What the Hell Happened to Sousuke?

by tornadoquakes

Summary

It's been three years since Makoto, Haru, and Rin graduated from high school and Sousuke hasn't been seen or heard from since. But when Makoto literally runs into Sousuke, the broody kid crash lands back into their lives, finally answering the age old question:

What the hell happened to Sousuke?

This is a very slow-building SouRin centered fic, but I see MakoHaru are also hugely important and have their own plot lines. There is a lot of angst, a lot of relationship building, and sprinkles of fluff. Basically this is how I want to conclude each of the characters' stories in Free!.

Enjoy!
A Chance Encounter

Chapter Summary

Makoto finds someone unexpected in front of the train station

Clutching a bag of groceries Haru-chan had asked him to pick up, Makoto happily hummed his zoning out song as he walked home to their apartment. The song was of his own invention and as the lyrics consisted mostly of the words ‘Haru’ and ‘love’, over and over again, the song wasn’t worth repeating to anyone but Haru. Makoto was prone to such pouts of inattention, even though the streets of Tokyo weren’t really a proper setting for love-struck daydreaming, so it came as no surprise to Makoto when he ran straight into someone as he crossed in front of the Yoyogi station, spilling Haru’s precious groceries everywhere.

What did surprise Makoto, however, was just how tall the person he’d run into was. As Makoto towered over virtually everyone he knew, people who were of his height or taller – as this stranger was – invariably caught his attention. If Makoto hadn’t been so absorbed in thinking about the delicious dinner and bath Haru had planned for him tonight, he would have noticed the stranger sooner. But Makoto was hopeless and now Haru’s groceries were scattered all over the pavement in front of the train station.

“Sorry!” Makoto apologized as he bent down to rescue the contents of his bag from death by trampling.

The stranger bent down as well and picked up a carton of yogurt.

“Did anything break?” the stranger asked. His voice was deep, full of gravity, and tugged at the edges of Makoto’s memory for some reason. Shaking away the feeling, Makoto opened up the bag so the stranger could deposit the yogurt in its rightful home.

“It doesn’t look like it,” Makoto replied, gathering up the bundles of leeks, “Haru will be so displeased by how muddy everything is, though!”

“Haru?” the stranger asked.

It was then that Makoto finally looked at the stranger properly. Droopy eyes that couldn’t decide whether they were blue or green looked back at Makoto and sudden realization hit both of them at once.

Why this wasn’t a stranger at all!

He’d run straight into Yamazaki Sousuke!

Who no one had seen or heard from in THREE YEARS!
“Yamazaki-kun!” Makoto cried out, “Is it really you?”

Sousuke, turned his eyes down, his frown deepened.

“You swam for Iwatobi, right?” Sousuke mumbles.

“Yes!” Makoto nodded his head vigorously, “And you swam for Samezuka!”

Sousuke didn’t say anything back, giving Makoto a chance to properly look at him and take in the changes that had happened over the three years since last he’d seen him. His hair was shaved on the sides though the top remained the same messy black as Makoto vaguely remembered. A purple shadow rimmed Sousuke’s left eye and his lip was cracked open. Though Makoto hadn’t ever had any personal experiences with fights, it was obvious that Sousuke had recently been in one. His skin was rather pale and his cheeks were flush; Makoto guessed that if he put his hand to Sousuke’s forehead, he’d find that Sousuke had a fever. Despite how sick he looked, Sousuke had gotten a lot bigger. Before, he’d been intimidating but the added muscle, the gauntness of his face, even the few new centimeters - well it all made him look downright terrifying. But the greatest change was in Sousuke’s eyes. Makoto hadn’t known Sousuke well before they graduated, but even Makoto could see that there was a world of heartache, anger, loneliness, and sorrow that hadn’t been in them before. Dark circles that had nothing to do with Sousuke’s black eye made the teal of his eyes stand out brightly; he’d obviously not slept recently. Makoto remembered Sousuke as a tragic, broody figure, but apparently his adolescents had only scratched the surface of the darkness within. Seeing him now, Makoto asked himself the same question he and all their other high school friends – some more earnestly than others - had been asking each other for three years:

What the hell happened to Sousuke?

“I should be going,” Sousuke mumbled, “I need to find a place to sleep now.”

“Have you eaten?” Makoto blurted.

Sousuke didn’t answer; Makoto took his silence as a no.

“You’re coming home with me. Haru and I are going to feed you.” Makoto stated firmly as he stood up.

“I’m not going to impose on Haru,” Sousuke growled as he too stood up. Anger flashed across his face, but was quickly replaced by exhaustion.

“ Nope, you’re coming home with me.”

Makoto squared his shoulders resolutely and stared down Sousuke. Sousuke wasn’t the only one who’d grown and bulked up in the last three years though Makoto remained a few centimeter’s smaller than Sousuke. Still, Makoto hadn’t hit anyone in his entire life and even he knew who would win a fight between them. Especially given the state of Sousuke’s face.

But apparently the fever had sapped Sousuke of his will to argue and he glumly nodded his head in defeat.
“Fine,” he grumbled.

“Great!” Makoto said brightly, “Haru’s an excellent cook!”

During their collision, Sousuke had dropped a large duffel bag he’d been carrying and now Sousuke bent down to pick it up. But Sousuke was in bad shape and it was taking him an awful lot of effort to bend down. Makoto quickly grabbed the rather heavy bag and shouldered it before Sousuke had time to protest.

Sousuke frowned deeply, but Makoto met him with a bright smile.

“It’s no trouble, let me help!”

Sousuke sized him up but said nothing so Makoto turned and led the way to home. Sousuke lagged behind him and Makoto looked back every few minutes to check that he was still following him. From the look on his face, Makoto had the feeling he was weighing whether or not it would be worth it to just abandon the bag and flee. But they made it to the front door without Sousuke bolting.

With some effort, Makoto fished out his keys.

“I forget your name.” Sousuke mumbled.

Makoto paused with the keys in the door. Come to think of it, Makoto hadn’t actually talked to Sousuke one on one during Sousuke’s single year at Samezuka Academy.

“Tachibana Makoto,” Makoto said with a smile, “I take it you remember Haru?”

Sousuke’s face darkened.

“I remember Haru.”

Makoto succeeded in locking the door (because Haru had forgotten to lock it again) then unlocked it and passed through into his home. He turned back to make sure that Sousuke followed him in, which he did after a reluctant moment’s hesitation.
Haru loves Makoto. Even when Makoto brings unwanted strays home for dinner.

Haru stirred the broth of his soup while he looked up at the clock on the wall. It was one of those cat clocks with a tail for a pendulum and eyes that moved. It had been a housewarming gift from Ren and Ran to their beloved onii-chan because they knew how much Makoto liked cats. Right now, the clock read 6:43.

Makoto was late.

Haru was trying not to worry.

To occupy his mind, he went to their bedroom to tidy up a bit. Haru had always liked doing chores around the house, but since he’d moved in with Makoto almost a year ago now, he loved cleaning their home. Their apartment wasn’t just an apartment, but their home that they’d made together. Cleaning their home didn't feel like a chore, but more like he was taking care of the love they shared. It was the easiest way he knew how to show Makoto he cared.

At the entrance to their bedroom, Haru paused to look down at their bed, the sight of their secret, shared domain sending a familiar wave of warmth through his body. Sex was awesome and taking baths every night was magical, but what Haru loved most about being with Makoto, living with Makoto, loving Makoto, was sleeping next to him every night and waking up with him every morning. It was amazing he’d survived so long without sharing his bed with Makoto. The way their frequent, adolescent sleepovers made him feel should have clued him in sooner, but Haru had willfully ignored those feelings because he didn't want anything to change.

Haru went over and smoothed the covers that had already been flat. Well the past was the past. Now, and forever more, Makoto was home and he was obviously Haru’s soul mate. Honestly it didn't seem possible for Haru to love anything more completely than he did Makoto. Not even water.

Haru’s eyes flicked to the drawer in his nightstand where a certain, special binder lay hidden. Well not hidden exactly, Makoto knew about it and generally what it contained, but he’d never looked inside because Haru had asked him not to. And of course Makoto respected his wishes so the contents of the binder remained a secret. Haru smiled to himself, letting his mind wander through the pages he'd painstakingly put together.

But before his mind wandered too far, Haru remembered that Makoto wasn't there and his smile turned into a frown. A sense of growing panic stirred up inside him.

Where was Makoto?
He should be home by now.

Something bad must have happened.

On cue, Haru heard the front door open.

“Tadaima!” Makoto’s familiar voice called out.

Haru sighed with relief.

Makoto was safe and at home and Haru's.

“Okarei!” Haru called out as he smoothed over his features. He didn't want Makoto to see how worried he'd been because then Makoto would worry about Haru and Haru would worry about Makoto worrying about Haru and...well point taken. As much as he wanted to appear normal, Haru couldn't help but rush a bit as he went out into the living room. To make sure Makoto was safe.

There was no need to panic.

Makoto was safe and sound, smiling to himself as he stood in the genkan, taking off his coat and shoes. Haru let the sight of his soul mate ease the separation-induced panic out of his body, replacing it instead with warm, safe, happy feelings because Makoto was home and he was safe. Of the two of them, Haru had had the hardest time adjusting to life in a big city and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t constantly worried about Makoto’s safety.

Once Haru had assured himself that Makoto was perfectly fine, he finally noticed that Makoto wasn’t alone. His face fell and Makoto, of course, noticed.

“I brought home a surprise,” Makoto explained sheepishly. Instantly, a wave of weariness, anger, and amazement went through Haru’s body as he recognized the ‘surprise’. A large black duffle bag took up half the genkan, while the other half was taken up by a ghost, awkwardly taking off his shoes.

Yamazaki Sousuke.

How on earth?

“I see you’re alive then, Yamazaki.” Haru said quietly. Yamazaki straightened up and stared Haru down, rage flashing across his face.

Yup. He was definitely Yamazaki Sousuke alright.
Makoto clucked a warning to play nice and walked over to Haru with his bag of groceries, placing his free hand across Haru’s shoulders and kissing Haru long and tenderly on his temple as he did every time they were reunited. Surprised by this display of romantic affection, Yamazaki forgot to be angry and gaped at them for a split second before averting his gaze. Somehow, that was the most satisfying interaction Haru had ever had with Yamazaki.

“I ran into Sousuke-kun in front of the train station,” Makoto explained, “That’s why the leeks are a bit, eh, worse for wear?”

Makoto shoved the grocery bag into Haru’s hands. Haru tore his eyes away from Yamazaki and looked down at the muddy vegetables.

“Oh, Makoto.” Haru sighed, though the tiniest smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. No one else would have seen something so small, but Makoto, of course, noticed. Makoto beamed at Haru, making Haru turn to mush. Just like he had since he was thirteen and he'd begun to experience these feelings for his best friend...

“This was a bad idea.” Yamazaki blurted out, interrupting their silent reunion, “Sorry for bothering you two. I should be going.”

He leaned down to put his shoes back on.

“No!” Makoto commanded, stopping Yamazaki in his tracks, “You aren’t going anywhere. I told you we’d feed you so we’re going to feed you.”

A little known fact about Makoto, he could be surprisingly forceful when he tried.

Haru knew that side of Makoto well. He liked when it came out in bed...

But Haru couldn't let himself get too distracted, not when *Yamazaki* was standing in his *genkan*.

Yamazaki looked from Makoto to Haru, locking Haru’s gaze with his. The old tension Haru always associated with Yamazaki returned between Haru’s shoulder blades, a tension that had dulled down to nothing as the length of his absence stretched on and on. Makoto was Haru’s soulmate, but Rin was Haru’s next best friend and feeding Sousuke, learning what the hell Sousuke had been *doing* for years was something Haru needed to do for Rin.

Poor Rin had suffered enough because of this bastard.

Sensing Haru’s distress, Makoto trailed his hand down between Haru’s shoulder blades and massaged gentle circles between his muscles.

“You’re staying for dinner, Yamazaki.” Haru said flatly, “No arguing.

Without saying another word to Yamazaki, Haru went to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner. But first, he turned the teakettle on.

Makoto settled Sousuke in at the *kotatsu* and turned on the heat before coming over to the kitchen
and getting things for tea. When Makoto drew near, Haru kissed him on the cheek to get Makoto’s attention and spoke to Makoto with his eyes.

_Don’t ask anything important until I’m there._

Makoto nodded and Haru knew he understood. Now he could turn his full attention to dinner and review the facts of Yamazaki’s disappearance.

After graduation, Rin had been so excited because Yamazaki was going to come to Australia with him.

“Just imagine, Haru!” Rin had said, “We’re going to go surfing everyday! When we aren’t swimming, of course! Having him in Australia with me, it’s going to be a dream come true!”

For the first three months that Rin was in Australia, Rin and Yamazaki had talked every day. Haru had never seen Rin so happy and excited. His favorite hobbies besides swimming and talking to Sousuke was telling Haru all about swimming and talking to Sousuke.

But three months later, all of a sudden, Rin stopped harassing Haru over the Internet. Honestly it was nice to not hear about how much Rin was looking forward to seeing Yamazaki every single day, but Haru grew concerned by Rin’s uncharacteristic silence. It lasted three whole months. The next time Haru saw Rin, for the New Year’s holiday, Rin’s heart wasn’t bursting with dreams of the future as it had been before. In fact, Rin was more upset than Haru had seen him since their second year in high school. It didn’t take Makoto long to find out that Rin hadn’t heard from Sousuke in over three months except for a single letter.

And Rin had remained silent to hide his devastation.

All this had happened during the New Year holiday. Makoto had brought Haru home to Iwatobi because Haru’s parents had finally sold their house. Because Haru was staying with Makoto, Rin had had to show both Haru and Makoto Sousuke’s last letter when he went to visit Haru. The letter had been dated at the beginning of September and big tear splotches marred the paper:

_I tried. I failed. It said, I won’t get better, it’s impossible and I’m worse now than ever before. I’m utterly alone and I realize, it’s best I stay that way. I’m so sorry, Rin, I really tried. I tried so, so hard for you because I wanted to be with you. But I can’t swim anymore so I can’t come to Australia. I’m so sorry but I’m nothing if I can’t swim so I won’t bother you anymore. I wish you all the happiness in the world and I wish I could be swimming there with you. It has to be this way as much as I wish it could be different. So goodbye. I'll always remember you and I hope sometimes you'll remember me too._

There was no doubt as to whose eyes those tears belonged to. Even as Rin showed Makoto and Haru the letter, Rin couldn’t help but blubber uncontrollably.

Makoto had insisted they all go try to visit the Yamazaki house, just to see if they could learn
anything else. Rin was surprisingly reluctant about this plan, which had confused both Makoto and Haru at the time. Still, Haru and Makoto managed to drag Rin to the Yamazaki doorstep and ring the bell. Mr. Yamazaki answered the door.

Though he wasn’t as tall as Sousuke, he had the same dark hair, the same droopy eyes as his son. But the moment Mr. Yamazaki recognized Rin, his face turned into a mask of malice and hatred even Sousuke was incapable of. The thought of it still chilled Haru’s blood.

“How dare you show up here, you filth!” Mr. Yamazaki screeched at Rin, taking a menacing step towards him. Makoto put himself between Mr. Yamazaki and Rin. It had been very brave.

Mr. Yamazaki continued to yell at Rin, his face turning purple with rage.

“You cost me a second son, Matsuoka Rin,” he bellowed, "Are you proud of yourself, you pervert? Get off my property and never return or I will send you to join your father!”

Mr. Yamazaki then slammed the door in Rin’s face and the three boys went back to Rin’s house, Haru and Makoto each with a hand on one of Rin’s trembling shoulders as silent sobs shook his body.

That letter and that visit was the last news Rin or anyone else had had of Yamazaki Sousuke. For three long years, Haru had tried his best to help Rin through it all. Was Sousuke dead? Where was he? What the hell had happened?

But there was no way to know what had happened.

Until now.

Now, Yamazako was sipping hot tea at Haru’s kotatsu and listening politely as Makoto told him all about his studies in Physical Education, the swimming school Makoto worked at part-time, and Haru’s swimming accomplishments in the last three years. When the international meets Haru had recently qualified for came up, Haru could feel Yamazaki’s eyes bore into Haru’s back, right between Haru’s shoulder blades. He knew what Yamazaki really wanted to know and it made Haru angry that he had such audacity to even think about Rin. Whatever had happened at home, Sousuke could have at least called Rin so Rin’s imagination would stop creating horrific death scenes that Haru would inevitably have to listen to.

Half an hour later, Haru set a tray of soba noodle soup, fried vegetables, and fish cakes on the table. Not mackerel. Haru was too angry at Yamazaki to give him mackerel.
“This looks wonderful, Haru!” Makoto gushed appreciatively as Haru took his spot next to Makoto. Haru liked cooking for Makoto because his reaction was always the same, overwhelmingly enthusiastic, even if Haru failed to perform perfectly.

“Help yourself,” Haru said, a faint blush on his cheeks from Makoto’s compliment.

“*Itadakimasu!*” Makoto said enthusiastically, clapping his hands together and bowing his head slightly.

“*Itadakimasu*” Haru mimicked.

Makoto greedily dug in but Haru hung back, watching to see what Yamazaki would do.

Slowly and maybe even a little shyly, Yamazaki clapped his hands together and bowed his hands.

“*Itadakimasu.*”

Haru waited until Yamazaki had helped himself before he took any food.

For a few minutes they ate in silence, Haru and Yamazaki because neither knew what to say. Makoto was quiet too but that was because he was hungry. He’d had always had a big appetite, especially when it came to chocolate.

Haru watched Yamazaki carefully as they ate, noticing the color of his cheeks, the brightness of his eyes, the way his eyelids kept lingering shut whenever he blinked. Despite everything, Haru couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit sorry for Yamazaki. He looked feverish and he was trying very hard to stay conscious for his hosts. Clearly, he’d been in a fight recently and his cheeks looked a bit sunken. Wherever it was he’d been living, he hadn’t been living well.

But that was only the tiniest part of Haru, the grand majority of Haru was still so angry he could hardly hold his chopsticks.

“So Sousuke,” Makoto began casually when his bowl was empty, “What have you been doing for the past three years?”

Yamazaki turned his sleepy head up. The look of misery on his face even Haru had a hard time being mad at.

“Travelling.” Sousuke answered.

Makoto frowned. Makoto was insatiably nosy and he was not pleased with Sousuke’s answer.

“Where have you been travelling?”

Yamazaki shrugged, “Everywhere. South Africa, Laos, all over Europe, North America, and South America, Iceland, Madagascar, the Azores, Antarctica, …everywhere really.”

“Australia?” Haru asked pointedly.

Yamazaki stared at him.
“No, never Australia.”

Haru’s blood began to boil once more.

