeping secrets from each other.

Things are different now. They are together. Whatever they are.

"Shunnn. Shun. Shun, Shun." He whined, poking Shun's shoulder.

"What?"

“One selfie. Just one. Please?”

Shun shifted on his seat. “For what?”

“I just want to have a picture of us.” Nagisa asked, handing him the phone. “Pleeease? Please?”

Shun looked to and from Nagisa’s expecting eyes several times before opening his mouth to respond. He had a new kind of frown on his face that wasn’t in the *Shun-ese* dictionary yet.

“Fine.”

Nagisa beamed. “Yay!”

“Just one.”

“And you’ll try to smile a little? Just a bit?” He pushed.

“...Once.” Shun relented. “No filters, and please don’t post it.”

Nagisa nodded. That was okay with him. He only wanted a picture of the two of them together, that was all.

A picture with his... whatever. Boyfriend? Sounds good, but it doesn’t matter. Shun is Shun.

“Say pyonpyon –“

“Don’t push your luck.”

Grumpy, grumpy Shun.

Nagisa loves him just like that.

Q: What goes on in a man’s mind after two months of dating?

Anonymous 1: Don’t get wrapped up into thinking too far into the future. Enjoy your time with him and let things naturally unfold as they inevitably will.

Anonymous 2: ‘How do I politely quit this chick?’

Anonymous 3: Mods? Account is fifty seconds old. This is obvious spam.

Anonymous 4: Talk to him, girl. Seriously, 90% of the questions in this section can be answered with a simple CONVERSATION.

“What the fuck are you reading?”

Nagisa jumped at the sound of Shun’s voice.

“...Nothing.”

He thought he had the phone's light on low enough not to wake him up.

"Nagisa, are you getting relationship advice from *Quora*?"

Oh no.

How does one get away from this?

"That's what all the cool kids are doing, Shun." Nagisa lied.

He only received a pinch on the arm as a reply.

October 2016.

He had no idea it was their 10th date until Nagisa explained it to him, right before falling asleep that previous night. He completely lost track of what were and weren't dates.

Yes, going to the movies and ordering a meal to eat together is a date. Bingeing a collection of increasingly terrible movies over a bowl of popcorn counts as a date to Nagisa, so a date it is. But he seemed to be considering even that time Shun got sick and they had to chat *over the phone* while he coughed his lungs out as a date. Somehow.

(That time was – it was embarrassing. He had a fever and started blurting out a bunch of things he did not want to say out loud. He cried his eyes out around thirty minutes into the call for reasons that he does not remember and does not want to know; then he apologized for it by saying even further embarrassing things that he would would be caught dead saying out loud in any other context.)

They were always together in some way, even before. Shun could not tell you the exact day they started dating, but frankly believed Nagisa must have it in his calendar in big red writing, ready to be celebrated at a moment's notice.

Did Nagisa note down things like *the date of their first kiss*? Oh, God. Shun does not remember. He remembers nothing. Suddenly, his brain is empty and he no longer knows how to count – don't some couples celebrate their 100 days together? They exchange gifts, don't they? Oh no.

He looked down at his phone. *10:20PM.*

Nagisa should be getting ready to go to sleep right about now. Shun opened their chat, and began to type, all while trying to distract himself from the realization that he can no longer count to 100.

(It was a tradition that started back when things were just beginning to return to normal... time-wise. Hikaru would message everyone a good morning to make sure they were all alive, and it became a thing between all the members of the Game Club to message her back.

Shun was a creature of the night, however. When he wouldn't respond, Nagisa would frantically call him. Messaging him good night was the solution Shun found to soothe his worries.

It evolved from there. Neither of them go to sleep without checking for a reply first.)

>Good night. Don't forget your homework.

Why do you have to remind me of that before bed?? (◡ ◡ ◡) <

>You should do a little bit everyday, not leave it all for the last couple days.

(πωπ) <

>Since when do you use kaomoji?

It's what all the cool kids do, Shun... you wouldn't understand<

Δ(◁)☞ <

Try it too, it's fun! ^(-ω^-) <

> ((◡ • ω •))

>Heh.

>Looks like you.

Read 8:23<

Shun frowned. Did he say something wrong?

...No, surely, there wouldn't be a hidden meaning to that emoji.

...

Right?

>You okay?

> ???

Sorry... <

(¯^¯*) <

It's just (//•/ω/•/∧)<

That was a critical heart on my heart... <

>Go to sleep, Nagisa.

Good night ♡ ~('▽^人) <

Dork.

If Shun's got a huge smile on his face right now, that's only for him to know.

>Good night.

Shun woke up to his doorbell ringing. Something of a panic went through his mind for a few moments, but it quickly went away as he looked at his phone.

It's October 5th, 2016.

He is not stuck in time any longer. There is no need to worry.

The doorbell rang once more. Someone was impatient, and didn't even bother to leave a message before showing up.

Why do people think that showing up uninvited is an okay thing to do? Shun needs at least 24 hours to mentally prepare himself for visitors. There is so much to worry about when someone enters your home.

But that's just not how normal people think, is it? It's a *nice gesture. Be grateful.* The world doesn't work that way, and he has to live in it no matter what.

Just accept it. That's how things are.

Sighing, Shun put on his usual hoodie. His pajama pants could pass for normal pants if you didn't look too closely. Whatever.

He headed downstairs, and there was a

door wide open.

The door to the outside was wide open.

Yet another moment of panic.

The memory of the box cutter he had hidden somewhere. He instinctively reached for it, somewhere in his brain, *where did I keep it that time?* But he couldn't say what *that time* meant, where in time it happened –

It's not there anymore. They took everything away when it ended. What ended? Time. It ended so this shouldn't be happening anymore. It was supposed to be over. They were supposed to be *safe*.

Footsteps approaching him, on the wooden floorboards, *tap tap tap tap*, Closer. Near the stairs there's the door to the kitchen but he can't hide in there, he can't hide anywhere at all. You can't hide from them because they were made to hunt you; that is what they were created for and they don't know anything else when they're being controlled like that.

They're coming closer to him and he cannot protect himself –

"Shun?"

"Jesus fucking Christ."

The head of pink hair before Shun blinked quickly at him. Clueless.

It was just Nagisa. Just him. No one else. No danger. Nagisa is not dangerous. He is the opposite of that.

Shun let go off the breath he had been holding all at once, gasping.

"For the love of fuck!" He screamed. "YOU SCARED THE SHIT OUT OF ME!"

Nagisa took a step back, startled. "S-Sorry! You weren't answering the door, so –"

Did he leave it open last night? How could he? What a dumbass. He's as good as the protagonist of some shitty straight to television teen horror flick. He has learned nothing from the –

"– I tried out the key you gave me."

...

"Key?" Shun breathed out. *Key, key, when? When did he give that to him?*

Nagisa carefully retrieved the key on his pocket, and showed it to Shun. He exhaled once more.

A silver key with a 'S' drawn with a red marker on top. Right. Right, that's right.

He gave that key to him a week ago under the joke of *if something happens I'll leave my fancy hardware in your hands* that made Nagisa mad at him for a bit.

"Shit." Shun mumbled. "Fuck. Sorry. I completely forgot."

"N-No, I get it. It's okay." Nagisa reassured him. "I was going to message you but I left my phone behind."

Shun wanted to scream.

“You’re shaking.”

Of course he is.

What was he expecting? It sounded like a *break in*, not a friendly morning visit. Always message him first, what’s so hard to understand? Not even Nagisa gets it, doesn’t he? *What the fuck is Shun supposed to do if no one listens to him?*

“Shun?” Nagisa repeated, quieter this time. “Are you mad?”

It’s not his fault. He didn’t mean it.

Calm down.

You’re pushing him away again.

No, no.

Stop.

He’s home with Nagisa. It’s alright.

It’s where he wants to be.

“...No. No, sorry. I – I just got scared. The doorbell. Startled me.”

Nagisa’s already soft gaze softened even further upon hearing Shun’s words. He put the key back, and reached to touch his shoulder.

Shun shivered at the touch. He realized he was feeling very, very cold.

The hand moved to his cheeks, and then his forehead. Nagisa furrowed his brows, and finally put the hand on his own forehead.

“Let’s put you back to bed.” He whispered. “Okay?”

Shun nodded weakly, leaning into Nagisa’s lukewarm hand. “Okay...”

He got his temperature taken shortly after, and was promptly offered tea and cookies. Shun could only imagine where the cookies would come from, as he didn’t keep any on his kitchen.

But Nagisa is ridiculous enough to decide to bake a whole batch of cookies solely for this. He absolutely is.

He knows that’s how Nagisa frets over people.

“I don’t need the cookies.” Shun tried to explain, before Nagisa could even start thinking of an ingredient list. “Or the tea.”

“Then what can I do? Tell me.”

Nagisa frets over people, even complete and utter *strangers*, because and he wants to help them. He wants to find a solution to their problems, or offer a way to comfort them.

If there's anything that the events of July 2016 taught them, it was that sometimes that just isn't possible. Some things can't be fixed.

Some people can't be saved.

...

"Stay here. If you're not busy." Shun muttered, this time a bit quieter.