“We went to your house, Rin, Haru, and I’ Makoto broke in, sensing correctly the unpleasant things Haru wanted to say, “I hate saying this about anyone, but your dad was pretty horrible. Is that why you left?”

Not the most tactful way of asking, but effective. Sousuke looked startled by this news, then his face slid into bitter resignation.

“Yes, that’s a big part of why I left. My dad found something I wish he hadn’t and he disowned me.”

Haru felt that Rin was probably behind whatever that something was. Since leaving again for Australia, Rin had made Haru his confidant for pretty much everything, but not even Haru knew to what extent Rin’s relationship with Yamazaki extended beyond the bounds of friendship. Rin hadn’t ever admitted he liked Yamazaki as more than a friend, but Haru had always felt a possibility there that had been destroyed when Yamazaki disappeared. But the way Rin mourned Sousuke, maybe something had actually happened. Haru and Makoto had done their best to help Rin through this, but Rin had been inconsolable until one day, he just stopped talking about Sousuke.

Next to Haru, Makoto was dying to dig deeper, but Haru placed a hand on his wrist, asking him not to. He hadn’t told Haru or Makoto what their relationship had been so clearly whatever there was between Rin and Sousuke wasn’t something Rin would want them knowing about. It was the only thing Rin hadn’t shared with Haru. Explicit details about Rin’s endless one-night-stands with boys from Sydney’s gay bars was fair game. Hell, his stupid, romantic dreams of a happily ever after that even an eleven-year-old girl would think cheesy was fair game. But Yamazaki Sousuke was strictly off limits unless Rin brought him up and even then, Haru was only allowed to be sympathetic or silent.

“So what sorts of things have you been doing for work?” Makoto asked diplomatically. Of course Makoto would have picked up on Haru’s anger and asking about how Yamazaki made money changed the subject while also calming Haru down. Makoto was good.

Yamazaki blinked at Makoto in confusion at the subject change, but still obliged Makoto with an answer: “Construction. Stuff in restaurants. I’ve worked quite a lot as a sailor actually. Pretty much anything I could find where I could get along with Japanese or English.”

“English?” Makoto asked curiously.

Yamazaki nodded sleepily, “Yeah, I’ve spoken more English in the past three years than Japanese.”

“You must be pretty good, then!” Makoto said brightly, “I’ve never been very good at English.”

Yamazaki gave Makoto a small smile and Haru marveled at this. If Makoto could bring a smile to Grouchyzaki’s face, was there anyone Makoto couldn’t get to smile?

Yamazaki’s smile was short lived, soon replaced by a massive yawn he couldn’t contain. Makoto’s eyebrows furrowed with worry.

“You look tired, Sousuke-kun.” Makoto observed. Haru knew that tone of voice and he couldn't
help but feel a little bit sorry for Yamazaki. Makoto was now entering Stage One of Mamakoto Mode and unless Sousuke allowed himself to be aggressively cared for, Makoto was only going to get worse. Much, much worse. He doubted Yamazaki could handle Mamakoto Stage One, let alone any of the other three stages. If Haru didn’t love watching Makoto do what Makoto did best so much – taking care of people – he probably would be pretty grumpy that Yamazaki was going to be staying with them tonight. And it gave Haru some savage delight to see Sousuke looking so uncomfortable.

Bastard.

Sousuke stared at Makoto for a long time before finally letting his eyelids fall shut, silently agreeing that yes, he was tired.

Makoto beamed at his patient warmly.

“Haru will get down a futon for you while I clean up the dishes. We have lots of blankets for guests, so you’ll be nice and warm!”

Yamazaki’s mouth fell open and he opened his glazed-over eyes, like a big dumb fish. Oblivious, Makoto continued:

“You probably should take a nice hot bath too. I’ll get that ready for you now so you can take a long time while Haru and I get everything ready.”

At that point, Yamazaki was able to recover somewhat.

“Thanks for the offer,” he sputtered, “but I couldn’t stay here. I’ll find a hotel or something.”

“Nonsense. You are staying with us.” Makoto insisted.

Yamazaki shook his head, “I barely know you guys. I didn’t even remember your name, Makoto, and Nanase…”

Yamazaki trailed off as he looked briefly at Haru. Haru could guess what he was thinking – And I really don’t like Nanase.

The feeling was mutual, Yamazaki. But Haru needed to find out about Yamazaki. For Rin.

“Oh you’re staying,” Makoto said sweetly though the underlying threat in his tone sent a shiver down Haru’s spine, “You’re tired and it looks like you have a fever. I’m not letting you roam around the Tokyo in the middle of winter, looking for a place to stay while we have a futon for you. You’re important to Rin,” Yamazaki inhaled sharply at the mention of Rin, “and Rin is important to Haru and to me. You’re staying.”

For a few, long seconds, Yamazaki stared down Makoto. Haru knew first hand how intimidating Yamazaki could be – especially after these three years that had left him looking more or less feral—but Haru knew better than anyone that Makoto could be terrifying - in a gentle, sweet, fully Makoto kind of way - when he needed to be firm for people he cared about. Yamazaki’s doom and gloom was no match for Makoto’s brand of aggressive kindness.
“Fine.” Yamazaki relented, “Thank you for letting me stay for the night. I’ll be out of here first thing in the morning so I won’t be in your way.”

Haru smirked at Yamazaki’s look of defeat and Makoto’s eyebrow, arched triumphantly and challengingly at Yamazaki. Haru knew the tone Makoto’s inner voice was taking, the same tone he took when one of his students was challenging Makoto’s authority during lessons.

_We’ll see, tough guy._

Haru couldn’t help himself; he tilted his head up and kissed Makoto under his chin.

God Haru loved Makoto.
Mamakoto - Stage 2

Chapter Summary

Makoto takes care of a sick Sousuke and learns something about Sousuke. Then they play video games.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter eludes to Sousuke harming himself. Don't worry, dear readers, he won't be shown doing anything bad to himself.

Thanks for reading and I love getting feedback/ comments :)

Makoto’s phone beeped at 5:30 the next morning, pulling him out of a wonderful dream where he and Haru had become mermen together and explored a sunken pirate ship. When merman!Makoto visited the ship on his own, the dream always became a nightmare, but when merman!Haru was with him it was always an exciting adventure. That dream was one Makoto frequently had and he wondered if sleeping in such close proximity to Haru had something to do with it. Sleepily, Makoto lifted his head off Haru’s chest and carefully untwined his legs from Haru’s so he could sit up properly. Sensing Makoto’s absence immediately, Haru rolled over and reached for Makoto in his sleep, latching onto Makoto’s thigh. It took a lot of control for Makoto to stop himself from waking Haru up by planting a million kisses all over him.

When Makoto looked at Haru, warmth went through his entire body and he wished he could just melt right into him. They’d been together for two years and it still baffled Makoto how much deeper he fell in love with Haru each and every day. He was so beautiful, especially now with his cheeks flushed from sleeping and his face looking so serene. Better still, he was wearing an old orange and yellow shirt of Makoto’s that had somewhere along the way become their shared property. Most of the time Haru wore it, but he always made sure Makoto put it on after every wash so the shirt would always smell like Makoto. The shirt was a symbol that Haru was his and only his. Like everything else, they frequently shared clothes but this shirt was special. It had the history of their love woven into every fiber like no other article of clothing ever would.

Sighing, Makoto reached out and gently brushed Haru’s cheek with his finger. How had Makoto been born so lucky to have Haru for his entire life, in pretty much every way possible? He’d been hopelessly in love with Haru since he was ten and it was still dizzying to think that Haru felt the same way, loved Makoto just as deeply as Makoto loved Haru. Not for the first time nor for the last, Makoto’s eyes drifted to the drawer in Haru’s nightstand where The Binder was kept safe. He wanted desperately to peek inside, see what Haru had created, but he would never betray Haru like that.
“Mako…” sleepy Haru mumbled below.

Makoto’s smile broadened as he leaned down and gently kissed Haru’s forehead.

“Go back to sleep, little fish,” he whispered, “I have something I need to do.”

Reluctantly, Makoto extracted himself from Haru and crept out of their bedroom into the living room.

Last night, Makoto had made sure to wrap Sousuke up tight in blankets and it was with great relief that Makoto found him still there, sleeping away soundly. Happily, he crossed the dark living room to the genkan and sat down so his back was against the door.

Yamazaki Sousuke wasn’t going to disappear again on Tachibana Makoto’s watch!

An hour and a half later, Haru put a hand on Makoto’s shoulder, waking him with a start.

“Why are you out here?” Haru asked flatly. Makoto felt he might be in trouble for not waking up with Haru.

“I had to guard the door and make sure Sousuke didn’t escape!”

Haru’s brows furrowed and he scowled.

“It’s your day off, Makoto. You shouldn’t be wasting it on him. If he wants to go, he can go. I have enough to tell Rin.”

Makoto frowned, “It’s not enough! We don’t know what his plans are or if he’s going to stay in Tokyo or anything really. Besides I’m really worried about him, Haru-chan. He seems so unhappy and he looked so unhealthy yesterday. I just want to feed him a lot of soup and make him sleep for a week.”

“Such a busy body. And drop the –chan already.” Haru muttered in defeat as he went to go make them some breakfast.

Smiling, Makoto drug himself up off the ground so he could go to the kitchen and give Haru a thank you hug and a kiss.

This is how the rest of Makoto’s morning proceeded:

7:00 A.M – Kissed Haru goodbye and wished him luck in practice. Went into their bedroom to play his DS on mute but kept the door opened so Makoto could hear if Sousuke got up.
8:30 A.M – Went in to check on Sousuke. He was still sleeping and his forehead was very hot. Had the brilliant idea to take Sousuke’s temperature.

8:32 A.M – Began to scour the bathroom for the thermometer his mother suggested he buy for Haru’s colds.

9:24 A.M – Finally found said thermometer and began to clean up the bathroom Makoto had practically destroyed to find it. Haru would not like coming home to such a mess.

10:00 A.M – Finished cleaning bathroom and cleaning self from cleaning bathroom. Went to check on Sousuke, who was still sleeping.

10:01 A.M – Decided it would be a good idea to make some soup for Sousuke so he would have something hot and simple to eat when he woke up. Began to look through Haru’s cookbooks for something Makoto could make with what they had on hand. Makoto didn’t want to leave to get ingredients because he didn’t want Sousuke to escape.

10:27 A.M – Found perfect recipe for a simple soup that Makoto remembered Haru making one time. If Haru could do it, so could Makoto! Began gathering ingredients.

11:02 A.M - …panicked…

11:43 A.M – Began silently weeping for the disaster that was Haru’s kitchen. Makoto wasn’t a very good cook, even after living on his own for two years. But even then, Haru had still cooked almost every dinner for him and had always come over on Sundays to make bento boxes for Makoto’s week. Now, every single dish was dirty, it looked like a vegetable scrap bomb had exploded all over the counters, the walls, even the floor, and poor Makoto had several new plasters on his fingers from the various cuts he’d received from the knives. However, there was a pot of soup simmering away on the stove, so victory? Checked again on Sousuke, who was miraculously still sleeping after hurricane Makoto descended on the kitchen. Proceeded to begin cleanup while soup cooked.

12:36 P.M – Finished clean up just as soup timer went off and the kitchen was finally cleaned up.

“Whas-going-on?” a sleepy voice asked just as Makoto turned the heat off the stove, causing Makoto to jump.

“You’re awake, Sousuke-kun!” Makoto yelped happily, rushing over to the futon with the thermometer he’d been keeping safe all morning, “Here, let me take your temperature!”

Before Sousuke could protest, Makoto stuffed the thermometer into his mouth. Sousuke tried to pull the thermometer out, but Makoto gave him such a severe look that Sousuke had no choice but to submit.

When the thermometer beeped as it finished, Makoto plucked the thermometer primly from Sousuke’s mouth and looked gravely at the results.

“38.5°!” Makoto moaned, “You poor thing!”

“I really should be going now, Makoto.” Sousuke said weakly, sending Makoto into one of his hand-flapping panics.
“You can’t! You’re so sick and it’s so cold outside! You can’t go anywhere!”

“I don’t want to be a burden to you, Makoto.”

“Nonsense! I made you soup!”

A quick sniff of the air confirmed for Sousuke that Makoto had indeed made him soup and Sousuke couldn’t help but soften as he watched Makoto dash over to the kitchen to get a bowl for Sousuke. It was true he felt terrible and doing anything remotely physical sounded excruciating. But more than that, Sousuke hadn’t had a home-cooked meal made just for him since, well since he left home. Makoto was virtually a stranger, but he’d made him soup. It was the kindest thing anyone had done for Sousuke in a very long time and it took a lot of control for Sousuke to not break out in tears right then and there. But Sousuke had had a lot of practice pretending he didn’t feel anything so he didn’t embarrass himself in front of Makoto.

A few minutes later, Makoto had managed to sit Sousuke at the kotatsu with two piping hot bowls of soup for them. While they ate, Makoto kept looking anxiously over at Sousuke. The only other person Makoto had ever attempted to cook for was Haru and Haru had been very encouraging about the effort, not so much about the result. The cooking attempt had only been made once, but Haru had made sure Makoto stayed firmly outside of Haru’s kitchen after that.

“The soup is very good, Makoto,” Sousuke finally told Makoto. Makoto sighed with relief and couldn’t help giving Sousuke a big, bright smile.

“I’m glad! Haru doesn’t let me cook very often. I was so afraid it would be horrible!”

Sousuke arched an eyebrow at Makoto, “Haru doesn’t let you cook?”

Haru nodded sadly, “I’m not allowed to do most of the house chores, actually. Haru says I’m a really bad cleaner and it’s easier if he just does it so he doesn’t have to redo it later. But he says I’m quite good at doing the laundry, so that’s my job!”

Sousuke smirked, “Can anyone really like cleaning?”

Makoto laughed and smiled warmly at Sousuke, “Haru started living on his own when he was 15 but he’s always liked cooking, even when we were really little. My mom let him help her all the time when we were little, but all I ever did was shape the rice balls. Haru’s just so much better than me at that kind of stuff and he actually likes doing chores quite a lot. He’s so cute, he wears an apron when he’s cooking sometimes!”

Makoto smiled to himself, thinking of Haru wearing his apron. It was a pretty basic, blue apron, nothing terribly special, but whenever Haru wore it, he also wore his very serious concentrating face that Makoto had always thought was just about the cutest thing. But Makoto’s smile disappeared when he noticed Sousuke watching him with a very weird expression.

“Oh sorry,” Makoto apologized, his cheeks turning pink, “I was just thinking about Haru wearing his
apron.”

“Oh.” Sousuke said, turning a bit pink himself. Makoto frowned, hoping he didn’t sound like a pervert. There might be a little bit of dirty thoughts attached to that apron, but that was something Makoto would only ever share with Haru.

“Speaking of cleaning,” Makoto changed the subject, “I have some laundry to do. Can I wash anything of yours?”

“No that’s ok,” Sousuke answered quickly, “You don’t have to do that.”

Makoto looked Sousuke over carefully. He was wearing the same shirt he’d come in last night and there was a toothpaste stain on the collar. Sousuke’s duffle bag was sitting on the floor next to the futon Sousuke had been sleeping on. How many spare shirts were in there?

“It’s absolutely no trouble,” Makoto insisted, “I always do laundry on Fridays anyways because it’s my only full day off. Please, it looks like that shirt could do with some washing.”

Sousuke looked down at the black T-shirt, noticing for the first time the toothpaste stain.

“If you’re sure it’s no trouble.” Sousuke mumbled.

Makoto smiled brightly, “No, absolutely no trouble at all!”

Sousuke nodded and peeled off the shirt.

“Here,” he said awkwardly, thrusting the wad of fabric out at Makoto, “Thank you.”

But something distracted Makoto’s attention away from the dirty shirt.

“Oh Sousuke,” Makoto gasped, staring at Sousuke’s right shoulder. Sousuke’s eyes widened like he was a deer in headlights and he instinctively covered his shoulder up as best he could with his large, left hand. But Makoto had already seen everything.

“After high school, I had a few surgeries on my shoulder.” Sousuke tried to explain.

Gently, Makoto reached out and with some difficulty, pried Sousuke’s reluctant hand away from his battered shoulder.

There were several long lines Makoto could tell were surgery scars. Those lines were easily distinguishable from the myriad of smaller, jagged scars that lined his shoulder, clearly cut using a razor blade.

Those jagged scars weren’t random either. It took Makoto a few moments before he could see that some of them formed kanji.

The kanji for ‘traitor’.

Carved deeply into Sousuke’s skin.

**Traitor**
Sousuke wouldn’t dare look Makoto in the eyes. Instead, he turned his head to the side, his eyes shut tight and his jaw clenched.

“Why?” Makoto asked, his voice cracking. He’d never seen anything like this before and he wanted to cry. Sousuke had done this to himself!

“It was a long time ago, right after my family kicked me out. I was so, so angry and it was my first taste of being alone in the world. It was a dark time for me. I'm used to being alone now so I don't do it anymore.”

Sousuke yanked his duffle bag towards him and rummaged around until he found a clean shirt to put on, the whole time looking anywhere but at Makoto.

Makoto grabbed the toothpaste stained shirt off the ground, where it had fallen, forgotten.

“You’re not alone, Sousuke.” Makoto said quietly, trying his best to keep his voice even. Sousuke must have picked up on the emotions, though. He finally looked at Makoto, his face a carefully carved mask void of emotions.

“I am, though.” Sousuke insisted, his voice as even as possible.

Makoto frowned deeply.

“No you’re not,” he argued fiercely, “You’ve got friends who care about you whether you choose to see them as friends or not.”

“Like who?” Sousuke scoffed though Makoto could see the tiniest, hopeful twinkle in those fever-ridden eyes. It was how a man lost in a desert would look at a glass of water or a starving man would look at a big plate of warm food, unable to believe but desperate for that one thing that could save him. From everything Makoto knew about Sousuke, he guessed Sousuke was asking Makoto to answer with one name and one name only.

But that wasn’t the answer Sousuke needed to hear.

“Like me.” Makoto replied.

Immediately, shock cracked the facade of Sousuke’s face.

Makoto continued; “I know I don’t know you well, or at all really, but what I do know for sure and what I respect a lot is how very deeply you care for people and how passionate you are. Every store Rin’s ever told us and every interaction I’ve seen you have with people shows that. Pretend you don’t care all you want, but I know differently. I also can see that you aren’t happy. It was obvious to me before I saw what you did to your shoulder. But you aren’t alone. I want to help you because I am your friend.”

Sousuke stared at Makoto’s gentle, sincere smile in utter surprise.

“Do you have anything else that needs to be washed?” Makoto asked brightly.
Two hours later, Makoto had just finished hanging up the last of the laundry to dry. Sousuke had offered to help several times, but Makoto insisted he stay in bed. So Sousuke had pulled out a book from his bag and began reading. Makoto hadn’t taken English in several years, so it had taken him an embarrassingly long time and several secret peeks in his English Dictionary to translate the title – *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. A quick search on his phone revealed that the book was originally written in German. In it, the main character had committed suicide because he couldn’t be with the woman he loved or be around his very good friend, her husband.

After seeing Sousuke’s shoulder, Makoto could not say he liked Sousuke’s choice of reading material at all.

But poor Sousuke must not have gotten very far in the book because he’d fallen asleep not five minutes after starting. Makoto had taken extra care to be as quiet as he possibly could while he hung laundry. Now, the book was perched precariously on Sousuke’s chest, rising and falling with the rhythm of his deep breaths.

Poor Sousuke.

At 8 pm, Haru returned home to find Sousuke and Makoto playing a video game in the living room, Sousuke laughing hysterically and Makoto looking pleasantly amused.

“What’s going on guys?” Haru asked wearily, shutting Sousuke up instantly.

“Oh Haru!” Makoto yelped happily, “I’m so glad you’re home!”

As usual, Makoto quickly appeared at Haru’s side, tenderly kissing Haru’s temple. Just like always, a shiver of pleasure went through Haru’s body and he couldn’t help but marvel that Makoto’s kisses could still have this effect on him.

Momentarily distracted, Haru eventually noticed that Makoto had been telling Haru all about his day with Sousuke.

“…the soup actually tasted alright! Can you believe that? I saved you some so you could try it. I think you’ll be pretty impressed.”

“You made soup, Makoto?” Haru asked. He glanced over at the kitchen and was surprised to find it was still there. Makoto beamed at him proudly.

“I did! Then I did laundry while Sousuke went back to sleep and when he woke up again this afternoon, I suggested we play some video games. When you came in, Sousuke had just won his first race against me.”
Behind Makoto, Sousuke was trying his best to not look pleased with himself but he was failing miserably.

“I’m glad you had a nice day off today, Makoto.”

Haru tilted his head up and kissed Makoto under his chin, sending a ripple through Makoto that mirrored perfectly the one Makoto had sent through Haru.

“I’m feeling like such a chef today, Haru, can I help you with dinner?”

“If you want,” Haru replied warily. Images of the disaster zone that would soon be their kitchen made Haru wish he’d refused. But when had Haru ever denied Makoto anything?

“My clothes should be done by the end of dinner,” Sousuke rumbled from the kotatsu, “I’ll find a hotel after that.”

Instinctively, Haru looked at Makoto and was displeased to see that his smile had fallen a fraction.

“Let’s get started on dinner then,” Haru grumbled.

While Haru watched Makoto perform the difficult task of chopping vegetables, a feeling developed deep inside Haru.

Despite what Sousuke said, Haru knew he wasn’t leaving tonight. In fact, Haru felt like he would now be seeing an awful lot of Yamazaki Sousuke.
Can We Keep Him, Haru-chan?

Chapter Summary

Haru is upset. Makoto asks if Sousuke can stay with them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the dark, Haru was lying on top of his bed, completely naked and listening to the soft murmurs of Sousuke and Makoto in the living room while he waited for Makoto to come to join him.

Though Haru would never admit this to Makoto, crippling waves of panic overtook him whenever Makoto was getting close with someone new. It was the same panic that had incapacitated Haru during The Fight, when Makoto revealed that he was going to leave Iwatobi and, as Haru had thought in that terrible, frenzied moment lit by the explosions of fireworks overhead, that Makoto was going to leave Haru. Obviously Haru hadn’t let Makoto leave his life – because how could Haru live without Makoto? – and they were more closely entwined now than ever before. Since they’d become a couple, Haru had gotten much better with his jealousies because they’d laid bare the fullness of their feelings for each other and they’d accepted each other. Makoto took absolutely every opportunity to show just how much Makoto was Haru’s, as Haru tried to for Makoto. Haru’s whole life seemed to be built on a solid foundation of Makoto and Haru was confident that foundation could never crumble. But still, there was always a lurking fear that someone would try to take Makoto away from him. Not that Makoto would ever leave him, but the idea of someone trying to take Makoto away was more than Haru could bear.

It took a lot to rouse that fear these days and since becoming a real couple, Haru had only experienced that fear once, when Haru had met a classmate of Makoto’s. Her name was Minami Chikako. She was beautiful, kind, and her eyes lingered on Makoto far too tenderly – just the sort of girl that could make Makoto happy if Haru weren’t in the picture. But Makoto’s obvious romantic indifference to her had made it easy to banish Haru’s fears.

Seeing Makoto with Sousuke these past few days, seeing the tender care Makoto had given Sousuke and the genuine appreciation Sousuke had for Makoto, well it had stirred something in Haru. Makoto had convinced Sousuke to stay for another night and he was out there now, making sure Sousuke was settled in. A muffled laugh, a Makoto laugh, managed to reach Haru and he felt Makoto’s absence, in his home, more fully than he’d ever felt it before.

Growing up, Haru had often imagined himself floating to the bottom of the ocean, untold fathoms waiting to swallow Haru and crush him in its icy embrace until Haru was no more than a memory. But in this fantasy, Makoto always reached Haru before he fell too far, reached out a hand and pulled Haru back into warmth and light and sun - all the things Haru thought of when he thought of Makoto. After rescuing him from the ocean, the places Makoto would take him to had evolved over time. As a young kid, fantasy Makoto would take Haru to a field of sunflowers where they used to play and the two of them were blissfully alone and happy. As a middle school kid, they went to a Makoto’s sun-filled room to play video games or play with the young twins, a huge big brother smile lighting up Makoto’s face and Haru’s soul. As a high school student, Makoto would take Haru to
their spot on the beach, sitting in silence and watching a brilliant summer sunset, sitting so close together that Haru could feel the warmth radiating out from Makoto, practically begging Haru to reach out and touch it. Later, when Haru finally understood what that longing meant, fantasy Makoto would rescue Haru from the depths and bring him to that sun-filled bedroom back in Iwatobi – this time without any trace of the twins. By the time Haru had worked up the courage to take the real Makoto in his arms and hold him tight, fantasy Makoto had already ravaged Haru with bliss.

Now, lying on the bed and listening to Sousuke and Makoto, Haru felt like he was sinking, could feel despair beginning to crush him, and he urgently needed to have Makoto reach for him and drag him out.

“If you come to me,” Haru whispered to the darkness.

Outside, Makoto laughed again.

Some time later, a slender beam of light from the living room pierced the darkness of the bedroom and Haru managed to lift his head up toward the door. Makoto pushed the door open wider, his silhouette casting a shadow over Haru. Seeing that Haru was naked and shivering on the bed, Makoto quickly stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and began groping for the light switch.

“Leave it off,” Haru said quietly. There was enough light coming from the window and their aquarium that they could see each other well enough in the dark.

“Haruka, why are laying here in the dark?” Makoto asked, his voice full of concern, “You look so cold!”

Haru propped himself up on his elbows so he could look at Makoto.

“If you can come here, please?” he asked almost in a whisper.

Makoto was frowning as he crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

“If you are ok, Haru-chan?” he asked tenderly.

As a reply, Haru crawled over to Makoto and wound his way around Makoto until Haru was sitting in his lap, his arms wrapped around Makoto’s neck, and his face buried in the crook of Makoto’s neck. Haru must have surprised Makoto, but before long, Makoto wrapped his arms tightly around Haru, nuzzling Haru’s neck with his nose. He trailed caressing circles against Haru’s back, easing the fear out of Haru without realizing what he was doing.

Makoto loved Haru and had stuck with him through everything and would continue to stick with him through anything. Evidence of Haru’s faith in Makoto could be found in the binder, hidden away in Haru’s nightstand. Makoto could be friends with anyone, even Sousuke, but he would never leave Haru.
This Makoto, holding him, would only ever be Haru's.

And it was only this Makoto who could pull Haru out from his despair. Always.

For a very long time, they stayed like that, wrapped in each other. Haru was a demanding lover and their sex life was more exciting and creative than people would probably imagine. But holding each other, not saying anything, sometimes it was more intimate than an orgasm.

It was Makoto who finally broke the silence.

“Haru-chan,” he whispered, “I have something I want to ask you and I know you aren’t going to like it.”

Haru had been waiting for this, ever since he’d come home earlier that night.

“You want Sousuke to live with us.” Haru said flatly. Makoto’s arms around him kept Haru from drowning in despair.

“Our lease is going to be up in two months and we can get a bigger apartment, one with a bigger kitchen maybe?”

Makoto was an angel, but with Haru he was also shamelessly manipulative.

Not wanting to fall into a trap, Haru pulled away from Makoto.

“Why?” he demanded, probably more harshly than he meant to.

Makoto’s face became cloudy and for a frightening moment, Haru couldn’t see what Makoto was feeling.

“He needs help and I want to help him.” Makoto answered. Haru unraveled himself from Makoto and sat down on the bed next to him.

“Not good enough, Makoto,” Haru said quietly, picking at the fibers of the bed spread, “You know him and I don’t get along very well so I need a better explanation if I’m going to agree.”

Makoto sighed and Haru waited patiently for him to explain himself.

“I want to help him because I think I understand what he’s feeling. Not about his family or his shoulder, but about Rin.”

Haru gave Makoto a questioning look, urging Makoto to continue:

“When we were in high school, it became pretty clear to me that there was a part of you that I could never share, a part that went best with Rin. For a while there, I thought that part would take you to Australia and I was very sad that I wouldn’t get to see you, that there was something I couldn’t share with you. I’m not suited for competitive swimming, that was something special between you and Rin.”
Makoto hung his head down low with shame.

“I was jealous of Rin because you shared something with Rin I couldn’t be a part of. It made me kind of miserable. During the 200 free race we swam against each other, I realized I couldn’t be everything for you.”

Haru stared at Makoto’s profile, shocked into silence.

One of the only things Haru had never understood about Makoto was why he’d insisted on having that race with Haru back in high school. Was this the answer to the old mystery? Makoto had wanted to create a tie between them that was like the rivalry linking Haru to Rin?

Haru put a hand on Makoto’s shoulder, causing Makoto to turn towards Haru. Even in the dark, Haru could see his eyes glowing brightly with emotion.

“Oh Sousuke, it’s much worse because he was Rin’s best friend, just like I was always yours, but he also had that rival swimmer connection with Rin. And Rin being Rin, chose to transfer to Iwatobi, then move to Australia, leaving Sousuke behind – choosing to share that thing with you instead of Sousuke. When Rin came back, it was you who Rin wanted to swim with, not Sousuke and even back in high school, it was pretty obvious that his jealousy over you was eating him up. I want to help Sousuke find happiness, teach him not to be jealous of your rivalry with Rin, like I had to teach myself. Maybe one day when he’s ready, I can even help him reunite with Rin. I want him to live with us because he is lonely and tired and doesn’t take care of himself. And it seems like jealousy and longing for Rin has been eating him up, worse than it ever did for me. I want to help because I remember what it felt like when I thought you’d gone to Australia to swim with Rin; I think that’s what he feels like. At least I would have been happy that you were following a dream, even though the thought of you leaving made me sick.”

Haru found this revelation both disturbing and endearing. Disturbing because Makoto’s was such a gentle, kind soul, Haru didn’t like the idea of it being plagued by something so ugly as jealousy, something Haru had always struggled with when it came to Makoto. But at the same time, Makoto’s version of jealousy was so much sweeter than any kind Haru had felt before. Yamazaki could never be jealous of Haru in the same way Makoto was jealous of Rin – he wasn’t an angel like Makoto. Suddenly, the sick despair Haru had felt about Makoto being friends with Sousuke was put into proper light and Haru felt bad for giving into his jealousy. Makoto loved Haru. Makoto had always loved Haru. There was nothing to be jealous of.

“Makoto,” Haru said quietly. “I couldn’t have left you. The whole reason I didn’t know what to do after graduation was because I didn’t know what you were doing. I needed you with me. I’ve always needed you with me. I couldn’t have ever gone to Australia because you weren’t going to be there.”

Makoto broke out into a beautiful smile and Haru felt so much better. Makoto leaned over and kissed Haru gently on the mouth.

“So I can ask Sousuke to stay?” Makoto asked when he pulled away.

Haru rolled his eyes as he entwined his fingers in Makoto’s hair.
I guess. But for now we aren’t going to talk about Yamazaki.”

He pulled Makoto’s face towards him and kissed Makoto fiercely.

Makoto pushed Haru down on top of the bed and matched Haru’s ardor in his kiss. He trailed his mouth down to Haru’s ear, his whisper sent shivers all through Haru: “I don’t want to talk at all right now.”

The next day was Haru’s day off and he spent it making sure Sousuke didn’t leave, just like Makoto had asked him to. It wasn’t such a hard task, considering that the fever-ridden Sousuke slept basically the whole day. When he wasn’t sleeping, he was reading, allowing Haru to cook food for this week’s bentos in peace. It wasn’t too bad having him there really, he kept quiet and that was how Haru liked his house to be.

When Makoto did come home, he was exhausted yet bubbling with happiness, like he always was after spending a whole day teaching swim lessons. He sat against the refrigerator while Haru finished making dinner, babbling away about the kids in his lessons. Haru couldn’t help but smile as he listened. Makoto was so well suited for working with kids, Haru was so happy he’d pursued that path.

One day, he’d make an excellent father.

The dinner Haru had made was delicious, as usual, and Makoto had been enjoying it too much to remember what he had to ask Sousuke.

“Thanks again for your hospitality, Haru and Makoto,” Sousuke said once Haru had taken the dishes away to wash them, “I appreciate it. I really should be going to find a hotel though.”

“You don’t have to go,” Makoto blurted out. His cheeks instantly turned pink; judging by the look on Sousuke’s face, a little more tact might have been a better approach.

“I’ve already been here for too long, I couldn’t trespass on your hospitality any longer.”

Sousuke moved to get up, but Makoto reached out and stopped him by putting his hand on Sousuke’s shoulder. Too late, Makoto realized it was Sousuke’s bad shoulder – his traitor shoulder. Sousuke winced slightly, but Makoto noticed.

“What I mean is, you could be our roommate,” Makoto explained, “Our lease will be up in two months and that would be plenty of time for us to find a bigger apartment so you could have your own space. We’d really like you to live with us.”

Sousuke opened his mouth to say something, but quickly closed it again.
“Everyone has been so worried about you for so long,” Makoto continued. By everyone, of course, he meant Rin but already Rin’s name had grown taboo, “I’m not sure whether or not you want to settle down for a while, but I think you would really benefit from some stability and seeing friendly faces everyday.”

At the mention of ‘friendly faces’, Sousuke’s eyes darted to Haru, who was sitting with his arms crossed and scowling deeply at Sousuke. Makoto nudged Haru with his knee.

“I don’t think I’d be welcomed,” Sousuke muttered darkly. Of course he’d think that, judging by Haru’s face. Luckily, Haru chose this moment to join in the conversation.

“Of course we want you to stay,” Haru shot back, “For Rin because Rin loves you and misses you.”

Haru’s words rendered Sousuke speechless and Makoto caught a glimpse of the turmoil those words caused before Sousuke was able to hide his feelings again.

It was the first time Rin’s name had actually been spoken in Sousuke’s presence. Makoto detected Haru’s savage pleasure in making Sousuke squirm. Vivid images of calamitous roommate situations flashed through Makoto’s head and a sudden creeping doubt tugged at Makoto. How could Haru and Sousuke ever get along as roommates? Maybe this wasn’t the best idea after all? Haru’s happiness always would come first for Makoto.

“Rin is my greatest rival and best friend outside of Makoto,” Haru continued, “I don’t think he’s ever stopped waiting for you, missing you, and if I can bring him some happiness, I will.”

For a long time, Sousuke was profoundly silent, turning their offer over in his head. Makoto could see how bewildered he was by it, but at the same time, deeply touched. Makoto couldn’t help but smile at him and it was that smile that met Sousuke when he finally looked up to face Makoto and Haru again.

“If I stay with you two,” he began slowly, “I have one condition.”

“What is it?” Makoto asked excitedly. Sousuke might as well have already agreed.

“If I stay, I forbid either of you mentioning to Rin that I’m here.”

“You want us to lie to Rin?” Haru asked angrily. Makoto’s stomach dropped. He didn't want to lie.

“I’m not ready to see him or talk to him yet. Right now, I’m not a person I would want to present to him. When I am ready I want to meet him again in the way I choose so I can explain. He’s going to be angry so if I want him to be my friend again, I have to be strategic about how I do things. That’s all I ask.”

Makoto turned and met Haru’s eyes. Haru was just as happy about this condition as Makoto, but if lying to Rin meant they could keep Sousuke safe, what choice did they really have?

“Deal.” Makoto agreed, Haru nodding right along with him.
And so, for better or worse, Yamazaki Sousuke agreed to become Makoto and Haru’s roommate.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading everyone :)
Chapter Summary

In which Sousuke broods on fallen angels. Then Makoto gets stupidly drunk with his two friends from school and Sousuke has to help him get home.

Chapter Notes

Sousuke has a lot of issues to work out about his sexuality and self-esteem in general. He's still in a bad place so please bear with him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Snowflakes caressed Sousuke’s bare cheeks and clung to his eyelashes as he looked up to the heavy, gray sky above Yoyogi Park. Such weighty heavens always made Sousuke think of Paradise Lost, a book he’d labored through in English about a year ago now. It had been extremely difficult to read on his own, but Milton’s take of heaven’s war and Lucifer’s fall had kept Sousuke riveted. He wasn’t sure if he really bought the whole heaven/hell/God thing, but it was still a story that appealed to him greatly. If Sousuke had to analyze the reason why, it was probably because he found Lucifer relatable to a disturbing degree. Sousuke wasn't deeply charismatic like Lucifer, but he had been cast out from his home too.

They both knew what exile felt like.

There were other, important similarities too. Hubris had been both their vices, thinking they could have everything they’d ever wanted against their father’s wishes, against what was natural and right. While not God, nor even a God-fearing man, Sousuke's father had always demanded complete obedience and adherence to his vision of the future and that vision did not include a son who passionately loved his best friend.

A man shouldn't love a man as much as Sousuke loved Rin.

Unlike Lucifer, Sousuke hadn't been able to rally support so he could return to heaven and challenge his father. None of his family had stood beside him in his defiance. Alone and abandoned by them all, he had barely been able to withstand the onslaught of insults and accusations of perversion during that fateful night, when his world shattered and his exile began. Sousuke had been close to repenting and begging forgiveness for the disease that had taken over his body and mind. But then his father had turned his hatred on the object of his desire.