"...Okay. I can stay as long as you want."

Shun huffed. "We have afternoon classes today."

"I know." Nagisa smiled weakly, moving his hand to touch Shun's forehead again.

Then, he grinned a bit wider. "Does that mean you want me to stay even after lunch then?"

He closed his eyes and pinched Nagisa's arm. "Think whatever you want."

He couldn't see, but he was sure that Nagisa had that grin still on his face as he pinched him back – on the cheek instead.

Shun knew he would not be able to sleep. His circadian rhythm was too messed up to allow that.

So did Nagisa.

"...Hey." Shun said, after a few minutes of complete silence. "...Lay down."

...He's going to be bored if he just stands there. Yeah, that's all.

There was the sound of someone shuffling. A pressure on the unmade bed's blanket, to his right.

Then, a long sigh, and that hand's back on his forehead.

"Want me to read you a bedtime story?"

"Shh. Enjoy the quiet moment, Nagisa."

"Okay."

'To Shun:

The day you were born was the happiest day of my life.

That's when I meant to tell you before I collapsed.

I love you, Shun. My body will recover, and we'll get away from this village.

We'll find a place to stay, maybe with Grandpa in Tachitachi. Or we could return to the mainland. For me, as anything's fine as long as we're together.

So please, don't say things like 'It would have been better if I had never been born' anymore.'

When he dreams of Mom, she's always smiling at him. Waving happily with her hair down to her shoulders, and her glasses up on her forehead.

But Shun knows that the moment she turns away from her, she'll start to cry.

She did that when she was alive; her deep frown would disappear and her tears would stop the moment Shun showed himself to her. That was how it worked.

Often, Shun would hide up on the stairs while his family argued, and silently listen in. It was not that Dad was violent. Grandma and grandpa liked her fine enough. His aunts and uncles were respectful of her.

He was too young to understand that Mom was different. That was why the late night arguing behind his back would happen, over and over again, with the same topics and insults brought up in-between shouts and admonishments.

She wasn't acting like a normal person. Like a wife. It's different in Shimazawa, you don't understand. This what happens when you marry an outsider.

That was the root of it all, wasn't it? Did anyone welcome her to the family with open arms, knowing that she was an outsider? Likely not.

It was also *weird* and *unusual* how Mom wouldn't smile at strangers. She was poker-faced and *hard to read*, and it made the neighbors or whoever was complaining about her *very uncomfortable*.

The lack of eye contact, the poker face – the looks and motions that were shared by them and them alone. Looking back, Mom was not the most social or outgoing person either. She had no friendships, not in Shimazawa or back in her hometown, as far as he knew. She read and wrote more than she spoke.

It was like Shun got all his biological... oddness? Weirdness. All from her. It just took a few years for it to show itself on him.

Even before that change happened, though, they understood each other somehow.

They just did.

Mom probably knew things about him that he himself took almost two decades to realize. She knew more than he'll ever discover about himself months, perhaps years from now.

At least that's what Shun tells himself when she shows up in those dreams.

She's trying to tell him something. It's important, so important, enough that she runs over to him – *Mom, the one who was constantly bedridden, running after him as if she had ever done that while she lived* – and asks him to pay attention.

But every single time, he wakes up before she can tell him what it is.

Of course she can't. The dead cannot speak.

And mom has been gone for a long time. Long enough that Shun's now much taller than she was. Long enough that the few pictures he had of her started to become yellow on the edges.

There are the stages of grief, or what have you, but Shun does not remember going through them. It was obvious from the start that Mom was gone and was never coming back; he knew what death meant and, for some time, celebrated that. There was no bargaining to be made, as it was made very clear from the beginning whose fault it was that her health deteriorated to such a point.

All he remembers is the sight of the adults' backs on him, walking away to somewhere he was not allowed to be.

Even though she was his mom, and none of them cared for her as much as he did.

No one mentions her; no one cares enough to remember that she ever lived in the Hiino household. Just like that, as if she were some kind of *mistake* that the family silently agreed to keep quiet about.

Mistakes breed mistakes. His place of belonging was gone now, just like that. He, too, would be kept a secret.

As you'd expect.

There is nothing you can do. That's just how it works. It's not worth it to argue over this.

Such stupid beliefs took too much from him already. From them, his family and his friends and the village itself.

Shimazawa had been stuck in time way before July 2016. From its people to its buildings to its way of life. Locked-in preconceptions that cannot be challenged, together with the strong, firm refusal to consider any other option. Even with the promises of change, the sun does not seem to shine any brighter. When will it? As hard as one tries, attempting to transform Shimazawa into something it is not will not be something easy.

Would Mom be happy to know that the village that rejected her had gone through hell and back? Would she, like Shun, briefly smiled a little at the thought of everything bursting into flames? Would she later regret feeling that way?

If Mom were still alive, would she be happy? Would anything have changed? If she were alive, would they be living in Shimazawa? Would Dad have stayed? Would Shun go to class like a normal person?

If Mom were alive, would she accept Shun for who he is, with all the cracks and rough edges and baggage he's come to carry?

...

He would ask all of that, loudly and desperately, but dead people do not speak. Once someone dies, they cease to be.

To Shun, it is idiotic to believe otherwise. It can comfort you for some time, yes, the thought that they are looking at you from somewhere and protecting you from harm. But that lie falls apart quickly and swiftly as time goes by. Mom was not secretly whispering into his ears at night. She was gone.

Death is the only certainty in the world. That is why it is both feared and revered, and why it's often taboo to discuss it. There is nothing to argue about when it comes to it, it just is. It cannot be controlled like everything else that is natural.

Humanity hates death because it is the only thing they can not get ahold of and destroy. It can be delayed, but it will come, sooner or later, to every living being on earth.

It's a fact that he wakes up to everyday.

Mom has been gone for a long time.

Shun opened his eyes. It was still bright outside.

Nagisa hadn't fallen asleep like he would usually do when Shun invited him to lay down with him. He had the incredible power of instantly sleeping the moment his head hit the pillow, every single time. A very enviable ability. One that Shun has expressed his confusion at many times, but it turns out that it's *normal* for people to fall asleep quickly when they're sleepy or tired.

This time, however, Nagisa was wide awake, facing Shun. His face was close enough that Shun could see the light freckles spread over his nose, and the thin stray hair almost touching his eye, stubbornly refusing to stay in place.

"Hi..." Nagisa smiled, shifting slightly. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. A bit." Shun muttered. Instead of smiling, he moved to fix the hair on the other boy's eye.

Nagisa leaned into the touch, humming. "It's funny how you always sleep like that."

The stray hair just wouldn't go back to its place. Nagisa's hair had grown longer the past months; it's longer than Aya's now. He keeps forgetting to brush it in the mornings, resulting in quite a few wild strands. Megu's going to kill him, if she doesn't offer to cut it first.

"Like what?" Shun responded, giving up on taming the hair with a sigh. "A vampire?"

"Yeah, like a vampire." Nagisa giggled. "You've got the dark hair and pale complexion and stuff. Just missing the lil fangies."

He keeps making that comparison every single time he sees Shun sleep. Shun never noticed he tended to sleep like that. He always woke up in some different position the next day.

...His was never a quiet sleep.

"I think it's funny, 'cuz I have to sleep on my side or else I'll have a weird dream. Last time it was about a giraffe becoming the Prime Minister." Nagisa continued. "And I have to hug a pillow or something. It's comfy."

Ah, yes, the Prime Minister giraffe dream. Nagisa made sure to share it with everyone as soon as he woke up the next morning. Apparently, the giraffe did a pretty decent job taking over Japan.

"Yes, I know." Shun clicked his tongue, smirking slightly. "You like hugging pillows, frog plushies and balled up shirts. Among other things."

There was another giggle, and now Nagisa had his arm hugging Shun's. He shifted a bit more, placing his head on Shun's shoulder.

"It's my arm now."

"Oh no. Whatever shall I do?"

"I'll trade it for a kiss."

Their eyes locked together. Clearly very proud of his genius move, Nagisa wriggled his eyebrows, and smirked.

But Shun was not one to fall for such amateur tricks.

"I don't kiss thieves." He replied, his tone even and uninterested. "It's my policy."

Nagisa pouted, and tightened his hold on the stolen arm. "This high-quality arm is mine forever then."

Rolling his eyes, Shun made a show of taking a big breath, and exhaling. "I especially don't kiss thieves with no honor."

Then, he gasped, raising his head slightly off the pillow. "What's that on the window? Do you see it?"

There's another thing about Nagisa. Everyone knows he's dense and about as self-aware as a bag of bricks, and that he has a liking for some bizarre hobbies, yes. But there's information about him that only Shun knows.

No one else's noticed the freckles on the top of his nose or the way he scratches his neck when he was embarrassed. His shampoo smells like peaches; it used to be lavender until

it ran out and he had to buy it in a hurry. Nobody knows that he quit using the lavender one because had Shun complimented the other scent.

Shun doesn't only want to keep the 'details' of their relationship between them for privacy, or fear of being the subject of even more village gossip. That's going to happen either way, and sooner or later, Nagisa's going to spill something to the twins. He doesn't care for that as much as Nagisa thinks he does.