Sousuke was a diseased, filthy animal. He could have taken his father's fists and insults, knowing that he deserved whatever pain his father could give him. He could have lived a life of lies, marrying some girl and raising some kids, working some job that led nowhere. He’d been ready to do all of that rather than be cast into the wild, with the rest of the beasts. Because deep down he knew his father was right about him.

But the one thing he couldn't do was allow his father to talk against Rin.
Rin was innocent and pure. He professed the same preferences for men as Sousuke, but his interest was forgivable because what he wanted was romance and to feel adored. Sousuke’s interest was more carnal and focused on someone it shouldn't have been, someone who didn't feel the same. Therefore, his desires were unforgivable. It wasn't Rin's fault that Sousuke felt these things. And Rin was worth everything.

He would accept anything against himself, but he wasn't able to hear a word against Rin.

So Sousuke had rallied his strength and was banished for it, forced to wander the mortal coil of the world among the other beasts.

But that was fine because an abomination, a transgressor against nature, deserved no better.

Even now, the disgusting desires of his flesh tore away at him and made him crave things he shouldn't crave.

He was worse than Lucifer.

He deserved this solitary life he'd doomed himself to and he was fooling himself by thinking the small glimmer of hope Makoto and Nanase had given him would last...

He was forsaken....he had no business playing house with them.

Looking skyward, the jagged reality of his wretchedness pierced him again and again, reopened the wounds that occasionally scabbed over but never fully healed.

He shouldn't be here, with Nanase and Makoto. He shouldn't cling to a past that had made him so very wretched for so long.

And yet....

Despite everything, there was the smallest, most secret of hopes that somehow, against all odds, managed to keep him from falling completely apart and kept his heart bleeding.

*Maybe one day Sousuke could be someone Rin would love back.*

The contradiction in Sousuke’s soul wasn’t lost on him.

Since the day Rin first went to Australia for middle school, the conflicting nature of his heart had simultaneously tormented him and given him the greatest hope he'd ever known and it was this hope that had allowed him to accept Makoto and Nanase's offer of cohabitation.

*Maybe one day Sousuke could be someone Rin would love back.*

But on a day like today, with a roiling sky overhead and his own wretchedness serving as his companion, Sousuke saw little hope and cursed his heart for clinging to something so impossible for so long. So instead he looked up to the heavens, where he could imagine Lucifer falling, his wings useless to stop his banishment.

What must it feel like to fall? To let go of everything forever?

Sousuke knew what it felt like to be cast out, to fall emotionally in every possible way, to loose everyone and everything he’d ever cared about. Sometimes falling seemed such a tempting relief. He was tired of feeling both numb and pain and the confines of his solitude. He wanted to let go of
everything and to feel weightless.

But Sousuke was too much of a coward to throw himself from the heavens, to feel with finality what it meant to *really* fall.

To meet his own oblivion and end this unbearable torment once and for all.

So he was stuck with himself, his own personal hell.

Haru and Makoto didn't deserve to be apart of it, no matter how wonderful it had been to be near people he knew again.

A fallen angel had no business inflicting himself on a good, sweet angel like Tachibana Makoto and it was stupid to have lingered so long...

“Sousuke!”

Sousuke blinked the snow out of his eyes and looked around the park.

“Sousuke, over here!”

And enter the good angel...

Makoto was walking towards him, flocked by a two adoring girls. Sousuke frowned; he had agreed to meet Makoto after classes, he hadn’t agreed to Makoto’s fan club nonsense. The girls in Makoto's class often took Makoto out to study, where no one could interrupt their Makoto time. Sousuke hadn't actually met them, but Haru tensed up whenever they were mentioned and sulked when Makoto was with them. Now, Makoto was waving at Sousuke as he came over to Sousuke's bench, a huge grin plastered across his face. Even though the extra company was going to be a pain, Sousuke couldn’t help but feel the darkness seep out of him when that smile was focused on him.

Tachibana Makoto was truly something special.

In the Angelic War, Makoto wouldn't have been a Gabriel or Raphael – he was far too gentle to be a fearsome warrior of God – but Sousuke could definitely see Makoto being something like a guardian angel, gently watching over people in his charge.

It was shocking to Sousuke how much it felt like Makoto was his guardian angel. Makoto’s heart was good and pure and it was this heart that had rescued Sousuke from the darkness and given him hope once more.

And yet...

And yet, Makoto was guilty of the same thing as Sousuke. Practically every night, Sousuke heard soft moans coming from the bedroom Makoto and Haru shared, saw the flush on their cheeks when one or both of them went to clean up in the bathroom afterward. He always pretended to be asleep, but he’d seen the tender kisses their silhouettes gave each other at the end of this nightly, secret ritual and he had often seen the looks of lust shared between them. Sousuke hated himself for ages after every time he gave into carnal temptation because it was at the root of everything evil in his life, but neither Makoto nor Haru ever seemed at all apologetic or in any way sorry for the unnatural deeds
they loved doing together. For them, it was the most natural thing in the world. And the longer Sousuke spent around them, the more he was inclined to agree.

For them, of course. Not for Sousuke.

But seeing a good, pure, and loving relationship between two men - because that's what they had - added to the confusion of his heart.

It shouldn't have been possible, but how could anything related to Makoto be anything but good and pure?

Their relationship must be excusable only because Makoto was involved.

Anything Sousuke was involved in could not be good or pure.

It would be filthy and despicable.

“There you are, Sousuke-kun!” Makoto said happily when he was within earshot of Sousuke’s bench, “I hope you don’t mind, but I invited some classmates to join us.”

Sousuke stood up to greet them, giving the girls a curt nod of the head. They were both quite cute, but Sousuke’s heart didn’t beat any faster than usual. If only it would. But Makoto inspired more of a reaction than the girls did and that's just the way it was.

“Nice to meet you.” Sousuke mumbled to the girls who didn't excite him.

“Nice to meet you too!” the girls said together with twin giggles, both clearly excited about Sousuke.

Oblivious to it all, Makoto laughed, “Allow me to introduce you to Minami Chikako and Miyoshi Kiwa. Girls, this is my new roommate Yamazaki Sousuke.”

“So you are the famous new roommate!” the one called Miyoshi said, “I wish Makoto here had told us how handsome you were!”

Both girls started to giggle again and Makoto blushed fiercely.

“Kiwa-chan!” Makoto fluttered, “Please leave Sousuke alone!”

Makoto darted an anxious look at Sousuke. He looked so worried that Sousuke would take their flirting the wrong way. Sousuke couldn’t help but be charmed by his concern.

That Makoto...

“Where did you want to go?” Sousuke asked, changing the subject.

“Er, I hadn’t thought about that. I didn’t know how much of Tokyo you’ve seen, so I thought I’d ask what you’d want to do.”

“I’m fine with anything.”

“Oh I know!” broke in the girl named Minami, “We’re so close to Harajuku, I know this adorable little cafe that has a really fun cocktail they call ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’! I’ve been dying to try one and Makoto will love it because it’s so sweet, just like him!”
Makoto turned a bright shade of pink, which only made the girls laugh harder.

“If you want to go there, Chika-chan, we can go there.” Makoto said awkwardly, blushing the same color Sousuke imagined this cocktail would be.

“Let’s go!” Minami declared as she laced her arm through Makoto’s elbow. Miyoshi did the same to Makoto’s other elbow and they began leading him off down the street. Sousuke was satisfied to walk a bit behind them, vaguely listening to their prattle about school while he tucked thoughts of fallen angels and...Rin...safely away where no one could see.

He didn't want to infect Makoto with his wretchedness so he would pretend it wasn't there.

The bar wasn’t nearly as ridiculous as it’s signature cocktail ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ would suggest and Miyoshi, Minami, and even Makoto were clearly a bit disappointed. Nevertheless, within a few minutes they were all seated at a large booth in the back and a waiter was taking their order. As predicted, the girls all ordered a ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ cocktail. When it came time for Makoto to order, he looked sheepishly at Sousuke, the tips of his ears flushing with embarrassment.

“I’ll have a ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ too.” He mumbled to the waiter.

The waiter gave Makoto a rather alluring smile. He was young and pretty cute for his type. Sousuke liked his guys to be a bit rougher, more mannish and dirty and definitely older, but in a pinch this waiter would be an awful lot of fun. Sousuke knew from experience. Evidently, the waiter thought Makoto was pretty adorable too. A surge of protectiveness went through Sousuke and suddenly he found the waiter’s presence annoying.

“I’ll have a triple of your top shelf whiskey,” Sousuke growled, staring the waiter down fiercely.

Everyone including the waiter seemed to have forgotten Sousuke was there too, but his order grabbed everyone's attention and they all turned towards Sousuke, gaping at him in confusion. Sousuke continued to glare at the waiter, his hackles raised to an alarming degree, mentally daring the waiter to say something more to Makoto.

“Right…” the waiter said, “I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

Sousuke stared fiercely at the waiter’s retreating back, triumphant that he’d fended off any advances.

“I should have gotten a drink like yours, Sousuke,” Makoto sighed miserably, “A ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ isn’t very manly, is it?”

“Don’t be dumb,” Sousuke snapped protectively, “If you want a ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ that’s fine. If it’s what you want, it’s what you want. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Makoto perked up and gave Sousuke a small, angel smile, once more dissipating the darkness.

That Makoto...

“Makoto likes sweet things,” Minami sighed as she reached out and patted Makoto on the head, “like attracts like, I suppose.”
Makoto turned his smile at Minami and it was just as innocent as the one he’d given Sousuke, but Sousuke didn’t like the glint in her eye. Makoto was a very handsome, sweet, completely unavailable guy; Sousuke could see how that might be appealing. Ok, more than appealing, more like downright intoxicating.

What did Haru think about this Minami girl?

“Anyways, what do you do, Sousuke?” Miyoshi asked, eager to change the subject, “Makoto hasn’t told us very much about you.”

“I’m working on boats in the harbor at the moment,” Sousuke explained, ”I’ve worked on quite a few boats before and there’s a welding training program offered next month that I’m going to be doing so I can make more money. I like the idea of it a lot.”

Makoto smiled encouragingly at Sousuke, though Sousuke had already told him his plans. Why was Sousuke making plans? He shouldn't pretend he was staying, no matter how much he might want to.


Miyoshi elbowed Minami in the side and smiled at Sousuke apologetically. Sousuke leveled his death gaze at Minami until even she began to squirm.

If there was one skill Sousuke had always been exceptional at, it was intimidation.

“It does sound very interesting!” Makoto chimed in, eager to smooth over the disturbance of their afternoon, “Weren’t you saying that you would be able to get hired to work on the big cargo ships once you’re certified? It must be fun to be around such big boats!”

“It’s more fun to sail on boats than weld them. I can’t say its very interesting work, but it pays well and what else am I going to do?”

The girls exchanged uncomfortable looks, which in turn made Makoto look uncomfortable. Sousuke wished he hadn’t said anything. Makoto had invited him to spend time with him, like a friend would, and Sousuke was spoiling it. He crossed his arms across his chest, leaned back in his chair, and looked out the window.

“So Mako-chan,” Miyoshi said when the silence was becoming a bit unbearable, “you haven’t told us how the swim lessons are going! Had any more trouble children?”

Makoto instantly broke out into a huge smile and began telling stories about the trials and tribulations his young pupils went through at the swimming school he worked part time at. Sousuke listened carefully but kept himself out of the conversation, where he belonged.

The ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’ lived up to their name; they were fluorescent pink with chunks of pineapple, mango, and several cherries mixed in. Dotting the foamy top of the cocktail were rainbow sprinkles and a little umbrella. When Makoto’s drink was put in front of him, he looked like he was a
little kid who’d just been given a giant ice cream sundae and it made Sousuke really happy to see.

Sousuke was served last.

“Triple whiskey for you, tall, dark, and handsome,” the waiter said casually as he leaned over and placed the glass right by Sousuke’s hand. As he stood back up, the waiter let a finger trail across Sousuke’s hand, tempting Sousuke to grab it. Small enough that no one else could see, Sousuke minutely raised a finger in response, encouraging the waiter. Why not? It wasn’t as though Sousuke was seriously propositioning him anyways. Unfortunately, the waiter’s interaction with Sousuke hadn’t gone unnoticed. The moment the waiter was gone, the girls started giggling to each other.

How annoying.

“Sousuke!” Makoto whispered rather loudly, “He was flirting with you!”

Sousuke only shrugged. The girls giggled harder.

“He’s barking up the wrong tree, isn’t he?” Minami laughed. Makoto gave Sousuke a panicked look, clearly not knowing what to do. A flash of annoyance rippled through Sousuke, causing him to momentarily forget who he was with and let out something he shouldn’t have.

“Not so wrong,” Sousuke remarked, silencing Minami immediately, “He’s alright, he looks like fun. I’d be okay with it.”

Oh shit.

Sousuke's mind instantly went into panic mode.

OH SHIT!

He'd said it out loud!

Sousuke honestly couldn’t tell who looked more shocked, Minami or Makoto. Sousuke took a sip of his whiskey, trying to brush off what he’d just said, what he'd never, ever admitted so blatantly before.

Sensing Sousuke's distress, Makoto changed the subject quickly and Sousuke and what he'd said were quickly forgotten by the rest.

His mind calmed down as he took another long sip of whiskey, letting it burn out his panic. He’d developed the taste after spending some time in the United Kingdom, working on Scottish docks. That was towards the beginning of the three years, when he was at his angriest. He’d drunk a lot back then.

Sousuke frowned deeply as the others discussed something funny their teacher had said in class that day.

Memories from Europe weren’t the best. And a lot of that badness came from the fact he’d just revealed to Minami, a virtual stranger. Sousuke liked having sex with men. He did not like having sex with women. He’d tried, all over Europe he’d tried so hard to enjoy sexual encounters with girls, to feel a rush of blood when he looked at a girl like he did with guys, to be the person his father had wanted. But no matter how hard he tried, he liked men a thousand times better and always gave in when he found a willing partner. He couldn’t help it. He hated himself for it, but he still couldn’t help it.
And now, for the first time probably ever, he’d admitted his carefully guarded secret out loud.

Just like that.

Like it wasn’t the most horrible thing in the world.

But the others had moved on and weren’t throwing stones at him like they should have.

What the hell was going on?

He took another sip of whiskey and tried to figure it out.

“This drink is really delicious!” Miyashi exclaimed. From the looks on the rest of their faces, this was a popularly held opinion.

Sousuke took another sip of his own drink – a simple, hard drink, not at all sweet and quite difficult for some people to handle...just like Sousuke. What a contrast to the fluffy, saccharine drinks he was surrounded with. How different Sousuke was from all of them.

“Sousuke, why don’t you tell Chika-chan and Kiwa-chan about some of your travels. Kiwa-chan is always talking about places she’d like to go.”

Sousuke looked at Miyashi’s suddenly eager face and he decided he liked her. She was a good one.

“I’ve been pretty much everywhere by the ocean,” Sousuke said.

"What about Australia?" Makoto asked pointedly.

Sousuke shook his head, “Never Australia, but every other continent.”

Makoto's cheerful face turned sorrowful and his angelic smile disappeared. Makoto looked like he wanted to say more, but luckily Miyashi came to Sousuke's rescue.

“Even Antarctica?” Miyashi asked as she took a sip of her drink, unaware that she was interrupting an underlying conversation.

Sousuke nodded gravely though he was relieved he didn’t have to talk about Australia more, “For a summer as general laborer at one of the camps. That’s actually where I was right before coming back to Japan.”

“Really?” Makoto asked excitedly, allowing the question of Australia to go unanswered, “Did you see any penguins?”

Sousuke breathed a sigh of relief, happy that Makoto had let it go. He couldn’t talk about Rin to anyone, especially not Rin’s friends.

“Yeah, I got to work at one of the tourist camps they have to go see them. They were pretty cool.”

“Oh man, you are going to have to tell Nagisa all about it when he next comes home!” Makoto laughed.
For a second, Sousuke thought he was talking about another girl in his class, but then he vaguely remembered a blond breaststroker on the Iwatobi Swim Club with a girly name like the rest of them. And Makoto wasn’t looking at the girls, he was looking expectantly at Sousuke for him to make a connection.

Makoto must mean that Nagisa and that Nagisa was someone he knew! Sure Sousuke had had even less interaction with Nagisa than with Makoto as Rin had been much better friends with Makoto than Nagisa, but for the first time in a very, very long time it was Sousuke on the inside of a conversation, not the outside.

Amazing!

Honestly Sousuke couldn't remember the last time something like this happened!

“I guess I could do that.” Sousuke said, his cheeks suddenly feeling warm. Before anyone could notice him blushing, Sousuke took a long, leisurely, deeply satisfying sip of his whiskey. By the time he surfaced, the conversation had changed again to classmates and the deliciousness of the ‘Cotton Candy Sprinkles’.

Sousuke half listened, watching Makoto laugh and giggle with his friends.

He really was something special.

Half an hour later, another round of frilly pink drinks had arrived, delivered by the same waiter. Sousuke hadn’t ordered another whiskey, mostly because any more would make him want to fight or fuck someone and Sousuke was having a rather nice time. He didn’t want an audience for either activity anyway.

As expected, Makoto was a complete light-weight and by the end of his second drink, he was noticeably drunk. He was Sousuke’s favorite kind of drunk, though, a quietly happy one that found words too hard when inebriated so just sat their grinning and enjoying himself. The girls were giggling and yacking an awful lot about some guy Miyashi liked. Minami’s drink was half gone, but Miyashi’s was nearly full.

They were interrupted by Miyashi’s phone ringing. It took her longer than it should have to answer it. Apparently one drink was enough for Miyashi to feel its effects.

Sousuke listened to Miyashi’s side of the conversation and when she finally clicked the phone shut, it came as no surprise that she had to go.

“My mom wants me to pick up a few things for dinner, so I have to go,” Miyashi explained, “Yamazaki, it was a pleasure to meet you! I hope I get to hear more of your travel stories soon!”

“It was nice to meet you too, Miyashi.” Sousuke replied, smiling both to himself and at her. It was really shocking to Sousuke how much he actually meant it.

Before she left, Miyashi slid her mostly full Cotton Candy Sprinkles in front of Makoto. “Here Mako-chan,” Miyashi said slyly, “I think you should finish it off.”

Sousuke was going to protest, but Makoto had already began slurping the pink drink through his
straw. Miyashi made her exit, leaving Makoto, Sousuke, and Minami at the table.

For a whole minute, not a sound could be heard except for Makoto’s loud, drunken slurping. Sousuke was fine with the silence, but the longer it went on, the more Minami began to fidget. Finally she couldn’t bear it any longer.

“Oh Mako-chan, you are going to give yourself a headache if you drink that so fast!” Minami sighed, placing her hands on Makoto’s forearm. Makoto looked over and gave Minami a very drunken grin before turning his attention back to Miyashi’s abandoned drink. Smiling, Minami reached out and tucked a strand of Makoto’s hair behind his ear, caressing it too long, before bringing her hand back on Makoto’s forearm. Was Minami’s behavior the result of her two Cotton Candy Sprinkles, or was she usually so shamelessly flirty with him?

“You know Mako-chan from high school, yes?” she asked Sousuke dreamily, not taking her eyes off Makoto, “What was he like back then?”

Sousuke frowned. It would have been better if Minami had left when Miyashi did.

“I did meet Makoto in high school, but we didn’t go to the same school. We knew each other through swimming and even then, I didn’t really know Makoto. All I knew about him was that he was almost as tall as me.”

It was as close to the truth Sousuke could come without getting into Haru and Rin’s epic rivalry and the painful relationship that Sousuke had watched powerlessly develop then never happen. But Sousuke had finally drawn Minami’s attention away from Makoto. She turned towards him, looking confused. Sousuke noted that she didn’t take her hand off Makoto’s arm.

“Then how did you start living with Makoto?”

Something about her tone rubbed Sousuke the wrong way, like she was accusing Sousuke of some wrongdoing.

“And Nanase,” Sousuke added quietly. Minami blinked, uncomprehending for a second.

“I live with Makoto and Nanase. They go together and it’s their home I live in.”

Sousuke knew the look in his eyes was unnecessarily ferocious, but he didn’t care. He didn’t like how she was acting. Under his wrathful gaze, Minami shrank.

“And Nanase,” she agreed quietly.

Her hand fell away from Makoto’s arm.

“Makoto found me in front of the Yoyogi train station and then he insisted I come home with him. I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so Makoto and Nanase asked if I would be there roommate. We’re going to get a bigger place next month. Makoto wants Nanase to have a bigger kitchen because Nanase likes to cook.”

Minami didn’t say anything back, opting instead to finish her drink while avoiding Sousuke’s razor gaze. Sousuke wondered why he kept saying things like he was going to stay? He didn’t know when he was going, but he knew he had to so why bother with all this talk of a future that Sousuke didn’t
“Haru is coming?” Makoto chirped thirty seconds later, a big dumb grin lighting up his face like it only did whenever he was with his lover. Drunk Makoto was hopelessly slow on the uptake.

“No, Makoto, but why don’t we get you home to him?” Sousuke asked. Minami shrunk further into her seat.

“I’d like that,” Makoto hiccupped, “I haven’t even kissed him all day.”

“You’d like to kiss him then?” Sousuke asked with a laugh, watching Minami carefully out of the corner of his eye.

Makoto nodded his head vigorously as only a drunken boy did.

“I love kissing Haru-chan! He has the nicest, softest lips and he doesn’t even really taste like saba! But that’s a huge secret!”

Minami hung her head down in despair.

“Well let’s get you home so you can kiss Nanase.”

Sousuke motioned for the waiter to bring their check and they waited quietly for him to return. When he did come, Sousuke wasn’t surprised to find a phone number and the name ‘Arakita Hayato’ written on the back of his and Makoto’s check. Glancing up, Sousuke caught the waiter’s eye and twitched the corner of his mouth up, making sure Arakita saw Sousuke fold the receipt up and put it in his pocket. Everyone put their money on the table and Sousuke helped Makoto up to his feet. In silence they left the café and Sousuke expected them to part ways. But before they could finally be rid of Minami, Makoto insisted they see her to her station.

“We’ve all had a few drinks and who knows what sort of people could be looking for an innocent girl like Minami?” Makoto insisted, “It won’t take us long, Sousuke!”

And so Sousuke and Makoto walked Minami to her station. As Makoto was fairly far gone, he leaned on Sousuke to keep himself walking straight. The station wasn’t very far and finally, it was time to say goodbye.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Chika-chan,” Makoto said at their parting, smiling angelically at her. The drinks had brought some color to Minami’s cheeks, but Makoto’s words made her blush furiously. Sousuke could see the heartbreak in her eyes as she looked at Makoto and suddenly Sousuke wished he hadn’t been so mean to her.

After all, who had better experience of loving someone who was in love with Nanase better than Sousuke?
“Goodbye, Mako-chan. Goodbye, Yamazaki.” she said right before she disappeared into the station.

Makoto watched her go, a very happy smile on his face.

“Minami is such a nice girl,” he slurred, “I would say she’s my best friend at school. And Miyashi is really great. I’m really happy that you got to meet them.”

“Your friends are nice,” Sousuke said carefully. Miyashi was someone he could see himself talking with more, but Minami had left a rather different impression on Sousuke.

Together, they both turned to go, but Makoto immediately stumpled and fell to the ground. Sousuke helped him up, but it became quite clear that Makoto was going to need Sousuke’s help home. Luckily for Makoto, Sousuke was just about the only one able to support Makoto’s weight easily. With his arm around Makoto’s shoulder pulling Makoto up and Makoto leaning heavily against Sousuke, they hailed a taxi and were soon safely at home. Makoto didn’t say much during the ride, just smiled to himself, a drunken blush spread across his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Sousuke would bet money that he was thinking about Nanase.

The apartment was empty.

“Where’s Haruka?” Makoto asked, panic in his voice.

“He isn’t supposed to be home for another hour yet, Makoto.”

Makoto turned his big, liquid green eyes up at Sousuke, “I think I’d like to lay down and wait for him.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

Makoto nodded his head and pushed off of Sousuke towards their bedroom, stumbling and falling along the way. Sousuke helped Makoto back up and together they crossed to the bedroom.

In the two weeks Sousuke had been living with them, he hadn’t once so much as looked inside the bedroom they shared. It was too private, too intimate a place for Sousuke to go. Naturally he’d wondered what sort of things might be inside the bedroom a couple of gay dudes shared. Sousuke had actually built up the room to be some sort of sex dungeon in his head because, cutely in love as they were, Makoto and Nanase were still engaging in unnatural acts so their room must have all sorts of perverted things in it.

But when Makoto opened the door and turned on the light, Sousuke was shocked to find himself in plain, ordinary bedroom. No, it wasn’t an ordinary bedroom. There was a corner of the room that had photographs of Nanase and Makoto pinned up. Even from a distance, Sousuke could see they documented the entire length of their relationship – from the very, very beginning to the present. In some of them, Haru was actually smiling at the camera.

There was also an aquarium, it’s gurgling rather soothing and peaceful. Above the aquarium were
several beautiful pictures Nanase had drawn; Sousuke could tell Nanase was the artist because the stunning pictures were all of Makoto. They were life-like snapshots into their daily lives; one was of Makoto napping, his glasses pushed up above his eyes and a book spread across his chest, another was of Makoto petting a cat on a set of stairs leading to some shrine, yet another was of Makoto reading to a pair of kids, the girl was looking at the book with glee, the boy looking at Makoto with complete adoration. Siblings, Sousuke guessed. Who were they?

There was a lucky cat on the windowsill along with little nick knacks that undoubtedly had some special meaning for the Makoto and Nanase of them. No, this bedroom wasn’t just an ordinary bedroom; it was a shrine dedicated to the love between Makoto and Nanase. Clearly these two adored each other and they belonged together. It really, really didn’t matter that they were both boys. They were perfect for each other.

There was nothing unnatural about this room at all.

While Sousuke took the room in, Makoto walked over to the bed and flopped down, face first.

“I feel so dizzy!” he giggled, “I really needed to lie down.”

Sousuke put aide his shattering world view and went over to the bed. Makoto rolled over and laboriously sat himself up.

“In the top drawer of that bureau is a yellow shirt with orange on the top. Could you get it for me?”

Sousuke nodded then went to look for the requested shirt. Behind him, rustling indicated that Makoto was getting undressed. A lump formed in Sousuke’s throat as he pulled out the shirt. Reluctantly he turned around and, as he expected, found Makoto in nothing but a worn pair of black boxer briefs. Makoto belonged to Haru and Sousuke’s interests lie in casual encounters and…one other place… but Makoto had a very nice body and the lump in his shorts was pleasingly large. Plus he was just as big as Sousuke and that was about the hottest thing. If Makoto were anybody else, Sousuke would probably be into it. But Makoto was Makoto and Sousuke would never, ever want to do anything to hurt that angel. Again, Sousuke experienced a flash of pity for Minami.

“Here’s the shirt,” Sousuke mumbled, tossing it across the room. Makoto wasn’t in any position to catch anything, so it hit him right in the face.

“I’ll get you some water,” Sousuke continued, “You’ll feel better later if you have water now.”

“M’kay.” Makoto hummed as he began wrestling the shirt on. Sousuke made a hasty exit so he wouldn’t have to see Makoto’s body anymore.

A minute later, Sousuke returned to the bedroom to find Makoto snuggled up under the covers. Their bed was pushed into a corner of the room and Makoto had automatically moved to the side against the wall, away from the door. Being the bigger of the two, Sousuke would have guessed Makoto slept on the outside, protecting Nanase on the inside. But apparently it was Nanase who protected Makoto while they slept.

Seeing Sousuke, Makoto smiled sweetly. Then he yawned.

“I’m so tired now.”
Sousuke went over to the bed and handed Makoto the glass of water.

“You can sleep after you’ve drunk this all the way down. You and Nanase are going out to dinner tomorrow, right? You don’t want to be feeling bad for your date.”

Makoto obediently sat up and drank every drop of water. Sousuke accepted the empty glass, tucked Makoto back into bed, and made for the door. He turned out the light but the room still glowed with the light from the aquarium. Sousuke didn’t understand how Makoto could sleep with any light; he needed complete darkness for a sound sleep. It was kind of cute that Makoto and Nanase needed a night light.

“Sousuke,” Makoto called out gently just before Sousuke left.

“Yes, Makoto?”

“I’m very happy you’re here too. It’s nice to have you as a friend.”

It’s very possible Sousuke’s heart melted just a bit.

“I’m very glad to be here too,” Sousuke replied genuinely, “You are very kind. Goodnight Makoto.”

It was just too bad Sousuke couldn’t let himself stay.

With that, Sousuke closed the door so precious Makoto could sleep. He went out to the kotatsu and pulled out the book he’d been reading. It was *Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy. Reading in English was very satisfying for Sousuke but somehow, the story of the Jude’s continual failures to make something of himself and his all-consuming and ultimately tragic love of Sue just didn’t interest him at the moment. So he put it away and thought about everything that he’d felt and said during the day.

Two hours later, Nanase came home. As usual, neither Nanase nor Sousuke greeted each other with anything more than a cold nod. Nanase quickly disappeared inside his bedroom and came back a few minutes later, looking as angry as Nanase was capable of looking.

“Why is Makoto drunk?” he demanded.

“We met up with his friends Minami and Miyashi from school. They wanted to try some ridiculous drink at some bar.”

Nanase’s clear blue eyes widened with panic. The Minami problem evidently wasn’t a new one.

“Don’t worry, I protected him. But I don’t like how Minami looks at Makoto,” Sousuke said.

Nanase’s face relaxed into a deep scowl.

“I don’t either.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her if you want.” Sousuke offered.
“Thanks.” Nanase grumbled before disappearing back into the bedroom.

Sousuke turned back to thoughts he'd been turning over and over in his head. He didn't deserve to stay and be friends with Makoto, but this afternoon had clearly shown that Makoto needed protecting and Nanase wasn't going to be around all the time to do it.

Maybe keeping Makoto out of harm's way was enough of a reason for Sousuke to stay.

For now anyway.

Because maybe a fallen angel could do something to keep his guardian angel safe.

And maybe, just maybe, that guardian angel could teach that fallen angel the secret to his goodness.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! This chapter was actually kind of difficult to write because of Minami. I'm so grateful for my lovely readers and I LOVE getting comments :)
Chapter Summary

Enter Shigino Kisumi!!!! Haru is not very happy to see him, but everyone else is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shigino Kisumi was nervous.

He’d only been on airplanes a few times before and never by himself. Besides, his destination was Tokyo and Tokyo was a whole lot bigger than Iwatobi. He was nervous about that too. To top it all off, Kisumi was seated in the middle seat and the person in the window was already sleeping, sprawled out into Kisumi’s cramped space.

Damn these long legs of his. Usually they were a blessing, they’d helped him with basketball back in the day and were a continual attraction for the ladies. On airplanes, however, they were utterly useless. Kisumi made a silent wish that whoever was going to be in the aisle seat was short and wouldn’t mind if Kisumi leaned over them a bit. But given how things were going so far, that probably wasn’t going to be the case.

To calm his nerves and distract him from the impending flight, Kisumi watched the Tokyo-bound passengers filing in for the ride, wondering what they were going to do when they got there. Was there anyone on this plane that would be his classmate at his new university? Transferring had taken months and had been a pretty huge headache, but Kisumi had finally completed the process and was set to start classes in a few weeks. And on top of a new university and leaving the only home he’d ever known, he was finally moving out of his parents’ house. It was pretty terrifying and exciting all at once.

Kisumi bent down to fish his DS out of his backpack. His space was limited and he didn’t want to have to worry about having to get into his backpack later. He could spend the flight playing his game and hopefully not obsessing about being in the big city by himself. While he rummaged in his bag with his head down, the aisle passenger took their seat. Without even looking, Kisumi could tell whoever it was was really big. This wasn’t going to be a very comfortable ride. In fact, it took quite a bit of effort to even sit up again.

“Shigino Kisumi!”

Surprised to hear his name, Kisumi looked to the aisle passenger and instantly broke out into a massive smile.

“Tachibana Makoto!”

No wonder Kisumi suddenly felt cramped in the middle seat, Makoto was just as big as he was!

“Wow, I haven’t seen you in a few years!” Kisumi said happily, “How have you been? Are you still living in Tokyo?”
Makoto’s smiled broadly, genuinely happy to see Kisumi, “I'm doing really great! Yes I am in Tokyo still. I have another year left at University and I’m teaching part time at a swimming school.”

Kisumi smiled back, remembering the last time he’d met up with Makoto. Hayato still loved to talk about ‘Tachibana Kouchi’ and how he made swimming fun. It had actually been Kisumi’s only other trip to Tokyo, taking Hayato to go watch Tachibana Kouchi swim at Nationals.

“That’s great, Makoto! You know my little brother Hayato joined the Iwatobi Returns Swim Club because of you.”

Hearing that, Makoto's smile widened. He really was one of the most friendly guys Kisumi had ever known.

“It’s great to see you again,” Kisumi gushed, the filter on his mouth being temporarily forgotten, “I forgot that you had come to Tokyo. I just transferred to a university in Tokyo so I'm going there to look at a few places to live before I come next month. It’s nice to know you are in town so I’m not completely alone.”

“Congratulations Kisumi,” Makoto gushed back, his enthusiasm equaling Kisumi’s, “Haru and I are together now, so you definitely know two people in Tokyo. Oh, and do you remember Yamazaki Sousuke? He’s living with us too.”

The mention of Sousuke’s name wiped the smile right off Kisumi’s face but before he could say anything, the plane suddenly shuttered to life and began rolling down the tarmac. Letting out an involuntary whimper, Kisumi clutched onto Makoto’s arm for protection.

“You aren’t big on flying I take it.”

Kisumi shook his head. Makoto was the only person in the world who wouldn't laugh about Kisumi's fear of flying and for that, Kisumi was extremely grateful.

“I’ve only been on three planes before.” Kisumi explained sheepishly.

Makoto smiled, not out of mockery, but like they now shared an important secret.

“I’m pretty terrified of the dark and scary movies,” he confessed, “I won’t tell a soul!”

Makoto winked at Kisumi, making him feel instantly better. No wonder Makoto was such a good swim coach!

Although he’d never admitted it to anyone, Kisumi had always wished he and Makoto had been better friends in middle school and had stayed in better touch during high school. He was a really great guy and they got along really well. But for some reason, Kisumi had always found it a little hard to keep guy friends. Sure girls had always kind of thrown themselves at Kisumi, but for some reason he’d always been on the outside whenever it came to guys. He’d always been kind of lonely and had therefore always made sure to have a girlfriend to compensate, though it just wasn't the same.

The plane picked up speed and Kisumi tightened his grip on Makoto’s arm when the wheels finally took off from the ground.

They were on their way to Tokyo.
Eventually the plane leveled out to their cruising altitude and Kisumi felt safe enough to let go of Makoto. His brain solidified and he remembered that they’d been talking about Yamazaki Sousuke.

“So Sousuke lives with you now? His last postcard said he was in Tokyo, but he didn’t say anything about you guys.”

Makoto’s face went completely blank.

“Sousuke sends you post cards?” he asked.

Kisumi nodded, “Yeah, he came to my house a few years ago and stayed with my family for a week. He wouldn’t say what happened, but our moms know each other and my mom found out that Mr. Yamazaki kicked Sousuke out. I never found out why. Anyways, Sousuke said he was going to go travel and work. My mom got really upset at the idea of him living completely alone in foreign countries, but there was no way to stop him. So she made him promise to send us postcards once a month so we would know he was alright. Otherwise she swore she would track him down and find him, no matter where he was. So for three years, he's sent us a postcard every month.”

“But we’ve all been looking for him!” blurted Makoto, “Rin, Nitori, Momo, Nagisa, Rei, even Haru! We all searched and searched but we couldn’t find any trace of him!”

Kisumi smiled but his heart wasn’t into it. Apparently none of those guys had thought to ask Kisumi where Sousuke was. He was, once more, passed over.

“How is he?” Kisumi asked quietly.

He’d often thought about Sousuke, imagined what adventures he was having. Part of him had wished he’d gone with Sousuke, but Kisumi hadn’t ever lived away from home and he’d never been especially adventurous. His mom predicted he’d be married before too long and living a quiet life somewhere, a boring yet stable kind of life. Just like Kisumi. Moving to Tokyo was a really, really big step for him.

Makoto frowned, “I really can’t say. I found him by chance really and when I did, he had a black eye, a busted lip, and a high fever. He’s physically better, but he seems really sad and angry most of the time. It worries me. When he’s not working, he usually just sits at home and reads these really depressing books, most of them in English, or he disappears for hours at a time and comes home in the middle of the night drunk. He's not very happy.”

Unfortunately, Kisumi didn’t have much trouble imagining Sousuke like that. Not with knowing how he was before he'd left on his great adventure.

“What does Rin say about all that? Rin always makes Sousuke feel better.”

Makoto’s frown deepened.

“Rin doesn't know he's here. Sousuke said he’ll leave the country if we tell Rin where he is. Haru hates lying to Rin and so do I. But Sousuke is not in a good place so I can understand him wanting to wait while he sorts himself out a bit more to see Rin. And I’m sure he knows how furious Rin is going to be with him for not contacting him once in three years and making him worry. I hate lying, but I'm more worried about keeping Sousuke in one place and helping him find some happiness first.
It's really hard to see him sometimes, he's just so angry all the time and he won't talk about anything.”