No. He keeps it quiet because it's only for him to know.

He wants to haul those little bits of trivia to himself.

As he turned to look at the window, Nagisa raised his head. "What? What is it?"

At the same time, however, he forgot that thieves can't let their guards down.

For example....

*When he's kissed, Nagisa's mind goes completely blank. His eyes go hazy and he melts into it completely. It's adorable and Shun wishes he could take a picture to show him, because Nagisa insists that it's not true. It can't be, **'cuz he's not new at this anymore, alright?***

It's adorable.

With the arm thief successfully incapacitated under him, Shun smirked. "Got you."

Nagisa's beet red self could not formulate a reply.

"What do you have to say for your crimes?"

...

"Nothing?"

He shook his head, and bit his lower lip. His eyes were not staring at Shun's; they were gazing somewhere lower.

Finally, Nagisa nodded lightly, smiling that dorky lopsided smile of his that only Shun knows about.

"...'m branching out."

The hoodie thief left behind no calling cards this time.

(A few hours later, the doorbell rang again. An angry pair of twins ranted and raved at them. Nagisa had completely forgotten to warn the Game Club's group chat that they

were going to skip the classes. Shun had no idea that they even needed to do that. The fact that neither of them looked the least bit guilty for their actions only made the girls more enraged.

They would have to pay in free snacks and the worst punishments Aya could think of. Not just because of missing out on club activities, but because they were legitimately **worried** that something had happened. There was a bet going on between Hikaru and Natsu that Shun had finally snapped and burnt down Nagisa's horrible green uniform, and was running off to Brazil to escape.

The Brazil part was a bit too much.)

A youth that's spent just like that, with an idyllic sort of breeze constantly on their backs. The hours and days and months and seasons go on and on.

It's a constant reminder of the finite amount of time they have left as teenagers in Shimazawa.

A somewhat bittersweet longing for change.

At the same time, something like *I wish time would run slower than this* engraved itself into their hearts.

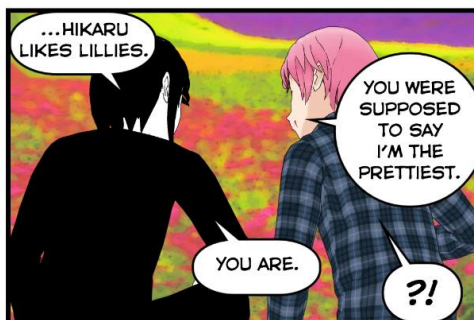
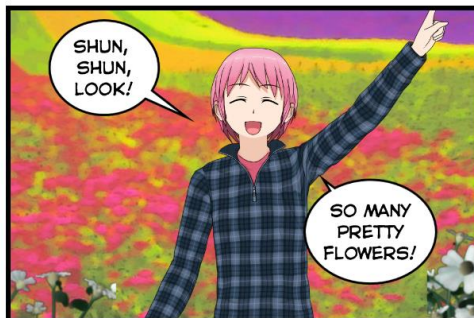
Change, melancholy, fear, reassurance, affection.

There is more to look forward to still. There is closure to be had.

Because, besides everything, they were alive. They still had time to speak and to be heard.

There is more to look forward to before they leave Shimawa.

DIFFERENT
WAVELENGTHS



Intermission III.

1. Does your partner consider himself an introvert or an extrovert?

S: He acts like an extrovert, but he's kind of both if you get to know him. He's sensitive, and he does get tired out when there's a crowd of people. Not the 'partying all night' kind of extrovert.

N: Total introvert. No question about it. Shun doesn't talk to people he's not close with unless they talk to him first... like, I'm pretty sure some of his classmates from the Uni think he's mute...

2. How does your partner prefer to show affection? (Touch? Gifts? Acts of kindness?)

S: Everything? Everything he does is affectionate. I don't know how he does it.

N: He's clingy! Heheh. And he's sweet. When I get sick, he sticks next to me the entire time, so we both end up sick in the end.

3. How does your partner prefer to *receive* affection?

S: He likes praise. A lot. And hugs.

N: (//ω//) (*∇*) (//•/ω•//)

4. How does your partner define an argument?

S: He doesn't say the word argument? I guess when we disagree on something important, that's an argument. Anything else is a misunderstanding or just banter.

N: Sometimes Shun will go '*sorry what I said during that argument*', but I don't remember an argument at all. We settle things out pretty quickly.

5. What does your partner like to talk about at the end of each day?

S: About everything and everyone. He blabbers on and on and on until he gets too sleepy to speak. It puts me to sleep sometimes.

N: He talks about his work... oh, he's super excited when he talks about new games that are coming out. Shun is talkative about things he enjoys.

6. How does your partner respond when they're angry?

S: He keeps it in, but it's easy to see on his face if you know what to look for. He ends up screaming and shouting once it all comes out. Nagisa's only ever hit someone out of anger once, and they deserved it, so.

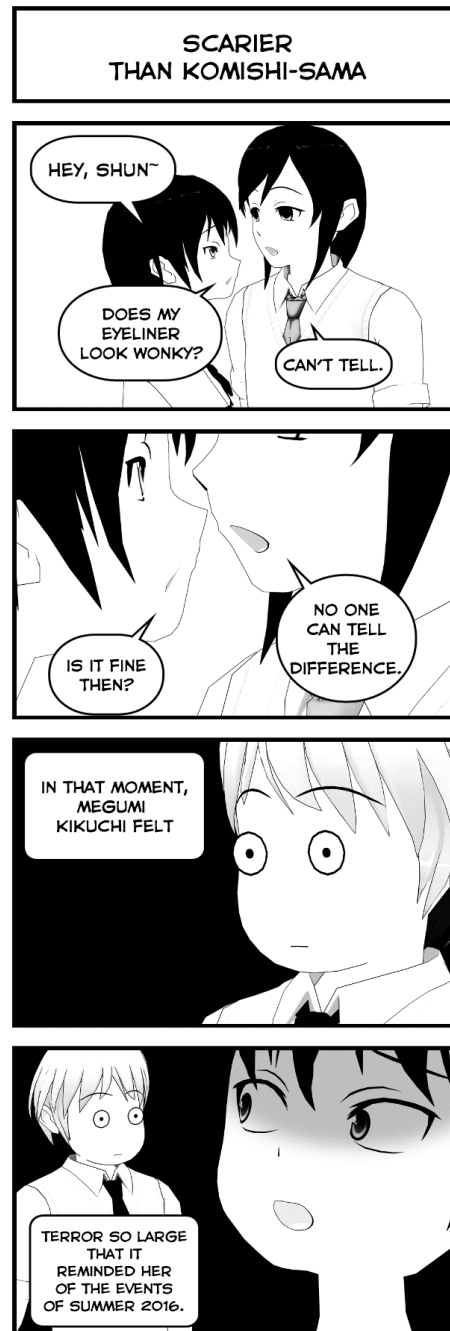
N: He reacts in all kinds of ways, I think? He always feels terrible afterwards though. Lately he's been ranting a lot about a client who doesn't understand what a deadline is.

"Alright, we are NOT answering the last ones."

"Which ones – oh. Umm, I guess that's it then. That was fun, wasn't it?"

"...Mm."

Intermission III end.



Chapter 12: Birthday, Part 1.

April 20th and April 21st.

The preparation for the twins' birthday party was one heck of an adventure.

The birthday card Natsu and Hikaru had made, signed by Chikasen and the rest of the class, was almost *put on fire* when Shun tested his lighter on the candles. It was a close one, to say the least.

Then, the decorations they ordered from the internet just wouldn't arrive. The delivery guy had trouble locating the house, and somehow ended up at the village's clinic. The surprise was this close to being ruined!

But more importantly, Nagisa was unsure of how the cake tasted, even with everyone taste-tasting his several previous tries and insisting that it was perfect. No, it wasn't – the strawberries weren't as fresh as they should, and the chocolate frosting didn't mix well with the cake itself.

"Nagisa, they're going to love it," his dad reassured him, again, as he filled up more green and blue balloons, "I've never seen you bake a bad cake."

"Don't you remember grandma's birthday that one time?! It was burnt!"

Shun eyerolled from the corner where they were keeping the huge pile of presents. "You mean the one you baked when you were 8?"

"Grandma loved that cake, son."

"No, she didn't. I saw you guys throwing the slices I cut for her in the trash!"

Ah, he knows the cake isn't bad, but it has to be perfect! How else could he show the girls how much he appreciates them, warts and dad jokes and insistent teasing and all?

Thankfully, Nagisa's worrying was promptly interrupted by the warning coming his walkie-talkie.

"S.O.S! Twins spotted leaving the school! Everyone, get ready!"

Oh, man. I hope they like it...

It would all be alright in the end, of course. The cake was a success with both the guests and the birthday ladies.

It turned out to be the first time in over 10 years that Megu's birthday was celebrated properly, too. Aya would always buy her a cupcake with her allowance and sing *happy birthday* instead.

Nagisa's chest felt tight when heard that. But it's fine.

There would be many more birthdays for them to celebrate together still.

May 1st.

Horror went through Shun's eyes when he realized Hikaru's birthday was tomorrow and he had *absolutely nothing to give her*.

She asked for no surprises, no parties. Just a congratulations and a present – *heh, as mature as she acts, she is still a kid who loves getting gifts* – just that would be fine for her, she said.

The twins got her a *Sylvanian Families* house, featuring the four-bunny *chocolate rabbit* family. It was expensive and burned all the allowance they had saved, but Megumi knew Hikaru secretly loved the little bunnies and their comfy houses. She was going to love it.

Nagisa fully began to work at the pizzeria so he could learn how to make the chocolate pizza the kids like so much, just so he could surprise Hikaru on her birthday. He went the extra mile, and the pizza is *delicious*. There is no comparing that effort.

Meanwhile, Chikasen helped Natsu write a story featuring them going on an adventure around the world. The others don't get to read it until Hikaru does, but the teacher promised that it was good. Natsu has one hell of an imagination, so of course it is.

I have nothing to offer her.

That thought followed him the entire day, through classes and lunch break and club activities. He can't get her a gift card like he did for Chikasen, she's *nine*.

"What do you want for your birthday?"

As embarrassing as it was to ask that, he had no other choice.

Hikaru tilted her head to the side, thinking.

"Cup noodles."

"...What?"

"I want to eat the crunchy cup noodles you make. Like old times."

Oh.

Just like old times, she says.

"Are you *sure*? Cup noodles for your birthday? That's only once a year. Are you absolutely sure that's what you want?"

"Yeah. Cup noodles and pizza."

Okay. Yeah, he can do that.

"Explain the significance of that to Aya first, or I won't hear the end of it."

"It's more fun that way." Hikaru smirked in response, and Shun couldn't hold in his own lopsided smile.

"You're devious, Wakabayashi."

Asking for slightly uncooked cup noodles for a present...

Kids these days are dangerous, Shun concluded.

It took a week for things to get weird again.

“All right, everyone! It’s time to reveal the casting for our play!”

Someone – it might’ve come from an offhand comment from Nagisa, naturally – thought it would be a great idea for the club to get together and work on a play.

“It’s for the children, Shun!” Aya had exclaimed, pushing him to the classroom. “Kids love fairytales and fun costumes.”

“Do you have any idea how expensive it is to put on a full play?” Shun tried to argue.

But it turned out that Nagisa and Megu were going to work on the costumes themselves, a few adults who worked with arts and crafts were willing to help build the set, and Aya’s mom liked the idea so much she was willing to *pay for the remaining costs*.

There was no way out of it.

“I want to be Tree #2.”

“There’s no Tree #2! We don’t need anyone dressing up as trees.”

“Then, what’s the role with the least lines and/or screentime?”

Aya stared at him. “Shun, it’s for the *kids*.”

Yes, kids! Kids are mean. They’re worse than adults in some ways because they can get away with so much, and you can’t be mad at them because they’re *kids*, yet Aya’s here, acting like she’s never seen what a pissed off little boy and some misshapen rocks can do to a house.

“We don’t have time for this. Sit down and listen!”

There is no God.

“Ahem! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you... the cast of Sleeping Beauty!”

Aya began to write the names of each member on the blackboard. Shun’s eyes, once again, widened in terror as he waited for his name to appear.

Maleficient: Hikaru

Narrator: Natsu

Fairy Godmother #1: Megumi

Fairy Godmother #2: Ayame

Princess Aurora: Nagisa

“Why does only Nagisa get to be the princess?!” Natsu yelled.

“We can’t have two sleeping beauties, Natsu.” Aya responded.

“*Lame.*” He muttered, sinking into his chair with a huff.

Next to him, Hikaru had a wide, smug grin on her face, which could only mean this was not a random pick and they totally rigged it to be the way she wanted it to. Or it was some kind of twisted birthday gift...

Prince Philip: Shun

“I REFUSE.”

Nope, no, no, nope nope nope. NOPE. I am NOT going to humiliate myself like this.

“...I told you he wasn’t going to like it. Why did you have to do that?” Megu said to Aya, while waving her hand in an attempt to calm the boy down. “See, Aya, I could play both the Prince and Fairy Godmother.”

Aya frowned. “But Prince Philip’s a guy.”

“Nagisa’s a guy too, and he’s playing a girl. What’s the difference?” Natsu asked, shuffling in his seat. “Don’t be mean to Shun.”

Aya said something about Natsu *not being helpful*, but Shun was too irritated to pay attention. *That’s not the point. They could’ve casted me as a rock or whatever and I still wouldn’t do this.*

Noticing that Nagisa was awfully quiet so far, Hikaru turned to him. “Thoughts, Nagisa?”

Everyone looked at Nagisa. He was sitting on his usual seat.

“Nagisa?” Megu repeated.

Nagisa only hummed, and tilted his head as if deep in thought.

He always enjoys the chance of dressing up in pretty clothes and having fun with the Game Club members, so why...? Shun thought he would be more excited about this than anyone else. Heck, he didn’t even let out a quip about Shun being the Prince –

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Nagisa finally said, his voice low and dry.

Everyone went silent. Megu nodded silently from the teacher’s podium.

To Shun, the air inside the classroom suddenly became heavy.

“W-What?” Aya gasped. “What do you mean?”

Nagisa got up, and walked towards the blackboard. “I know you guys don’t mean it, but it’s going to expose us too much. Especially if it’s a play for the kids.”

....

“It’s fun and all if it’s just us, but I’m not comfortable doing this.” He continued. “You should invite some of the kids to play the princess and the prince instead.”

Nagisa finished speaking, and patted Shun’s shoulder. “Let’s go. Sorry, guys.”

“Wait. It was my –” Aya began, but Megu interrupted her by shaking her head.

Another pat on the shoulder, and Nagisa opened the door. Shun looked back at the kids and the twins, and whispered another *sorry*.

It was still silent when they left the school together.

“Before your brain starts being mean to you, I didn’t do it for you,” Nagisa immediately said, as soon as they were out of eyesight. “Not just for you anyway. I really don’t think it would be a good idea.”

It was like he could read Shun’s mind.

“People already talk enough about us. I don’t want them to somehow involve the kids in it.” He said, and stopped for a moment. “They’re good kids. They just imitate their parents ‘cuz they’re *kids*.”

Hearing Nagisa say that was bittersweet. Sweet, because he considered everyone’s feelings about it and put it into words before it got too out of hand.

Bitter, because this was exactly the kind of thing Shun feared Nagisa would go through when they *got together*. The kind of understanding of the world – and loss of innocence, in a way – that only those who understand what *otherness* feels like can achieve.

Nagisa was warned that this would happen. He knew that he would not be looked at as just an outsider anymore. He would be something more; he would receive another characteristic that would define him as someone who *did not belong*.

He heard all of that, and said: *so what?* He said: *you’re more important to me than any of that. You can’t scare me away.*

And so, without noticing it, their hands were linked together. Literally, and figuratively.

In a couple more months, they would be leaving Shimazawa together. In a couple more months, they could start anew somewhere else. Somewhere that might not be necessarily better, but *different*. Perhaps that’s what they need.

“...Nagisa. That’s really sweet of you.” Shun murmured. “Tell me the truth, though.”

Shun paused. Nagisa looked at him expectantly.

“You did want to be the princess, didn’t you?”

Nagisa let out a loud snort, and laughed for a few seconds, before responding with a smile.

“Who do you think I am? The prince’s outfit is *lame*.”

“Totally. The red cape does not do him any favors.”

A chorus of mutual laughter resounded through Shimazawa’s pebble roads then. Swinging their linked hands together, they walked leisurely, heading to somewhere and nowhere all at once.

"I'm talking more about the hat – it's shaped like a weird *triangle*. I would not be caught dead wearing that."

*(Aya apologized shortly after, explaining that she changed the casting on the spot even though Megu told her not to do it **that way**. There were no bad intentions or hurt feelings, so it got sorted out quickly. That was a mistake they all knew not to repeat again. Playing dress up would stay solely as something they would do at the pizzeria now and then, and it would be something they would keep to themselves.*

The play didn't end up happening in the end.)

June 11th.

A month and ten days after getting Hikaru her unconventional birthday gift, and the play bursting into metaphorical flames, Shun was once again struck with horror.

Natsu's birthday party is *in fifteen minutes* and neither him nor Nagisa got him a present. No toys, no cake, nothing.

"Shun. Shun. Listen to me. We're *screwed*." Nagisa mumbled to him, far away from the *Happy Birthday* banner Megu was putting up.

"Yes. Yes we are, Nagisa," Shun mumbled back, knowing they sounded like some sort of standup comedy duo about to get booed off the stage. "Don't think you can bake a cake before he shows up, do you?"

"Impossible. I-I feel SO bad I completely forgot about it 'cuz of the moving and stuff..."

"I figured..."

"Natsu is like a puppy, you two." Hikaru called out to them, clapping her hands with a disapproving stare. "Write him a card and claim that it's one-of-a-kind, sent by aliens... or something. He'll be thrilled."

"That's mean, Hiichan! The poor kid!" Nagisa objected, and then gasped. "You're not pulling that on him, right?"

"I wonder..."