Sousuke always had been the rain cloud to Rin’s sunshine, but together they’d always made rainbows. It was rather depressing for Kisumi to hear the state of their current predicament. Like Haru and Makoto, Rin and Sousuke just needed to be together in Kisumi’s head.

“Well I’m sure they’ll make up eventually and get back to being the dynamic duo. In elementary school they were seriously the most energetic, competitive kids and Rin was the only one who ever got Sousuke to smile. I was sort of the third member of their little group, but I usually was just the mediator whenever they got into a fight. It's really depressing to think they aren't even friends anymore.”

“I’m sure they’ll make up sooner or later,” Makoto offered.

Kisumi hoped so. Rin and Sousuke and Makoto and Haru had always sort of been his friendship ideals. He'd been close with each pair, but never apart of it. Knowing them, he'd always tried to find a friend who he could be that close with but so far, he'd had no luck. Still, it was nice to hear that at least Haru and Makoto were still best friends. It gave Kisumi some hope for his future in Tokyo.

“So Kisumi, how is Hayato doing?” Makoto asked.

Kisumi smiled widely. Even though Hayato was so much younger than him, they were extremely close and Kisumi was always ready to gush about his incredible baby brother. And Tachibana Kouchi was very eager to hear how his first and all-time favorite swimmer was excelling at the old swim club.

For the rest of the trip, the two boys chatted and caught up on each other’s lives, though Rin, Sousuke, and Haru weren’t mentioned again. Instead, their conversation veered towards Makoto’s twin siblings, who were a year older than Hayato. Kisumi knew them both, since they swam with Hayato, but it was still really lovely to share a big brother moment with Makoto. Apparently it was because of the twins that Makoto had been in Iwatobi; it was their birthday and being the good big brother he was, Makoto always made sure to be home for that. From their they began reminiscing about their middle school days and the time flew by faster than they did.

By the time the plane began its descent into Tokyo, Makoto had invited Kisumi to come over for dinner before checking into the hotel he’d booked. Kisumi was so happy that he wasn’t going to have dinner alone, he wasn’t even that disturbed by the plane’s bumpy landing.

Haru looked down on the meal he’d prepared with pride. Ever since coming home after practice, he’d been slaving away at Makoto’s welcome home meal. All his favorite foods were there, even though they would probably have to eat packaged Ramen for a week to make up for the expense. But it was worth it because Haru had missed Makoto like crazy.

The front door opened and Haru’s heart jumped up into his throat in eager anticipation of Makoto. But it was only Yamazaki.

They nodded at each other in greeting and Haru tried very hard not to look too disappointed.
Four days without Makoto was entirely too long.

“This smells nice, Nanase,” Yamazaki said cordially as he surveyed the spread on the kotatsu, “There’s an awful lot of meat so I’m guessing this is Makoto’s welcome home dinner?”

Haru nodded. He was too excited to see Makoto to be annoyed by Yamazaki.

Yamazaki smiled and pulled out his wallet.

“Here,” he said, holding out a rather large sum of yen.

Haru looked down at the money suspiciously. Yamazaki had already given them quite a bit of money to help pay for rent and food while he stayed with them and of course some of that money had gone into the night’s meal. He didn’t need to give them more, even though Makoto and Haru could really use it. Tokyo was far from a cheap place to live and Makoto’s part time job at the swim school was the only extra income they got apart from their student living stipends. Yamazaki’s generous contribution towards their household funds had made things quite a bit easier for them. But still, Haru couldn’t accept his money; it was too much.

“You’ve given us enough already, you don’t need to pay for more.” Haru insisted, batting Yamazaki’s hand out of the way.

Sousuke quickly shoved the money back in Haru’s face, his face turning scarlet.

“I’m making good money and I didn’t even give you that much,” he muttered, "This meal looks expensive and I want some so this should help cover it. And it would be cool if you used the rest to take Makoto out on a special date or something."

A date? If Haru didn’t know better, he would have thought he was talking to Rin. Yamazaki was the furthest thing from sentimental. Sousuke frowned when Haru didn’t say anything back.

“It’s just…Makoto…” Yamazaki stammered awkwardly, “he’s so nice and he's so nice to me and you make him…so happy. I like to see you do…special things for him. It would make me really happy…if I knew you were taking him somewhere nice because I like how...happy...you guys are....together.”

Yamazaki blushed fiercely and shoved the money harder in Haru’s face.

Haru’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked at Yamazaki.

Things had always been very tense between Yamazaki and Haru. Although he’d never admitted it in so many words, Haru could tell that Yamazaki had always been cripplingly jealous of Haru, in swimming and with Rin. How many times had Yamazaki threatened Haru to not hurt Rin in high school? And even now, Yamazaki tensed up whenever Haru talked about a swim meet or his practices. Once a die hard swimmer, always a die hard swimmer and worse too, for being taken out by an injury before his time.

But things felt different between them now that Yamazaki had been out of the pool for so long and had seen first hand that there was no one in the world for Haru but Makoto. Maybe now things didn’t have to be so tense between them.
For the very first time ever, Haru smiled at Yamazaki as he gingerly plucked the money out of his hand.

“Thank you, Sousuke.”

Yamazaki peeked at Haru with wide, surprised eyes and then he too, for the first time ever, smiled at Haru.

“You’re welcome, Haru.”

“Will you help me finish getting the table ready?” Haru asked as he stuffed the money in his pocket.

“Sure.”

Just as Sousuke and Haru finished setting the table, the front door opened and this time it was Makoto at the door. Haru had his arms around him in two seconds flat, just enough time for Makoto to drop his bag in the genkan. Haru took in a big whiff of Makoto and felt a wave of warmth travel down from his forehead, where Makoto’s lips had found their special spot.

“Okaeri, my love,” Haru whispered soft enough so Sousuke couldn’t hear.

Makoto squeezed Haru against his chest, “Tadaima, my love.”

Haru leaned his head back so he could look up into Makoto’s beautiful emerald eyes, be bathed in the light of his magnificent ‘Haru’ smile.

In front of other people, physical expressions of their love beyond cuddling, holding hands, and chaste kisses anywhere but on the lips wasn’t their style. That aspect of their relationship was secret and special between them, just like so many other things over the years. Haru didn’t want to share that part of Makoto with anyone. The physical aspect of their relationship was strictly for them, no one else.

But Haru really had missed Makoto, so tonight Haru made an exception.

Reaching up, Haru wrapped his hands around Makoto’s neck, pulling him down so Haru could kiss him thoroughly and deeply.

It wasn’t a porno kiss, but it was enough to stir his desire. And Makoto’s. Suddenly he wished they didn’t have a meal to sit through so Haru could take him into their room and lock the door.

But they did and Sousuke was there.

All too soon, it was over and Haru untangled himself from Makoto, feeling suddenly very conscious that Sousuke was their audience. But weirdly enough, it wasn’t Sousuke that Makoto seemed worried about.

He turned his head behind him and it was only then that Haru noticed Makoto hadn’t come home alone. Instantly, Haru’s elation at being reunited with Makoto evaporated as he recognized the mop of stupid, pink hair behind Makoto.
“Er...Welcome to our home, Kisumi. I didn’t really explain it before, but Haru’s my boyfriend now!”

Five minutes later, everyone was sitting around the kotatsu. Haru was scowling as deeply as he possibly could as he listened to Kisumi, Sousuke, and Makoto marvel at the unbelievable coincidence that Kisumi and Makoto had sat right next to each other on the airplane.

Unfairly yet oh so satisfyingly, Haru thought it must be some sort of Kisumi trick to steal Makoto again.

Dinner proceeded and Haru pouted all through Kisumi’s explanation about how he was going to be moving to Tokyo.

“Oh great!” Sousuke said, “You can send my boxes of books with you!”

Kisumi rolled his eyes in exasperation, “Yeah, you know you never asked if you could just send me stupid books all the time. There are five boxes of them now and they take up sooo much room.”

That bit caught Haru’s attention.

“You knew where Yamazaki was this whole time?” Haru snapped at Kisumi.

Haru’s fury grew as he listened to Sousuke’s explanation. Apparently they could have found Sousuke if they’d only asked Kisumi. None of them, of course, had thought about Kisumi because Kisumi and Sousuke hadn’t really been friends since elementary school. Haru couldn’t decide if it was more infuriating that they hadn’t thought of Kisumi or that Yamazaki hadn’t said anything about it until now. All the good feeling Haru had been feeling towards Yamazaki was now destroyed.

A terrible thought occurred to him...

If Haru felt this betrayed, how was Rin going to feel when he finally found out that Yamazaki was Haru and Makoto’s roommate?

It made him feel sick just thinking about it. He valued Rin’s friendship second only to Makoto’s and he felt like he was a traitor.

Dinner went on and Haru sullenly picked at the meal he’d worked so hard over for Makoto, unable to enjoy it at all. Now Yamazaki and Kisumi were both eating it and, what’s worse, they all seemed to be having a great time. Makoto kept darting worried looks at Haru, but it was pretty obvious that he was enjoying their company despite Haru.

Haru’s anger turned into despondency and as soon as he was finished with his meal, Haru said he had something to take care of in the bedroom and left the three of them to worry about the dishes.

Safe inside their room, Haru didn’t turn on the light, preferring to bask in the warm, watery glow of
the aquarium’s light instead. It felt like being underwater, like Haru was a merman.

Dragging his feet, Haru crossed the room and plopped sadly down on the bed, feeling Makoto’s absence more profoundly than he had over these past four days. From the conversation with Kisumi they’d had at dinner, Haru could guess what Makoto would ask him.

Somehow, the idea of adding Kisumi to their growing household was even more appalling than it had been for Sousuke. Sousuke was awkward and grumpy, but he also needed to be taken care of and was endearingly grateful for Makoto and Haru’s hospitality. He was also very neat and did everything just like Haru would. It was nice to have the house so clean after living with Makoto’s well-intentioned chore failures for so long. Sousuke didn’t seem so much Rin’s fearsome, half wild guard dog anymore as he did an ugly, beaten up, neglected old stray that had finally found a nice home and cleaned up everything really nicely.

Haru could live with that.

But if Haru had to compare Kisumi to an animal, he would be the most adorable puppy in the universe, very easy to love and give attention to. And because he’d never lived away from home, that puppy probably also made a huge mess. The thing that killed Haru was that he knew just how happy puppies made Makoto. Makoto was, after all, the most adorable, loveable, friendly dog in the universe.

Haru was a cat – abrasive, aloof, not easily mixed with others, and affectionate only to a very select few. And any drastic change to his surroundings upset him a lot. Who would pay attention to a cold, high-maintenance, difficult cat when there was a fun, loveable puppy around? Not for the first time did Haru wish he had a little bit more dog in his personality, but he was who he was. And not for the first time, he felt like what he was couldn’t possibly keep Makoto’s interest.

For what felt like ages, Haru lay on the bed, curled up in a ball and feeling sorry for himself, until a soft knock came at the door and it opened a crack.

“Haru-chan?” Makoto called softly.

Haru didn’t answer, so Makoto came in and closed the door behind him. Haru heard Makoto’s bag land on the floor and Makoto’s heavy steps crossing the floor to the bed. When Makoto sat down, the bed sunk a bit under his weight.

At least Haru wasn’t alone anymore.

One of Makoto’s big, strong hands reached out for Haru and began gently rubbing his shoulder.

“I don’t want Kisumi to live with us.” Haru said flatly.

Makoto sighed heavily then went about situating himself properly into the big spoon position. Because he was in a mood, Haru kept himself stiff as he could, so Makoto had to work to get into his preferred spot. But Makoto knew how to do things and his legs eventually twined themselves around Haru’s. His arms wrapped around Haru and, finally situated, he kissed the back of Haru’s neck.

“He’s your friend and he’s been having trouble finding a place to live. It will be cheaper if we have two roommates instead of one and we can get an even bigger place.”

Haru didn’t say anything but Makoto correctly took his silence to mean Haru wasn’t happy.

“The thing is, Haru-chan, I have been looking at three bedroom apartments as well as two bedroom places anyway and it would be cheaper with four people instead of three. You know money has
been really tight but if we could save some, it would mean a lot because then I could go to the Pan-
Asian games with you next year, now that you’ve qualified. If we start saving now, I think we could
manage it. I don’t like being away from you anymore than you like it and it’s going to get harder
now that you are fast enough for international meets. And I want to be there cheering for you!”

Despite his resolution to pout, Makoto knew just what to say. Haru turned around so he could face
Makoto and relaxing into Makoto’s arms. A four day separation was terrible, but Makoto was right
about Haru having to spend more time away from home. Although there were plenty of swim meets
in Tokyo, more and more had been dragging Haru away. Besides it always made Haru so, so happy
when Makoto was there to cheer him on.

Makoto’s face suddenly became very serious and his hand moved to caress Haru’s cheek. Haru
could see in his eyes that Makoto was about to say something deep from his heart, so Haru held his
breath, eager to hear it even though he had a pretty good idea what Makoto was going to say:

“Nanase Haruka, you are my past, my present, and my future and you know that we are going to
spend the rest of our lives together. We should enjoy this stage of our lives, being young and living
in Tokyo with our friends. We should enjoy it as much as we can so we won’t have any regrets
when we enter the next stage, then the next stage, then the next. As neither of us want to stay in
Tokyo forever, someday we’ll have a nice house somewhere quieter where it will be just us. I’m so
excited for that day to come, but that day is still a long way off. So in the meantime, I think it would
be really great if we enjoyed spending time with our friends and had all sorts of fun stories to
remember when we’re old and gray together.”

For a long time, Haru was at a loss for words. He did want to spend his whole life with Makoto and
he loved the idea of them reminiscing about their wild times in Tokyo, when they were both old men
together. His mind drifted between Makoto and the Binder in the bed stand and some new ideas
came to him. His future with Makoto was always something that made him happy to think about...

Kisumi was hardly Haru’s favorite, but Makoto – Haru’s undisputed favorite forever and ever – did
have a point. Both about the money issue and about enjoying their youth. To be fair, Haru was
holding onto a grudge from middle school and he really didn’t know what Kisumi was like anymore.
And if it made Makoto happy to have another fun and loveable dog around, then Haru could suck it
up and deal with Kisumi.

Makoto watched Haru patiently, waiting for his response.

Haru was always a sucker for arguments based around their shared forever.

“Fine.” Haru muttered, looking away from Makoto’s eyes, “But he’s still annoying.”

Haru could feel Makoto break out into a massive grin and he just had to look.

Makoto thanked Haru for being understanding with a kiss, which Haru returned fiercely. Makoto
pulled away slightly to look into Haru’s eyes, then kissed Haru back even more ferociously. Anyone
who knew Makoto would be surprised to find how passionate he could be...

And just like that, the night began to live up to Haru’s expectations.
“Are you serious, Makoto?” Kisumi cried in disbelief. He’d met up with Makoto and Sousuke at a mall and, instead of looking at a nearby danchi, Makoto and Sousuke had asked him to live with them.

“Of course!” Makoto declared with a huge smile, "Iwatobi kids should stick together!"

Kisumi laughed happily, not quite believing his luck.

Suddenly his impending move wasn’t half as scary, not when he would be living with Makoto, Haru, and Sousuke!

“I would love to live with you guys! It will be so much fun!”

It was impossible to tell who was smiling brighter, Makoto or Kisumi. Even tragic Sousuke was smiling a little. The only one who was missing was Haru and Kisumi had a feeling Haru would not be smiling. Remembering him, Kisumi’s smile fell.

“Is Haru alright with it?”

As long as he’d know him, Haru had always been a bit of a weird guy and Kisumi hadn’t gotten a very welcoming impression from him last night.

“He agreed,” Sousuke confirmed, “I asked when they talked to me about it this morning.”

Relieved, Kisumi’s smile began to dazzle once more.

“Excellent! It’s going to be so much fun!” he exclaimed, “If you and Haru want to go on a date or want the apartment to yourselves, Sousuke and I can go find girls at karaoke or something! You must have some cute girl friends, Makoto! You’ll have to introduce me!”

Makoto darted a worried look at Sousuke that Kisumi didn't understand. Sousuke blushed and suddenly looked very awkward.

"Yeah...about those girls..."

Chapter End Notes

How could I not include the precious strawberry smoothie prince? As always, thanks so much for reading! I've been enjoying writing this immensely and I really appreciate all the lovely comments :D
The Various Struggles of Being Sousuke and Makoto

Chapter Summary

The gang goes to karaoke and then plays pool. Sousuke is upset so Makoto tells him a very precious story.

Chapter Notes

This chapter does involve Sousuke with another guy, but don't worry! SouRin is very much endgame! Baby boy just needs to work things out for himself.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the blink of an eye, the New Year was over and Kisumi, Sousuke, Makoto, and Haru found themselves the new residents of a large, three-bedroom apartment. For the first time since middle school, Sousuke had a room completely his own. Even before he’d left on his world tour, he’d shared a room with Rin and had lived in a dormitory at the boarding school he’d attended during the first two years of high school before transferring to Samezuka. It felt surprisingly nice to know there was a space in the world that was all his. As Kisumi had never lived away from home, Makoto fussed over teaching Kisumi the basics of adult living while Haru busied himself with the kitchen. Makoto devoted entirely too much time dividing up a complex chore wheel, probably because he wanted to be very sure Haru didn’t get landed with everything. While the rest of them worked out the details, Sousuke busied himself with organizing his beloved book collection and decorating his room. Since it had been so long since Sousuke had a room to himself, his first instinct was to put up a sign saying ‘Sousuke’s Room, No One Allowed’. That’s what he’d done growing up, trying in vain to keep his older brother Ichirou out.

Stupid Ichirou.

Unpacking his things, Sousuke reflected on how dumb it was that he missed Ichirou so much still, more than his mom and definitely more than his dad. Sure Ichirou gave Sousuke a hard time growing up – Sousuke was highly sensitive as a child, so it had been easy to do - but Ichirou was also the one that introduced Sousuke to the world of swimming and encouraged Sousuke to follow in his footsteps at Sano Swim Club. He’d taught Sousuke how to fight and a few, very choice swear words in English that amazed and dazzled Sousuke’s classmates.

“Such a serious little brother!” Ichirou would laugh anytime he made Sousuke throw a fit – which was embarrassingly often - then he would make silly faces and tickle Sousuke until he was laughing again. Ichirou was a golden boy, always laughing and joking around, the idol of Sousuke’s early life.

When Sousuke thought about it, Rin was a crybaby version of Ichirou. Maybe that’s why Sousuke had felt so drawn to Rin in the first place, because his knowledge of Ichirou made it easy to understand and appreciate Rin.

In any case, Ichirou had been kind of ideal as far as big brothers went.
That is, until their dad kicked Sousuke out.