Saying that, Hikaru left, heading to the ever-increasing pile of presents near the entrance of the room.

Thanks. Very helpful. It's not like this is going to be his last birthday they can celebrate in person before they leave. Yep.

No toys, no cake. What else could a kid want? Nothing. They don't even have any cup noodles left... not that Natsu would accept that.

They're the worst big brothers ever.

As if sensing the chaos, Aya turned to look at the boys, smirking. "Come write y'all's names on our gift. We'll say we all bought it."

"Yeah, yeah. Remember this when OUR birthday comes around." Megu added, handing them a pen, also all-knowing. "For real though, Natsu wouldn't hold a grudge. He'd understand."

Shun raised an eyebrow at Megumi's words. "Yeah, but he's a kid. All kids want presents and cake."

"Guys, S.O.S! Chikasen has the package! I repeat, Chikasen has the package!"

In exactly fifteen minutes, the crisis was averted. Natsu would be arriving soon.

They get to keep their honor as big brothers this time.

If Natsu's confusion at their apology for not having a separate gift for him made Shun teary eyed, that's only for him to know.

"I'm blessed to have any presents at all."

Natsu...

The day they leave draws closer.

Shun is going to miss him very much.

July 9th

Everything was going wrong.

A sudden downpour so powerful that they could not leave their houses, followed by Natsu spraining his knee after a bad jump from the school's seesaw, Megu catching a bad cold, Nagisa getting distracted and burning the cake.... And so on, and so forth.

You've baked a million cakes, how the heck did you burn this one?! Aya had questioned then – or at least, that's what Nagisa believes she said over the phone. The connection was stupidly weak, and it was a miracle they get managed to chat for a few minutes.

Sometimes even great chefs get distracted! It happens. Nagisa will not give any further details.

"I'm just saying," Nagisa grumbled, as he set out the ingredients on the kitchen sink once more, "if she's gonna be so mad about it, then why doesn't she bake it herself?"

Chikasen was out of Shimazawa until the end of the downpour anyway, it's not like they were in a rush!

Dad laughed from his corner of the kitchen, setting down a cup of milk. "They want the best of the best to make the cake for their teacher, of course."

“And Aya’s cooking is a fire hazard.” Shun added, pitching in from the living room. He was watching a weirdly depressing anime featuring a protagonist who could turn back time using his watch, instead of, you know, helping with the cake *he* was partially at fault for ruining.

That aside, baking a simple cake was as easy as breathing, at least for Nagisa. There was no need to panic any more than they were already panicking.

That wasn’t Nagisa’s biggest worry at that moment.

“Enough milk?”

“U-Uh, yeah, thanks, dad.”

Things had been awkward between him and his dad ever since he found that Nagisa was using his part-time work at the pizzeria as an opportunity to let Megu-nee dress him in up.

It’s not that he reacted badly. It’s just that Nagisa was not ready to have to *talk* to him about it. Unfortunately, not a lot of adults from his generation have any clue of what things such as *gender expression*.

(It was Megu who taught him about those things. He had no idea if he was using the term correctly.)

Nagisa is pretty certain that his dad thinks he wants to be a girl or something, but that’s not it. And he’s likely got some weird ideas in his head too, what with the one the questions he made when he found out being *does Shun know about this?*

...Anyway. Chikasen’s birthday cake, that they promised to give him once the rain calmed down. That’s his priority.

“So, Shun, have you got the chance to visit Nagisa at work yet?”

Goddamnit, dad.

“N-Nooooo..... nooooope....” Shun replied, as if he was having an asthma attack. “W-Why? Was the pizza not up to par?”

“No,” Dad smiled, “Just curious. A lot’s changed with place since I last ate there.”

Furiously mixing the ingredients together, Nagisa wished he was anywhere but there.

“Y-Yes, I guess so. Hah... hah...”

“Hey, Shun, I just remembered my phone’s low on battery. Could you go get my phone’s charger upstairs?”

Shun – dear, sweet Shun, as much as Nagisa loved him – *did not know how to handle male authority figures*. Like an allergic reaction, his braincells seemed to not be able to connect to each other out of pure fear, and it was not a pretty sight.

One time, he almost *cried*. Chikasen’s the sole exception, and even *that* friendship took longer than it should have to work out.

"S-Sure!" Shun immediately replied, clearly very glad to have an out of this conversation. "I-I'll bring it back. Yes."

Nagisa let out a sigh as he certified that his boyfriend was out of eyesight. He stopped mixing the batter, and turned to his dad.

"Dad, Shun knows and he's okay with it. Could you please not scare him off?"

Dad widened his eyes. "That wasn't my intention at all."

"It didn't sound like it." Nagisa muttered. "It's not a secret or anything, I just didn't mention it before 'cuz it's not a big deal."

"Nagisa, I think you're gotten the wrong idea." Dad responded, putting his hand on Nagisa's shoulder. "You can dress however you want, I'm just worried about what people will say."

People already say a lot, so what's one more scandal?

"You didn't look like you were worried *only* about that."

It was dad's turn to sigh. He clicked his tongue, and picked up the packet of flour on the counter.

"I was surprised because... well, how do I say it..." he began to explain, analyzing the flour with much interest, "It's like if we added new steps to grandma's recipe. We don't know if it's... if the people who try it will enjoy it as much."

...Nagisa had never thought about it that way. To him, changing even one milligram of that recipe was unthinkable...

Cake metaphors. That's Dad for you.

"No, that's just me being close minded." Dad continued, squeezing his son's shoulder. "I'm sorry. Son, you know I love you no matter what."

Any annoyance and doubt Nagisa had in him had melted away.

"...I know. Me too."

The most important thing when sharing a recipe is to have confidence in it, isn't it?

"Friends again?"

Nagisa smiled. "Yeah. We should get back to the cake before Aya-nee calls me again."

The cake. That's what important. He can't get distracted again, even by this wholesome father-son moment.

Chikasen's birthday has been a mess so far. That's what's bothering him the most right now....

"Alright, son, let's finish this cake, Amamiya style!" Dad cheered, doing a thumbs up.

That's right. It's a matter of *honor*. New recipe or not.

It's cake or death in this household.

“Shun? We’re done with the cake. You alive in there?”

Nagisa opened the door to his bedroom. Shun had been MIA since he was asked to get the charger, which was about thirty-five minutes ago.

Shun greeted him with a grunt. He was laying down on the bed, his eyes closed and an arm over his eyes. He had a bit less energy to spare on uncomfortable conversations than other people did.

“Too much emotion for one day?” Nagisa asked, sitting down by the bed.

Shun looked like he was trying very, very hard to keep his eyes open. He nodded.

“How did your dad react?”

“He was just a bit confused. We’re okay now.”

Shun opened his eyes. Relief spread over his face as he rolled over to the left corner of the bed.

A comfortable, cozy silence filled the room as Nagisa laid down next to him on his too-small bed. He was reminded of that time with the futon...

“...Nagisa.”

“Yeah?”

*“You took the cake out of the oven before you came up here, **right?**”*

Chikasen loved the cake. He had no idea of the stress they had gone through to get it done, and he doesn’t need to. Unfortunately, neither Aya nor Natsu could make it to school when it was handed to him.

It was a little sad that they couldn’t go all out on a party with balloons and tweezers and music this year, but the rumor went that his family in town did show up to celebrate with him and Chiemi, so that’s good.

What’s important is the big smile he had on his face as he shared the cake with the rest of the class. *It’s your best of the year*, he later told him.

Yet another success for pastry chef Nagisa Amamiya. Those chef wannabes in America have *no clue* of what they’ll be up against once the the new trimester begins.

...Yes, it was almost time.

That was the last birthday they could celebrate before leaving Shimazawa. That was also the last time Nagisa would be able to bake with his dad, too.

From now on, everything is going to change, isn’t it?

It’s scary.

January 1st.

Before Aya and Megu's or even the kids' and Chikasen's birthdays, there was Nagisa's birthday.

Plans were being made weeks in advance for a surprise party, a huge cake, presents --

That's why everyone was surprised when he asked them to go celebrate New Years instead. *A congratulations and a hug is fine*, he claimed.

He had no cravings for a cake, and the presents could be given in another date. Nagisa was thankful that they respected his wishes.

"I don't like birthday parties," he had confessed to Shun, on a snowy day that was too cold for winter in Shimazawa, "Never have."

The boys both stopped on their tracks then. Looking down for a moment, Shun could see their footsteps on the snow.

"What? I thought you loved celebrating birthdays."

Nagisa nodded. He followed Shun's gaze down to the snow, and their linked, gloved hands.

"I do. Other people's birthdays." He stopped. "I dunno, I just - I don't like being made a big deal about."

A pause. Nagisa kept his head low as he waited for Shun to formulate a response.

Shun was thinking, wondering; going over the revelation he had just heard. He opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it.

Nagisa waited a few more seconds.

The pressure of the hand holding his own increased sharply. He was on holding on *tight*.

"What if I want to make a big deal about you?" Shun whispered. "Of you being born?"

A silence followed.

It was Nagisa's turn to be speechless.

He... he had never thought about it like that. But that was what birthdays were, weren't they?

Celebrating life...

"Then... um, you can do that, but..." He whispered back, after digesting the shock.

"...Do it, like... quietly."

"Quietly?" Shun repeated, turning to face him.

Close like this, Nagisa could see Shun's face clearly. The hair that would usually cover his cheeks was swept back in a ponytail held together by one of Hikaru's spare hair ties. Not because it was sticky, but because it was getting long.

"Yeah... quietly."

Nagisa liked it like that.

"Okay. Then..." Shun grinned, as he brought the other boy closer to him with a hand pressing on his back, "...Want to grab some blankets and watch some really bad movies together? Just us."

Sounds perfect.

By the time the second part of the movie franchise they were watching began to play, Nagisa was not even facing the television screen anymore.

With his head on Shun's chest like this, he can hear his heartbeat clearly. Shun's hands on his hair and back feel grounding and warm. This is better than a party.

Your hair smells nice, Shun mumbled, and all Nagisa could do was nod. Responding would mean turning his head away from those rhythmic, comforting beats. Not feasible.

This was what he considered a good birthday. A great one, even.

A hug and sushi for lunch from his Dad, and a visit from Hikaru and Natsu before they headed to the shrine. Aya and Megu sent a voice message singing him happy birthday. Even Chikasen sent him a *letter*, days in advance, to congratulate him.

And now, he's staying in, covered in half a dozen blankets, and watching terrible movies that Shun hates with a passion but struggles through because Nagisa loves them. And it's his birthday, so Shun has no choice.

(Truth to be told, Nagisa had given up on watching the movie quite a while ago. Shun is surprisingly clingy when the lights are low.)

Still, the film played on in the background. The low blue light it produced transformed the moment into something that felt like a dream. One that, for once, he did not want to wake up from.

Birthday. What a word.

For a long time, it had been synonym for threats and long hangover speeches, followed by hugs and affirmations. It was never one or the other; always both, in its extremes, for Mom was a woman of high highs and low lows. Her mood would shift and transform based on what day it was and how much she had drunk.

The date of Nagisa's birth unfortunately happened to be one she was not very fond of. As a result, neither did he.

...It was not like he was close enough to celebrate with his 'friends' from school either. Grandma and grandpa were getting too old to come visit, especially after that failed knee replacement surgery.

He would bake himself a cake, but that was it. Most years, they turned out to be the most tasteless, inedible cakes he had ever made.

Those were memories he could not escape from. Infuriatingly sad ones that reared their ugly heads once a year exactly.

“Nagisa, you awake?”

Just before he could depress himself any further, Shun’s deeper than usual voice broke him out of his trance.

“Yeah.” He replied, noticing that the hand on his hair had stopped petting him at some point. “Just thinking. Don’t stop.”

A hum. Both hands moved now, one on his head and another tracing circles on his back. “About your birthday?”

“Yeah...”

I wish you had never been born. I wish you had died in my womb so that I would have no connection to that man anymore. Don’t you understand how painful it is to have to see your face every fucking day? You’re the spitting image of your –

...Oh. Oh, don’t cry. You poor thing. Don’t be sad, it’s not your fault. You’re such a blessing. What would I do without you? Come here...

“Shun, remember how I’d lie to my dad about how things were at home?” Nagisa blurted out.

The hands on his hair and back stopped again.

“Yes, I remember you not wanting to *bother* him –” Shun responded, air-quoting the word *bother* with much sarcasm, “– About things such as the fact that you were being *beaten up at home.*”

What else was he supposed to do? Tell on mom? He knows it was extremely stupid of him now, but to 17-year-old Nagisa, it was unthinkable. She was his *mom*.

Nagisa scoffed. “Don’t be mean to the guy laying on your chest. This is a privilege, not a right, mister.”

What followed was a breathy laugh – one that Nagisa had to smile at, as he could feel it resound in Shun’s chest – and a muttered apology.

But most importantly, there were the words that came next. They made Nagisa think, *ah, I thought I had cried enough already.*

“We can do this every year. The movies, the blankets.”

Don’t cry. Don’t cry, don’t cry. If you start crying, so will he.

*“Until the meaning of **birthday** changes for you.”*

In that moment, in that moment, he...

Besides everything and everyone who made him believe him otherwise, for that single precious moment where it was simply two of them, and that promise hanging in the air –

He made him think:

Am I loved?

Do I deserve to be loved?

Can I love being alive?

“Happy birthday.”

And the answer was yes.

Chapter 13: Birthday, Part 2.

February 14th.

Valentine’s day in Shimazawa was not as hectic as it was in the city. There were sales on chocolate and some whisperings among the children of who had put a letter on whose locker, but it was all very... relaxed.

“Ya look like ya haven’t slept a wink.”

Aya had commented that, as she handed Nagisa his friendship cookies (lovingly made under Megu’s watchful eye and *many many* failed attempts later), with a knowing wink.

Nagisa could only smile in response. “Nope. I’m completely calm. The sweets are perfect, and Chikasen’s letting me keep the keys!”

There was no panic this time. He had the whole afternoon planned out with activities that Shun enjoys *and* free from anyone’s gazes. Everyone else had already wished him a happy birthday and handed him the presents, and Chikasen sent the other boy on a quest to deliver something or the other to another teacher – just as Nagisa asked.

It was important that everything went perfectly.

After all, February 14th was also *Shun’s birthday*.

“Figures he’d be born on Valentine’s of all days,” Megu added, giggling to herself as she passed on more cookies to the *good boys and girls* in class, “That guy absolutely *hates* the whole chocolate-giving shebang.”

“He hatshs itch?” Natsu asked over a mouthful of Nagisa’s brownies. “Why? Itsh candy!”

Megumi shrugged. “Something about it being a capitalist holiday and a means of setting the... uh, what was it? Hierarchy of... oh, I dunno. He doesn’t like it.”

Finally, Hikaru, who sported a huge grin on her face as she received yet another piece of candy from a boy, hit the nail on the head:

“That’s his excuse. People forget it’s his birthday ‘cuz of Valentines, so he’s scared it’ll happen again.”

People being his own family, Nagisa mumbled to himself. Last December, Shun bothered to send some of the family members he disliked the least a message wishing them a merry Christmas. Some of them had *no idea* who had contacted them.

The Game Club would *never*. Their Christmas party on the 24th was awesome. Take that, Aunt Sachiko.

Nagisa is going to make this birthday the best one Shun’s ever had. Just two more classes, and the plan would be put in action.

“Operation Best Birthday Ever... begin!” Aya had cheerfully announced earlier that day, earning a *shh* from everyone around her. She’s kept quiet around Shun, at least.

Everything would turn out perfect. Nagisa could feel it.

Nothing can stop him. He is a man with a mission!

Nagisa exchanged knowing looks with his fellow Game Club members as they left. Club activities would end earlier, thanks to an excuse masterfully crafted by Hikaru and Natsu.

Now, it was just Shun and Nagisa, alone in the classroom the latter could lock or unlock freely. As he looked around the room, Nagisa’s certainty that everything was *very, very* romantic was proved true.

Most of the desks had been moved to the side, except for one, covered by a small white tablecloth like in these fancy restaurants. On top, there was a candle, two plates, and a set of cutleries.

(Dad had offered to get them a reservation at an actual restaurant, but Nagisa refused. There’s nothing Shun hates more than crowded, noisy places full of strangers, even if the food is ‘the best in the area’ and ‘very difficult to get good seats at’.

...And likely, there would be a sea of straight couples surrounding them. That was not something that made Shun uncomfortable as far he knew, but he can’t imagine they would be well received. It was not an option.)

But what really made the entire thing *work* were the large open windows that dyed the classroom with scarlet and orange tones. It was a beautiful, beautiful sunset.

Everything was just like Nagisa envisioned.

“Didn’t know the Shimazawa schoolhouse had Valentine’s reservations open,” Shun joked, sitting down on one of the chairs and looking around, “I’d have changed my clothes if I knew we would be doing this.”

“A uniform date is fine too.” Nagisa replied, attempting to keep his voice even, because he *totally* wasn’t hoping Shun would be wearing the tie and the blue blazer for this. Nope. No second intentions here.

(...He wouldn't have picked those clothes for Shun to wear as his uniform if it didn't look really nice on him. Just saying.)

As for Nagisa, Megu suggested he leave his "*hideous*" green blazer at home for this, and began to mess with his cuffs, sleeves, and shirt buttons as soon as he entered the classroom at the start of the morning.

"But keep the tie on. You'll thank me later."

Clearing his throat, Nagisa picked up the items stashed under his desk. Shun followed his motions with his eyes, and widened them in surprise.

"This one's for Valentine's," Nagisa explained, pointing to the Fondant au Chocolat proudly displayed on the table.

It was decorated with strawberries and topped with the vanilla ice cream he had stored in the teacher's office's minifridge. The filling, of course, was dark chocolate.

"...I thought you didn't know how to make fondant."

"Surprise!"

(Fondant cake was Shun's favorite. Of course Nagisa would keep it a secret that he was religiously studying how to reproduce a recipe that was as appetizing as the one from that bakery back in the city.)

"Oh, but don't start eating it yet. Check out your birthday present first."