A big brother was supposed to protect their little brother, no matter what, and Ichirou had done absolutely nothing when their dad rained brimstone onto Sousuke. Ichirou had stood by and watched as their father punched Sousuke for the last time. And the last view Sousuke had had of Ichirou was of his blank, passive face over his father's shoulder, when the front door was slamming shut on Sousuke. The bruises left on Sousuke by Ichirou’s inaction lasted far longer than the ones left by their father’s fist. Even now, his heart was still black and blue and tender from them.

Stupid Ichirou.

So Sousuke didn’t put up the childish sign. Ichirou wasn’t around to invade Sousuke’s privacy. If he hadn’t defied their father when Sousuke’s world was being torn apart, Ichirou would never defy their father now, years after the fact.

But Sousuke missed Ichirou with every fiber of his being. Ichirou and Rin, the two who’d broken his heart the most. His golden boys.

Stupid Ichirou.

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One night, about two weeks after they were all settled in, Kisumi proposed that they celebrate their new place by a night of karaoke in Shibuya. As none of them had gone out much lately, everyone easily agreed and Makoto invited Miyashi and Minami to join them. Much to Sousuke’s surprise, Haru also invited his training partner – Tsukino Hiro.

Since Haru had told Souske about the kid he shared a lane with everyday, Sousuke had been dreaded meeting the swimmer who excelled in the 50, 100, and 200 frees and the 100 and 200 butterfly. His regret and voracious jealousy about able-bodied swimmers had lessened over the years, but it was always there, silently gnawing at Sousuke’s shoulder and haunting his dreams with races that would never be. Sousuke was fully prepared to hate Tsukino so when joined them at the karaoke bar, Sousuke’s hackles went up immediately.

“Nanase!” Tsukino greeted Haru amiably, “It’s so weird to see you in actual clothes and not just sweats or a suit! Thanks for inviting me!”

From the smile on his face, he really meant it.

“Sure.” Haru replied flatly, though there was just a tinge of blush on his cheeks. Makoto looked about to burst with pride, like Haru was his socially awkward friend who had just brought home a friend for the first time. Come to think of it, that actually wasn’t too far off the truth.

To Makoto, Tsukino bowed politely in greeting, “Nice to see you again, Makoto. How are the swim lessons going?”

Makoto smiled warmly at Tsukino and put a hand on Haru's lower back, “Really great, thanks for asking!”

Did Tsukino know that Makoto was Haru’s boyfriend? It was impossible to say. Clearly, this wasn’t
the first time he’d met Makoto so he must know, right? And straight guys didn’t touch each other like that...But Tsukino didn’t act like it was weird or unusual at all, which was quite weird for Sousuke to see. It was one thing for Sousuke to accept that they were a good couple, but for a straight guy who saw Haru in a suit every day?

Next, Haru introduced Tsukino to Kisumi, Manami, and Miyashi before finally making it to Sousuke.

“This is Yamazaki Sousuke,” Haru said, “he was a swimmer too.”

Being a true chlorine rat, Tsukino’s eyes grew wide with excitement at the mention of a fellow swimmer. Sousuke felt like punching him. Tsukino was about an inch taller than Haru and didn’t look to be especially muscular for a swimmer. Yet he’d far surpassed Sousuke in the pool.

“Really?” Tsukino asked, “What did you swim?”

“Fly and free. 50, 100, and 200,” Sousuke answered curtly. Whenever he thought about swimming, which was still way too often, Sousuke felt the phantom pain in his bad shoulder and would reflexively try to massage away the pain. Tsukino noticed the gesture and his smile disappeared.

“Rotator cuff?” he asked, guessing immediately the source of Sousuke’s greatest pain.

Sousuke nodded.

“Surgeries?”

Again Sousuke nodded.

Tsukino shook his head sympathetically.

“I’m sorry, man. Shoulders took my high school rival and my little sister out of the pool. She was ranked first nationally in the 1500 free and was recruited to swim at an American university when she screwed up her shoulder. It’s a brutal twist of fate that could happen to anyone, no matter how careful you are. I’m really sorry.”

“Yeah.” Sousuke agreed, though he failed to mention how he’d done this to himself. Still, it was nice to have some sympathy after so many years of pain and frustration and disappointed hopes.

Maybe this Tsukino guy wasn’t so horrible after all.

Karaoke was actually a lot of fun. Kisumi enthralled Miyashi and Minami with his beautiful singing and Sousuke and Haru exchanged a few, relieved glances that Kisumi was so enchanting. With Kisumi there, Minami forgot to hit on Makoto. Tsukino was a perfectly terrible singer, but he was clearly enjoying himself and on more than one occasion, he forced Haru to join him on stage for a duet. Haru only went up so long as he got to sing a duet with Makoto immediately after and it was rather a delight to see Makoto blushing so hard in the spotlight. After a generous amount of terrible whiskey, even Sousuke was persuaded to sing a song of Miyashi’s choosing. Howls of laughter rang through the bar as Sousuke stumbled his way through the most ridiculously cheesy love song Miyashi could find. But for once, Sousuke was enjoying himself so he didn't mind.
For hours they sang, drank, and laughed together and it was a really pleasant evening. But then Haru started to look tired and Makoto grew concerned.

“I probably should get going,” Tsukino announced once Miyashi and Minami returned from a duet together, “We have practice in the morning and I’ve probably drank too much as is.”

Makoto agreed, “Haru’s about ready to pass out. I should probably take him home.”

Haru nodded sleepily and slumped against Makoto’s shoulder.

“Ah, but I don’t have class until tomorrow afternoon!” whined Kisumi, “I’m not ready to go back home yet!”

Sousuke had to agree. He had the next three days off and he wasn’t ready to go home yet either. There was enough alcohol in his system now that he really needed to do on of two things:

Fuck or fight.

Actually if he could do both, it would be kind of perfect. It had been too long since Sousuke had done either of those things and he needed some kind of outlet. Bad.

“I’ll stay out with you, Kisumi,” Sousuke offered, “it’s still early.”

Kisumi smiled widely, “Great!”

“But what about Chika-chan and Kiwa-chan?” Makoto broke in, “What do you girls want to do?”

“We’ll go with Kisumi!” they declared in unison.

“Great!” Kisumi said enthusiastically, “Where should we go?”

If Sousuke hadn’t had so much to drink, he probably would have censured himself a bit more.

“Kisumi, I need to fuck someone tonight. So we’re going somewhere where I can do that.”

For a brief moment, Miyashi and Minami looked as though all their prayers had been answered. No doubt images of gay bars with thumping house music and pretty boys making out with each other flashed through their minds. Were they fujoshi?

Kisumi frowned, “I don’t know any gay bars around here.”

Sousuke scoffed, “Who said anything about gay bars!? It’s too easy to pick up a guy in a place like that. Where’s the challenge? We’re going to a bar I know in Ueno.”

Sousuke looked around at the rest of the group and noticed Makoto and Haru exchanging confused looks.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Makoto asked him, “What about…”

“I’m not a monk,” Sousuke interrupted before Makoto could finish his thought.

Makoto nodded, though he was still frowning.

“If you think that’s what you need, Sousuke, have a great time.”
Infuriated, Sousuke grabbed Kisumi and yanked him towards the door, the girls trailing after them. He would never be so annoyed with Makoto if he hadn’t had so much whiskey. But as it was, Sousuke’s mind began to deliver a mighty tirade against Makoto.

Just because Saint fucking Makoto had only slept with one person in his whole freaking life did not mean that everyone else in the world should be held to such an impossible standard! And Sousuke hadn’t seen Rin in three fucking years! How was anyone supposed to survive for three years without dipping their dick in some cute little ass when they needed to! Maybe gay sex was unnatural, but no sex was even worse! Rin probably slept with more people than Sousuke anyways, why shouldn’t he! Rin hadn’t even been a virgin when Sousuke joined him at Samezuka so there’s no way someone as hot as Rin wouldn’t be fucking all over Sydney! They weren’t together anyways, they hadn’t even spoken in three years!

As his thoughts stormed out, Sousuke had used the natural advantage of his long legs to pull ahead of the others. Unfortunately, Kisumi’s legs were not that much shorter than Sousuke’s and he didn’t have any difficulty catching up to Sousuke.

“Uh, Sousuke,” Kisumi said coyly, “you’re into Rin then? I didn’t know that.”

Crap!

FUCK!

Had Sousuke been saying all that fucking shit out loud?

Damn alcohol! Damn Makoto!

He wouldn’t dignify this admission with an answer so the rest of their journey to Ueno continued in silence. Sousuke was fuming too much to notice the unease of Miyashi, Minami, even Kisumi as the train passengers became rougher the closer they got to Ueno. They disembarked and made their way to a nearby pool hall that Sousuke had frequented a few times...not for this purpose though.

Sousuke was so caught up in his anger and panic about revealing his feelings for Rin to Kisumi, that he stormed through the front door and slammed the door in Kisumi’s face. But once inside, Miyashi quickly put Sousuke in his place.

“Dammit Yamazaki! Would you calm the fuck down!? If you want to fuck some one then fuck some one! No one’s telling you not to and no one cares if you do! We’ve all had a really nice night so don’t ruin it for everyone else!”

Sousuke stared her down, but the fury in her little face dissipated Sousuke’s. And she was right, he had been having a pretty wonderful night. Mollified, he nodded and mumbled an apology.

“Where are we anyways?” Minami asked.

The bar was dark and there weren’t many people around. Most of the patrons were clustered around pool tables and all of them were male. Maybe this wasn’t the best place to bring Miyashi and Minami, but Kisumi and Sousuke were both big guys and clearly they were all there together. Besides, no one was paying them any attention. Any other place, their group’s loud arrival into the bar might have caused people to look up from their game in annoyance, but this was the kind of
place where people kept to themselves.

It was perfect.

Sousuke led them over to an empty pool table and put his coat on a high stool at the nearby pub table.

“This is where you want to pick up guys?” Miyashi whispered, “It looks more like the kind of place you might pick up hepatitis.”

Despite her unfavorable assessment, Sousuke could tell she was impressed with Sousuke’s selection. “I’ll get everyone a Sapporo,” Sousuke muttered before heading to the bar.

While he waited for the beers, Sousuke had the opportunity to check out the fuckability potential.

There wasn’t much. Most of the guys in here would probably stab Sousuke if he tried to fuck them; distinguishing potential from danger had been lessons Sousuke had learned the hard way.

Sousuke’s dick began to despair until one guy at the table next to theirs caught his eye. He was probably thirty, he had a nice face, but most importantly he had a pretty good ass. Sousuke stared shamelessly at that ass when the guy bent over the pool table and failed miserably at the shot he was trying to make. His clothes weren’t fancy but they looked good on him. What Sousuke especially liked was that they all were a bit too tight.

The signals were all there; this guy was flaunting himself.

He was with three other guys who looked just like him; if Sousuke had to guess, he’d say they were all brothers or at least cousins. The brothers looked rough, like the guys who’d been in construction for years, but they weren’t the type to kill Sousuke if he fucked their friend. Sousuke’s target didn’t have that same manual roughness about him, but he obviously didn’t make a whole lot of money.

He was just what Sousuke needed tonight.

Sensing Sousuke’s eyes on him, the Target looked up at the bar. When Sousuke tipped a beer bottle at him, the guy gave him a coy little smile.

Oh yeah, this was definitely the guy.

Gathering the rest of the beer bottles, Sousuke went back over to Kisumi and the girls. He didn’t look back at the Target, but he could feel his eyes on Sousuke, liking what they saw. Sousuke had heard enough times that he had a fantastic body; attracting ass had never been much of a problem.

When Sousuke returned, Kisumi, Miyashi, and Minami had already gotten down pool cues and Kisumi was setting up the balls. At least, he was trying to set up the balls; he obviously had no clue what he was doing. Surprisingly, the only one who seemed remotely competent with their cue was Minami. Sousuke’s respect for her went up slightly.

“Minami is on my team.” Sousuke declared. Kisumi and Miyashi looked confused, but not nearly as confused as Minami. She wilted and looked at Miyashi for help. Miyashi gave Minami a sympathetic look, but obviously she was pleased to be on Kisumi’s team.

“Fine, but we’ll break,” Kisumi said, oblivious to the girls.
At the table next to them, it was Target’s turn again. While his own table arranged themselves, Sousuke watched Target bend over the table out of the corner of his eye, admiring how firm that ass was. Target noticed and he stuck his butt out more than was necessary, just for Sousuke. When he was bent completely over the table, he gave Sousuke a side long look and quirked his eyebrow up at him, like a goddamn invitation. Target failed the shot again, but he was paying too much attention to Sousuke to care. Target positioned himself so he was leaning slightly on the corner of the table, just enough so he could pop his butt out at Sousuke without his friends noticing. Sousuke smiled and leaned against his table, looking every now and again at Target, completely relishing the sight.

This was why Sousuke liked coming to places like this, because everything had to be covert and secretive. It made the pursuit fun.

Kisumi let Miyashi break and she actually didn’t do a terrible job. She managed to get a striped ball in one of the pockets.

“Alright Miyashi!” Kisumi cried enthusiastically, giving her a high five. She smiled proudly. Unfortunately her luck was short lived and she scratched the next shot.

It was Minami’s turn next and she sunk too impressive solids into pockets, just barely missing a third. She blushed furiously when Kisumi congratulated her. As Sousuke suspected, Kisumi was horrible and scratched immediately. The girls both flocked to his side to comfort him and Sousuke had a vague thought that maybe he’d scratched on purpose.

Next it was Sousuke’s turn. Target was watching.

Sousuke first stretched out his arms, holding his cue in front of him with both hands. Then, pretending to think over the shot, he moved the lower of his hand up and down the shaft of the cue slowly. Sousuke was very good at watching people on the peripheries and he could see Target’s eyes widen, the corners of his mouth curling up irresistibly. After that, Sousuke leaned over the table and made his shot, thrusting his hips into the side of the table so just Target could see. Sousuke had spent plenty of time playing pool and he made the shot easily. He stood up, keeping his groin pressed into the table. There was a shot he could take while also showing Target his ass, so he repeated the process again, thrusting his groin harder into the table and making sure to grunt just enough that Target could hear. Sousuke sunk that shot easily and decided to take a shot so that he was facing Target. While Sousuke lined up his cue, he stared down the long shaft and met eyes directly with Target for the first time since the bar.

Sousuke winked at him as he took the shot, making it easily.

Target licked the corner of his lip.

“No fair!” Kisumi complained, completely oblivious to the game Sousuke was really playing, “You’re really good at pool!”

Sousuke decided he should take a really difficult shot that he had little chance of making. Yes, he was going to fuck Target tonight, but he wanted the others to have a good time too. There was a perfect opportunity at the head of the table and Sousuke took it, missing the shot but landing a rather salacious look at Target.

Sousuke and Minami won by a landslide and for the next game, they switched teams so it was boys against girls. Kisumi was by far the worst player and not even Sousuke was good enough to save their poor team. To be fair, Sousuke might have performed better if he hadn’t been so concerned
with flirting with Target. What made it so much better was that no one, not Kisumi, the girls, nor Target’s family, realized what was going on.

Sousuke felt a dark pit in his stomach, knowing that this pursuit was more fun for him than the actual act was going to be. But he still needed to perform the act, it had been so long...

Before starting the third game, Kisumi decided everyone needed a beer, providing Sousuke with the perfect opportunity to seal the deal with Target.

“Great,” Sousuke said as he waved Kisumi off to the bar, “I’m going to go to the bathroom first.”

On his way to the bathroom, Sousuke deliberately walked near Target, though he didn’t look at him. At the back of the bar, he turned down the hall where the bathrooms were and leaned against the wall, waiting. Sure enough, it took only a minute for Target to follow him. At first he looked completely surprised when he nearly ran into Sousuke, but that surprise turned into something else when he saw the look on Sousuke’s face. Without saying a word, Sousuke led the way to the women’s toilet and opened the door for Target. When Sousuke followed him in, he locked the door behind him.

Sorry Miyashi and Minami. Sousuke hoped they didn’t have to pee.

Alone, Target suddenly became a little shy.

“Hi,” he said nervously, “my name is…”

“I don’t want to know what your name is,” Sousuke grunted as he stepped towards him, “That’s not why we’re here.”

Target looked like he wanted to say something but then Sousuke grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled Target towards him.

Their mouths met, warm and wet, and Sousuke pushed Target up against the wall.

God how much he’d missed the feeling...

Target ran his fingers through Sousuke’s hair and cupped his ass, clearly enjoying the rather impressive specimen who was going to fuck him. They kissed fiercely for a while, Sousuke grabbing Target by the hair, biting his lip. When Sousuke trailed kisses down Target’s neck, Target moaned with pleasure.

He smelled musky and manly and his body felt hard against Sousuke's. Sousuke had missed this so much...

Sousuke sucked and bit Target on the collarbone where his shirt would cover up a bruise, making Target moan harder. In an effort to elicit a similar reaction from Sousuke, Target reached down and rubbed his palm across Sousuke’s cock. The poor thing was rusty from inaction, but at the pressure of Target’s hand, it instantly sprang to life.

Sousuke pushed up against Target’s hand, trying to speed up the process towards penetration so they
could finish quickly and return to their respective friends before anyone noticed their absence.

Quick and dirty.

Meanwhile, Target’s other hand had disappeared and it wasn’t until Target growled in Sousuke’s ear that he even realized what it had been doing:

“I’m ready for that fat cock of yours in my ass, big boy.”

Sousuke bit Target hard then wheeled him around so Target was pressed hard against the wall. Together, they fumbled off Target’s pants and underwear until Sousuke was looking straight down at that shapely ass that had grabbed his attention in the first place. Sousuke could see a slickness between those finely sculpted cheeks, could smell lube.

The little bastard must have been fingering himself while they’d been making out! Evidently he wanted this encounter to be over as quickly as Sousuke did.

Through the haze of alcohol and hormones, Sousuke felt a prick of hurt. But it was easy to ignore.

Soon, Sousuke had his own pants unbuttoned and a condom around his fully erect dick. With one hand he pinned Target’s wrists up on the wall and with the other, he guided himself into Target.

Fuck.

It felt so fucking good to be inside of a guy.

Nothing had ever, ever felt so good. A female asshole could compare, but not a vagina...and the smell, it just wasn't the same...

God Target smelled so fucking good...

Fuck!

As he thrust inside, Sousuke groaned with pleasure while Target hissed with pain. Slowly, Sousuke eased his dick further in, then pulled out again. With the next thrust, Target moaned and the shudder that went through his whole body told Sousuke he’d found the prostate.

Good. Now they could get to work.

Sousuke adjusted himself for a few thrusts, finding the position that felt best for him that would also make Target come hard. Sousuke had made a bit of a study out of hitting prostates; he’d practiced on plenty of guys just like Target. When he found the sweet spot, Sousuke began to pound Target’s ass harder and harder.

Target was loud and he had a filthy mouth.