Shun looked down at the small box he handed him; the wrapping was white with a red ribbon on top.

"Open it, open it."

Shun, with that lopsided smile of his, unwrapped the present. Realization hit as he recognized the branding on the box.

Nagisa beamed at him. "I bought it for you. It's a g-i-f-t."

"...Nagisa, I can't accept this."

"Yes you can. I know you've wanted one for a while!" Nagisa beamed once more, opening the box. "Try it on."

His present was a watch. More specifically, the exact same *Tissot* watch worn by the protagonist of that one anime Shun was slowly beginning to get addicted to.

"You did not just spend *20 thousand yen* on a novelty watch for me."

"Does it help if I say it was on sale?"

"No. I really appreciate it, but I can't just take – there's so much cool stuff you could've bought with this money," Shun explained. "Was this what you spent your part-time job money on? I thought you –"

Nagisa shook his head, interrupting him. "This is a special occasion. I wanted to go all out."

“It’s not such a big deal, I can’t –“

“*Am I not allowed to make a big deal about you?*”

There was a pause then.

Shun knew exactly what Nagisa was doing, and it was *unfair*. Using his own words on him like that...

“Try it on. You’ll look handsome. Handsome-er.”

Getting the key from Chikasen was not only for to keep the others out. Shun had no escape.

“...First, let’s – the cake. The cake’s good. Look, the ice cream’s melting. We should eat now.”

He’s absolutely adorable when he tries to distract Nagisa from the very obvious embarrassment plainly showing on his cheeks.

“It’s all yours.”

After watching Shun eat the entire cake in one sitting, it turned out to be Nagisa’s turn to widen in his eyes in surprise.

“Turn around.”

“Huh?”

“Your gift. Valentine’s. Turn around so I can put it on you.”

Nagisa tilted his head. Shun made a show of rolling his eyes, but he wasn’t annoyed. He was nervous.

“Just do it, alright? C-Close your eyes.”

“Yessir.”

Turning around on his chair, he did as ordered, and waited.

“Keep ‘em closed.”

He could feel hands on his shoulders, and neck. The sound of a box being opened. Shun mumbling something to himself. He’s having trouble with something –

Oh.

“Okay, open them now.”

Nagisa opened his eyes, and looked down.

A necklace. One of these thin, fragile-looking ones from the jewelry stores in the mall; silver and long and very very pretty.

“Did I put it on right?”

“Y-Yeah. It’s perfect. Not tight at all.”

Nagisa grabbed the end of the necklace, looking for the small decoration that hung from it.

It was small, almost unnoticeable if you didn’t look for it.

A tiny, shiny letter ‘S’.

Oh my God.

Nagisa gasped.

“Like in High School Musical?!”

....

A beat. It took Shun a moment to realize.

“*What.*”

“Oh my gosh, Shun, we just recreated that scene at the start of –”

Then he *groaned*; a long, breathy sound filled with as much annoyance as his eyeroll.
“Do you like it?”

“I freakin’ love it. I’m Gabriella. You’re Troy.” Nagisa laughed, his smile increasing with each sigh coming out of the other boy’s mouth.

“I meant the goddamn necklace itself, Nagisa.”

Oh, he loved it. It was pretty, and not too showy. He could wear it wearing anything and few people would notice it, which was likely Shun’s intention – but Nagisa will be damned if he doesn’t go around showing it off to everyone.

He loved annoying Shun with the knowledge he was forced to gain when they binge-watched that entire trilogy together just as much, though.

“I love it. Thank you, Shun.”

“...Mm.”

That means *glad you’re happy with it* in Shun-ese. Nagisa proved that he could translate it well by reaching out to squeeze his hand.

It got him a shy smile and a squeeze back. Perfect.

But...

Most importantly.

Now that all the gifts were exchanged, it was time for the last step in Nagisa’s master plan.

Okay, Nagisa was not expecting this part to be so difficult to put in action.

Perfect mood, check. Food, check. Gift exchange, check. Locked door, check.

The timing itself was perfect. Shun was turned to the window, looking at the schoolyard. For once, he was not on his phone or reading a textbook.

Just do it, Nagisa. You are a man with a mission.

The sun was almost fully set. If he waited any longer, then it would not be like he envisioned it.

“S-Shun.” Nagisa mumbled, lightly pinching the other boy’s sleeve. “Look here?”

*It’s been months, and he still can’t call out to him for this. It’s so silly, but the self-awareness has hit him **hard** since he realized how he felt.*

*The touches and the leaning over and even the accidental bumping into each other. It was all so natural and instinctual – but now these things have **meaning** behind them.*

Shun turned to look at him. The way the sunset’s tint framed his profile made it look like he was standing close to a fireplace of sorts.

Before he was able to act on his feelings, Nagisa would think about a future where Shun got married to someone else; a pretty girl or a handsome boy who would take him away from Shimazawa and to the big city. No matter how hard he tried, he could not imagine himself happy in that future.

And his own future? For a long time, he could not envision one. Late at night, his mind would sometimes wander to the possibility of finding someone - always a faceless, formless being with no name or personality - to keep the loneliness in check.

*Such loneliness only went away when he allowed himself to let that being take Shun’s appearance, and imagine that it was **him** Nagisa was moving in with.*

A blow of wind sent the window’s curtains flying. Shun leaned in, closer, closer still.

Their foreheads were touching now. A hand stroking his cheek, and another bringing him in closer.

“...I was going to do that.” *There goes the plan.*

A smirk. “If I let you, we’d be in a 30 volume long slow burn. We’d hold hands for the first time in volume six, and *maybe* kiss by the twentieth.”

“Hey, be *nice*.” Nagisa scolded. “Have some respect for *Kimi ni Todoke*. It’s got layers, just like Shrek.”

“The ogre?”

“You really need to watch Dreamworks movies, man.”

They both began to laugh then. It was rare to hear Shun laugh like that, loudly and proudly and *pretty*.

That was the first thought that went through Nagisa’s mind when they met again in Shimazawa, after almost a decade of being apart. That was almost a year ago.

He is very, very pretty. Always has been. Always will be, even decades from now when they are old and wrinkly and yelling at clouds. Nagisa is as certain of that as he is that the sun will always rise in the morning.

“What am I going to do about you? You’re such a dor – “

He doesn’t like the word *pushing down*, but that’s what he did.

Mouths locked together, hands wandering over his hair and waist; down to the floor with Shun’s back to the wall.

They could shift a little and then he’d be down on the floor instead. That’s an interesting option.

And...

And Everything felt like it was ablaze. Flaming. Not helped by these new sounds –

“S-Slow down, you...”

Ah.

Ah, he gets it now.

Megu was right, blazers are an annoyance.

Hey <

Not saying goodnight? <

>You’re so spoiled.

>We’re literally in the same room.

Is that bad? <

>No.

>Good night.

:3c <

Chapter 14: And then

And then, just like that –

Days, weeks, months, years.

Birthdays, firework-less festivals, exams, and graduations.

Hiichan's debut at the brand new Shimazawa baseball team. Natsu's adventures in being the new club leader. Aya and Megu's ever-increasing understanding of each other.

That time Nagisa punched a bigot.

No one can stop time from moving.

The other people in the village are irrelevant. Their opinions, their thoughts, their preconceptions. They stopped caring for them long ago. Not even saving their families and their homes was enough.

It all came out in those punches and kicks and slaps, bringing Morino Sora down to the ground with a scream. He did not fight back, of course he didn't. Much easier to claim that he was assaulted out of nowhere, isn't it?

Their second big fight happened then.

He never shouted. He'd yell to call out to him sometimes, and raise his voice when he's nervous.

For the first time in his life, Nagisa was shouted at by Shun. A loud, resounding shout that seemed to quiet down even the cicadas around them.

"What the actual *fuck*," Shun began, his voice low at first, "were you thinking?"

Nagisa couldn't meet his eyes. "He deserved it."

His hands still hurt. He might've broken some of his fingers, and maybe a few nails. Nothing compared to the limping, sobbing waste of air that was underneath him a few minutes ago, however.

"He passed by me and – he said *awful things*. Called us... stuff."

"Nagisa, for the love of God..." Shun scoffed, incredulous. "If I went around punching everyone who called me a *sissy* –"

"It was *worse*."

"– I would be in *jail*. Do you understand that? DO YOU?"

Shun paced from one side to the other, shaking his head.

"We're not minors anymore. Do you get that? You could've – what if he *fought back*? Huh?"

Nagisa shrugged. That only made Shun more irritated.

"He's going to tell everyone. He could try to get you *arrested*."

"I know."

"IF YOU KNOW, THEN WHY DID YOU DO IT?!"

...

Why?

Shun widened his eyes and motioned at Nagisa to *say something*. *Explain to me why you thought that was a goddamn good idea.*

Why, he asks?

“Is it that bad,” Nagisa let out, holding in a sob, “that I acted on one of my ugly wishes for once?”

“That’s not –”

“Is it *really* that wrong?”

As those words sank in, Shun’s expression, once one of frowns and gritted teeth, began to transform into one of quickly wetting eyes and a bitten lower lip. It was furiously holding in a sob of his own.

If one of them cries, then the other will follow.

Taking in a deep breath, Shun sniffled.

“No.” He murmured, so softly that neither of them could quite hear it. “No, that’s not *bad*. That’s not what I...”

I don’t like it either.

Shimazawa.

I can’t look at it with those rose-tinted sunglasses anymore.

Hey, let’s get out of here already. Our bags are packed and we got our tickets. Call your dad and let’s just... leave.

They both knew they can’t do that. It’s not right. Not to them, not to their friends, and not to *Morino*.

It’s not feasible, and not fair.

“...Sorry. I fucked up. I’m sorry.”

But has this place even been fair to any of them?

The fight with *Morino* ended up being a perfect last hurrah for their final month in *Shimazawa*. As if they were saying *yeah, we’re leaving, so what? What are you going to do, hate us more?*

Shun had later told him that it wasn’t quite the case. The village wasn’t exactly divided on who was in the right or in the wrong; unsurprisingly, quite a few people wanted to see that asshole get knocked down a notch or two.

It wasn’t worth it getting his knuckles decimated for it, though. *Megu* and *Aya* had to teach him that he has to fold his thumb and aim in a certain angle to protect his hands.

...Not that he was planning on punching anyone else anytime soon. Dad was *furious* and not willing to hear him out at all for the first few days, as that was *not* how he was raised and *not* how this family did things.

Even Shun got an earful for smirking at the news that Morino would need to stay in the clinic for a few days. *Never wish harm on others, unless they're a bigot and they suck*, Aya had explained to the kids, and promptly received an earful from nearby adults and her own sister shortly after.

Natsu still didn't quite understand what a "homophone" is, but that's alright. He'll grow up to be an open-minded person, that's for certain – right after he grows past this phase of trying out the moves from these superhero shows on other people. Kid needs to play a sport too, but not baseball, or else Hiichan will not hear the end of it.

Dad, the twins, the kids, Chika-sensei, and everyone at school too. They would be okay.

There was closure. They would say their goodbyes knowing that it would turn out alright. That it would not be the last time they would meet; that the connection they had was real and firm and so very loving. Unconditional.

It was time to move on to the chapter of their lives. Together.

But...

But, then... and...

And, and, after that...

...And what *next*?

What would the future bring?

In the blink of an eye, they'll be twenty or twenty-one living in an apartment in Seattle (*of all places*, Shun would grumble), studying different courses and buildings, and likely struggling to understand how to live away from everything they knew and everyone they loved.

They could change their looks and idealisms and become completely different, practically unrecognizable adults. Or they could stay the same forever, never growing from the supposed truths and affirmations they believed in as teens.

It was nerve-wracking. There was no certainty to any of it; no foolproof way to make it an easy adjustment.

But as scary as that sounded, they knew that time could not be stopped.

Everyone has to move on. That is just how life works.

And then, they'd move on again, and again, and again. There is nothing to stop them from doing that, not anymore.

And then, what next?

And then, what to do?

And then, what else to say?

It goes on.

And then, and then, and then...

They, too, growing up –

Or perhaps a new wonderful everyday –

...No, that story is not mine or yours to hear. Not yet, not like this.

Who are we judge for that decision? Anyone who has put their thousands upon thousands of words and experiences and emotions on paper can understand.

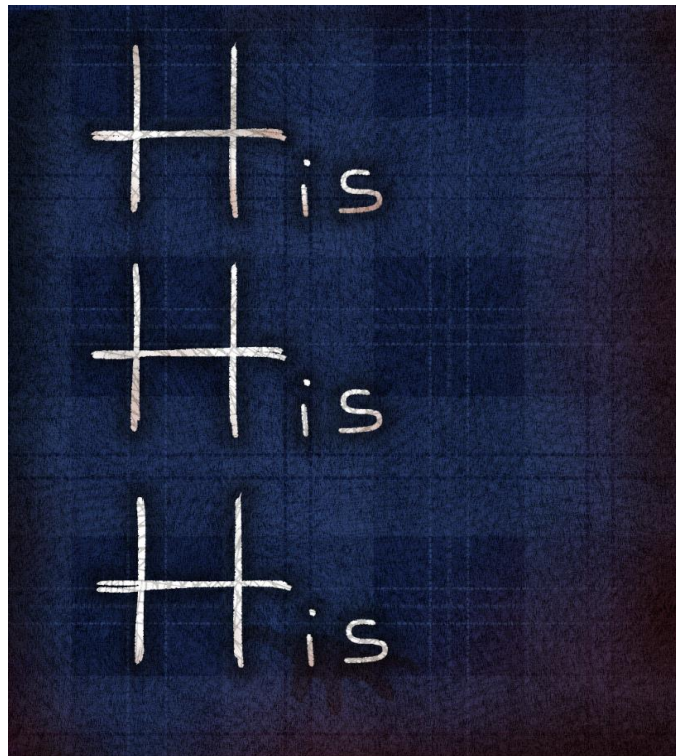
Because, when Hikaru Wakabayashi and her friends freed Shimawa from that loop of pain and anguish and uncertainty, it was not only the seven of them that earned the opportunity to grow.

There was someone else, too.

It's a story that is his to tell, and that is all.

Teo.

Final Chapter: HIS HIS HIS



A four-story building inhabited by humans and a small family of cats.

On rainy days, one must be careful not to slip and fall on the rusty metal stairways.

The building's shoddy outside is contrasted by the high-tech security system installed at the entrance of each apartment.

It is that kind of city.

Arriving at the apartment that night, he expected to be greeted by the usual *tack tack tack* of fingers tapping on the keyboard, followed by the humming and sighing he's come to associate with his second home.

Instead, all he could hear were the repeated apologies. Over and over, explanations upon explanations of what he had done.

He had slashed his left wrist with a knife.

A flashback? Could be...

Father's Day was coming around, it's about time the TV started showing those awful Father's Day ads with their cheesy, unrealistic slogans.

He tried to call people, but everyone's phones were off, including his. Luz's and Kie's had no battery left, and Lake was asleep.

He kept apologizing to HIM. Explaining that he regretted it the second he did it and swearing he won't do it again.

He was attracted to his side profile and the way his brows furrowed while he penned down ideas on paper.

He thought;
you're pretty.

He thought; why does
writing upset you?

He thought: I want
in on his world.

He hugged him and held him and held him and held him until his body stopped shaking. His hands and legs and arms and everything.

He tried telling him that he had nothing to apologize for, but that made him more agitated. Keep quiet.

Keep quiet and let him follow your heartbeats; his own cannot calm down by themselves.

That is alright, it happens and it is fine. Not a bother. Don't talk about yourself like that, please. You are more than this, and I will repeat it you as many times as you need.

Bandages. A few under the bed. Antiseptic just to be sure. His motions are mechanical, they have to be, lest he break down as well.

After he helped him clean and bandage his wrist, he went to throw away the knife. He considered throwing of all them away, or hiding them somewhere away from his sight.

Wash it away. Relapses happen sometimes. He doesn't lack a support system anymore, it'll be fine.

Later. One day. Not now.

For now, he cleans. The sink drains the red spots.

He noticed his pointer finger had been stained with his blood.

It tasted like iron.

He wears heavy black headphones on his ears while he works and smaller grey earbuds when he's outside.

Me too!
Me too!

Are we the same? Can I
claim that we are the same?

There's something
wrong with us both!

Weak laughter was heard from behind. By the bed, he grinned.

"Didn't know you were into that kind of stuff."

The way he phrased it made him want to cry.

A chill. A wry smile.

Someone's else face seemed to be staring at him instead of HIS.

At least he had calmed down enough to be back to his sarcastic self. At least that, but it's enough.

And then, he thought, and thought. He thought:

I just wish he could be kinder to himself.

I wish he had said he regretted it because it hurt, not because he didn't want to upset me and the others.

I wish he had told me he was hurting earlier.

I wish that he hadn't done it.

Those emotions, as real as they were, felt somewhat selfish.

It was made clear at the start of their relationship.

Loving him will never be enough.

I fell in love
with you.

I could not recognize myself when
those feelings first appeared.

I want to hold you just as much
as I want to break you into pieces.

If he could take in even a little bit of the pain he's in, he would. He would take everything.

But there's nothing else he can do other than reassure him.

I was not cursed; I was like this from the start.
You know that, yet you still embrace me.

You held me tightly and whispered that I did not have to hide how
I feel and think around you. You said you'd accept me completely.

Even this depraved
me? Truly?

You said: *yes. I love
that part of you too.*

He is his as much as he is.

And he is his as much as he is.

To him, there is no confusion at all. Plainly, simply, effortlessly. It just is like that.

He, who heard all of that without
flinching, and said: *so what?*

He said: *you're more important to me
than any of that. You can't scare me away.*

*I love the you that wants to take control and
leave marks just as much as the you that is gentle.*

*You can't drive me
away, not anymore.*

His, his, his.

His.

AFTERWORD

The objective of its existence is for you and only you to decide.

It takes little piece of you and exposes it in ink or pixelated promises.

Worked and reworked until it mirrors the truth, or something like it.

A blessing or a curse following you until your last breath.

That is what writing is.

END.