The shit he said wasn’t worth repeating, but it made Sousuke smile. He ran his fingers through Target’s hair, grabbing hold of a hunk and pulling as he thrust in harder and harder.

Target was practically screaming and Sousuke wondered if anyone could hear them.

Part of him wanted some of the other guys in the bar to burst in mid fuck and beat the shit out of
Sousuke. It had happened on multiple occasions before...

Target was drooling and moaning so much, he must be close to coming. Sousuke wasn’t near ready yet and he wasn’t about to fuck some guy without coming. He pulled out until just the tip of his cock was left inside Target, then did a few, shallow thrusts to stimulate himself more.

“What the fuck, man!” Target panted once he realized his prostate wasn’t being hit on purpose anymore.

Sousuke told him to be patient as he gave 15 or so shallow, head of penis thrusts. The warm sensation began to build behind Sousuke’s navel, so mission accomplished.

Having achieved the sensation he was looking for, Sousuke plowed hard into Target, harder than he had yet.

Then again.

Then again.

Target was panting and shouting, ‘Fuck!’ over and over again, pounding his fist against the wall because it was getting almost unbearable.

It was getting to be a bit unbearable for Sousuke too.

A few quick, deep thrusts and the warm feeling started to become fire.

When Sousuke got like this, he stopped paying attention to his partner because all he could concentrate on was the blissful fire burning through his body. Before plunging into the inferno, Target shook violently all over and tensed up as his own orgasm hit him full on.

Sousuke pulled out and thrust in one last time, sending himself flaming into one hell of an orgasm.

Sousuke was weak kneed after coming and all he wanted to do was slump against Target and kiss the back of his neck so he could show his appreciation. Hell it would have been nice to just hold him for a while and breathe in his musk. But Target stepped forward just enough so that Sousuke’s flaccid dick fell out.

Well that was that.

Sousuke peeled off the condom, spent with his seed, and flushed it down a toilet. Without looking at Target, he buttoned up his pants and walked over to the sinks. He felt sticky and dirty and he wanted to be clean.

“Where they hell did a kid like you learn to fuck like that?” Target asked. In the mirror, Sousuke looked back and saw him leaning against the wall as though he would fall on his face if it weren’t there. He was clumsily peeling off his own used condom and making himself presentable for his friends. But there was no mistaking that Target had just had sex; his eyes were glazed over and his cheeks were red. A trail of drool fell down his chin.

Sousuke had done this to him, reduced him to drooling, glazed over mess.
Logically, Sousuke knew he should be happy with how the encounter went, but Sousuke could barely look at Target.

Turning on the taps of the sink, Sousuke splashed some cold water on his face, letting his hands linger over his eyes so they could block out the sight of Target.

He knew he’d directed things this way, but Sousuke desperately wanted Target to come over and hug him, kiss him, do something more. But these guys Sousuke fucked, they never did.

“What’s your name anyway, kid?” Target asked, “I might have to find you again because that was pretty excellent.”

“What does it matter,” Sousuke mumbled as he let his hands slip from his eyes so he could splash more water on his face.

For an excruciatingly long time, the only sound in the bathroom was that of the running water. Sousuke didn’t dare look in the mirror, for fear of seeing Target again. As with so many other things with Sousuke, he was torn between two polar opposite feelings. On the one hand, he yearned for Target to hug him, kiss him, show him even the slightest bit of affection. On the other, he wanted Target to get the hell out and leave Sousuke alone. The long silence sent a clear enough message. A few seconds later, Sousuke winced as he heard the door slam shut behind Target as he left.

Finally, Sousuke turned off the taps and only then did he look at himself in the mirror.

His reflected self was bare, miserable, and all alone. Although people considered him a good looking guy, there was nothing remotely nice about Sousuke. There never had been and there never would be. He would only ever be good enough for these random encounters in bathrooms, in alleyways, dark hidden corners fit only for rats. Sousuke was a rat. He felt filthy. He was overwhelmingly alone and he was filthy.

Having sex with women wouldn’t change that. Sousuke had tried, so many times he’d tried to fix his unnatural preferences. But there was no point in denying it anymore, Sousuke liked having sex with men more than he’d ever liked having sex with women.

But it didn’t matter. No matter who Sousuke had sex with, he always felt disgusting.

He was disgusting.

He wanted to crawl into a hole and hide himself from the world.

He hated himself, wished he could be anyone but Yamazaki Sousuke.

But it didn’t matter because in the end, he was Sousuke.

A vile wretch.

And so terribly, terribly alone.

After a few minutes, Sousuke finally rejoined Kisumi and the girls. They were up at the bar, laughing at some story the bar tender was telling them. Bright smiles were worn by all and they looked so happy. Deep in his soul, Sousuke ached to be just like them. But his filth wasn’t easily
As he walked over to join them at the bar, he noticed Target and his friends had left.

“Sousuke, where have you been?” Kisumi asked when he saw Sousuke walking over towards them, “We thought you might have left!”

Sousuke shook his head, too drained to even scowl.

Kisumi instantly registered the change in Sousuke, “You alright buddy?”

“Can we go home now?” Sousuke asked quietly.

He could feel everyone’s eyes staring at him but he didn’t care. He wanted darkness to swallow him and he didn’t want to be around good, happy, clean people.

“Sure,” Kisumi said carefully, “it is getting pretty late, but let’s take the girls back to their apartment first.”

Outside, a fog had rolled in, making the night glow a hellish orange from the streetlights. The air was bitingly cold. This liminal world between joyous intoxication and the dangers of the night belonged to depraved, lonesome creatures just like Sousuke. If only he could evaporate into the fog and the cold.

But he'd decided to stay because Makoto needed protecting so he was stuck.

Sousuke walked behind Kisumi and the girls, not listening to them prattle on about who knows what. Eventually, however, Sousuke realized they were talking to him.

“What did you say?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“I said, where did you really go all that time in the bar?” Kisumi repeated himself, turning around to watch Sousuke carefully.

“I told you I needed to fuck someone, so I did.”

The girls both stopped to gape at Sousuke.

“Really!?” Miyashi gushed loudly, “Who?”

“The guy wearing the tight pants at the table next to ours.”

“Dude!” Kisumi cried, “How the hell did you pull that off? You didn’t even talk to him the whole time we were there!”

Sousuke shrugged.

“Is that why you wanted to leave, Yamazaki?” Minami asked.

Sousuke normally would have glared daggers at her, but he didn’t have the energy.

“Yeah.” he agreed.
Kisumi surveyed Sousuke for a while before changing the subject. Sousuke shuffled along behind them, grateful that they were ignoring him again.

The next afternoon, Makoto walked in the door and immediately found Haru to give him lots of kisses on the back of his neck, his favorite spot to kiss his beloved. Haru giggled and just like every time Makoto heard Haru laugh, it went straight to his groin.

“How was your day, Haru-chan?” he purred into Haru’s ear.

What he expected was for Haru to say something like ‘boring without you’ – meaning ‘get in bed now’ – but much to Makoto’s dismay, Haru backed away from him.

“Not very good. Sousuke hasn’t gotten out of bed all day and I’m kind of worried.”

Makoto instantly forgot his dick and flew into a panic.

“Really? Did you take his temperature?”

Haru shook his head, “I thought it was just a hang over, but Kisumi told me that he hooked up with some random guy in the bathroom of the bar they went to after karaoke. I think it’s something more to do with that.”

“I’ll go talk to him!”

“It’s not really our business, Makoto.”

“I’m still going to go talk to him.”

“Fine.”

“Can we be in bed together when I’m done talking to Sousuke?”

“If you want.”

“More than anything, Haru-chan.”

“Then hurry up and talk to Sousuke.”

Makoto knocked softly on Sousuke’s door. No answer. He opened the door a crack, letting in light to the dark cavern that Sousuke had made his lair.

“How was your day, Sousuke?” Makoto called.

Sousuke moved in the bed. For Makoto, that was enough of an invitation. Sitting on his nightstand was a lamp and Makoto went to turn it on. At the sudden light, Sousuke curled up into a tighter ball, but said nothing. Makoto went back across the bedroom to close the door. Then, he sat down on the
edge of Sousuke’s bed and put a gentle hand on Sousuke’s shoulder. It was only then, when they were safely closed off from everyone else, that Sousuke finally unfurled. He turned onto his back and looked up at Makoto.

Sousuke’s hair was all rumpled and his eyes were red. Makoto couldn’t tell if it was from crying or from lack of sleep. Though somehow he couldn't picture Sousuke crying.

“What’s wrong, Sousuke?” Makoto cooed quietly, trying to soothe him by rubbing his shoulder.

For a very long minute, Sousuke stared up at Makoto. In the sorrowful eyes and desperate lines wrinkling his brow, Makoto could see a war within Sousuke raging just below the surface.

Finally, Sousuke spoke.

“I fucked someone last night.”

Makoto smiled as gently as he could.

“I heard.”

Sousuke pulled himself up into a seated position, with his knees tucked into his chest. Patiently Makoto waited for him to continue. His eyes looked off to the distance for a while, deep in contemplation, but they did eventually return to Makoto.

“Do you ever feel terrible after you’ve had sex? Like you’re the worst person in the world?” Sousuke asked.

Makoto shook his head, smiling sadly at Sousuke.

“I’ve only ever had sex with Haru,” he explained, “and it always left me feeling incredibly happy.”

Sousuke crunched up into himself further.

“Why does it feel like that for me?” he asked, his voice hoarse with emotion, “It’s not even a gay issue because it happens with girls too. Every single time I have sex, no matter who its with, I feel terrible afterwards. I can’t even look at myself. I wish I’d just sink into the ocean and disappear from this wretchedness. Why can’t I just enjoy it, like a normal person? What’s wrong with me?”

Makoto frowned deeply. He had heard about drowning fantasies before and he hated them. Makoto reached out a hand and put it on Sousuke’s arm.

“Maybe it’s because you aren’t having sex with the person you want to be having sex with.”

Sousuke looked up at Sousuke, his eyes wide with surprise that Makoto had broken the taboo on mentioning Rin.

“How I love Rin?” Sousuke muttered, though he couldn’t manage to say that convincingly. Makoto arched an eyebrow. Sousuke fooled no one, least of all himself.

“You think that’s what my problem is?” Sousuke whispered. There was so much desperation in his voice, so much longing and despair. Hearing Sousuke like this nearly broke Makoto’s heart.

“Probably.”

Sousuke looked away from Makoto, his cheeks burning up.
“And what happens when I have sex with Rin and I feel empty and hollow and terrible like I do now?”

Was this part of the reason Sousuke had stayed away from Rin for all these years? He was worried he wouldn’t like having sex with Rin?

“That would never happen,” Makoto tried to assure him, “sex is an expression of intimacy, love, and trust between two people and it’s best when you do it with someone you have those things with. I think that if you were to sleep with Rin, it would make you very happy because you care about him so much and you’d enjoy sharing something special with him.”

Sousuke studied Makoto carefully, but now that they were talking about intimacy and sex, Haru was swimming through Makoto’s mind and that made Makoto smile. It was oddly alluring to think of them having this conversation while Haru was waiting for him to come to bed.

“Could you…” Sousuke began before falling suddenly silent.

“Could I what?” Makoto asked.

“Oh, never mind.”

“Come on, what do you want to ask?”

Sousuke turned an even darker shade of red.

“How did you know you were in love with Haru? How did it happen with you two?”

In two seconds flat, Makoto’s face matched the redness of Sousuke’s. Sousuke noticed.

“I don’t want to know the gory details!” he added hastily, “I just…you two have such a nice relationship. I’ve always been kind of curious.”

For a few minutes, Makoto contemplated Sousuke’s request. When Haru and Makoto announced they were together, no one had ever asked them how it happened. Both sets of their parents didn’t seem at all surprised or at all concerned that their sons weren’t just friends anymore. Makoto’s mom had been the only one to really offer any comment and all she’d done was ask Makoto what had taken them so long. Makoto had never gotten an opportunity to talk to anyone about the transition; he’d never thought to bring it up to anyone because it was something special between him and Haru.

But, Sousuke was looking at Makoto as though his life depended on Makoto’s answer. Makoto tried convincing himself that telling Sousuke about the beginnings with Haru would help Sousuke, but deep down Makoto just wanted to talk to someone about that special memory. Haru probably wouldn’t be too keen on the idea and it did feel a little weird sharing something so intimate between them with someone else. But at the same time, it was one of the happiest periods of Makoto’s life and Makoto had always liked to share.

So Makoto took a deep breath, smiled at Sousuke, and began the origin story of Makoto and Haru’s love.

For Tachibana Makoto, there had never been a point in his life when he wasn’t in love with Nanase Haruka.
He hadn't understood the feelings he had until his first year of high school, but it hadn't been a huge revelation, more of a moment of clarity that allowed everything else to make sense. They'd been in class one day and he simply looked over at Haruka in the desk next to him, staring out the window as always. It had been spring, Haru's season, and something about the way the light caught on his skin was really, really wonderful. Makoto wondered what it would feel like against his nose. He'd often had thoughts like that about Haru and it was always somewhat curious that he'd never thought about anyone else like that. Sensing Makoto looking at him, Haru turned and in the soft light of a spring morning, smiled at Makoto with his eyes. Looking into those crystal clear eyes, everything inside Makoto suddenly fell into place:

Haru was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

And Makoto wanted him in every possible way because he was in love with his special friend.

Just like that, the confusing things Makoto felt for Haru made sense. It was so simple, it was a wonder Makoto hadn't figured it out before!

Haru looked back out the window and the class continued.

But those two, newly defined feelings remained with Makoto and he hadn't been able to concentrate on his work for the rest of the day.

He was in love with Haru. Obviously.

As Makoto marveled at the knot of feelings untangling inside his heart that fateful day, he examined his relationship with Haru with a new set of eyes. From time immemorial, Haru was his special friend. Haru wasn’t exactly shy, he could be unfailingly straightforward with people when he felt the need, but he was very quiet and introverted. Most of the other kids were put off by his cold manner and his unwillingness to participate in things, but they didn’t know Haru like Makoto did. Inside, he was in this own little world of his that was very sweet and kind and cute. And Makoto was the only person who was allowed into that inner world. Haru felt things very deeply, even if he couldn't talk about them, but it was always Makoto who Haru went to with everything. Even as very little kids, he was such a precious, fragile, pure thing, Makoto recalled feeling as though Haru had been made just for him. The way Haru made him feel, the dreams he had involving Haru, it was just so different than anyone else.

His feelings for Haru had always been so wonderful, he could hardly even describe them.

But that spring morning, Makoto finally found the word that described those feelings. Love. Not just love for a friend, but true, deep, romantic, physical, tender love.

It both excited Makoto that he finally understood and terrified him because there were so many new possibilities to choose from.

The two of them had a long standing ritual that had begun the day the twins were born. Makoto was usually very good at expressing how he felt, but that day it was just too much and he had to do something. The night of their birth, Makoto stayed at Haru’s house because the twins were a bit premature and Makoto's dad wanted to stay with them in the intensive care unit and be with Makoto's mom. At the time, Makoto didn’t understand any of the danger and he was very caught up with the idea that his new baby brother and sister had finally arrived. Finally, he was going to be a big brother! When he was really young, Makoto had been confused that Haru wasn't actually his older brother because Haru was always there, looking out for them. Even after Makoto realized that
Haru wasn't his brother because they didn't have the same family, the idea of older brothers still really intrigued Makoto. For him, brotherhood was like having a cat to take care of that Makoto could talk to! The night of the twins' birth, so much excitement buzzed through Makoto's little body, he felt ready to burst. Haru wasn't usually a physically affectionate friend, but Makoto felt that he really needed to hug someone. And he wanted that someone to be Haru.

When they went to bed that night, Makoto crawled over so he was right behind Haru and gently he shook Haru. Haru was still awake because Makoto's energy was hard for him to ignore.

"What is it, Makoto?" Haru asked quietly.

"Haru-chan I just..." Makoto stammered, "Can I hold you?"

For a long time, Haru was silent and Makoto's heart beat wildly.

"I don't mind." Haru finally said, "but drop the -chan."

Haru couldn't see how happy he'd made Makoto but it didn't matter. He'd given Makoto permission so he must have felt Makoto's happiness. Careful so as not to bug Haru too much, Makoto moved himself so that he was hugging Haru from behind. Even back then, this innocent contact had felt like nothing else Makoto had experienced before and his face felt like it was going to crack from smiling. He felt that by allowing Makoto to hug him and hold him, Haru was accepting the feelings Makoto was about to explode with and it made Makoto happy beyond belief that Haru allowed Makoto to give them to him. That he had Haru to give things to. That night, Makoto let all the excitement spill out of him and Haru, being Makoto's special, precious friend, listened.

The act of Makoto holding Haru became a secret ritual between them that occurred whenever Makoto felt something too strongly to express in words. More often than not, what he needed to express was his feelings for Haru. Sometimes, especially when they were younger, Makoto would find words to whisper to him about how he was feeling. Haru never responded to what Makoto said, but he didn't really need to because Haru just knew. Anyone observing this ritual would think Haru was passive in it, but he wasn't. His part was what really mattered. The accepting of Makoto and what Makoto was feeling. Really that was the most important part.

The spring day in their first year of high school, when Makoto finally understood he loved Haru, was a Friday. As neither of them had plans for Saturday, they of course had a sleep over that night. While they were walking to Makoto's house, during dinner, and all through the video game they played together afterwards, Makoto's heart was full to the point of bursting and Haru, of course sensed it. So when Makoto crawled up next to Haru in the middle of the night and tapped his shoulder, asking for permission, Haru let Makoto hold him.

Makoto hadn't thought anything would change with his feelings for Haru made clear, but the ritual that night was different.

First of all, Makoto couldn't help but move his body closer to Haru than ever before. He had an irresistible urge to feel the muscles in Haru's back, press his forehead against the back of Haru's head, take in Haru's smell. Compelled by the conscious feeling of wanting Haru, Makoto turned his head so his mouth was against the back of Haru's neck. It wasn't a kiss, but it might as well have been. Under his lips, Haru's skin was so soft and warm. And Makoto, moved by everything he was feeling for Haru, covered his hand around Haru's and pulled it close to Haru's chest so that Makoto, effectively, was cradling Haru against him.
He'd never held Haru so intimately before and Makoto had a hard time restraining himself because he wanted *more*.

But it was all too much, too sudden, too confusing for Haru. He hadn't figured things out yet and what Makoto was doing, well it was just so *different*. He let Makoto hold him like that for a few minutes but then he gently extricated himself from Makoto.

Makoto's heart broke a little that night because it was the first time Haru hadn't accepted something Makoto gave him. And this something was really, really important.

Neither of them ever spoke about it. For a few weeks after, they kept their distance and were very careful with each other until things went back to normal. Haru was still his special friend and Makoto still loved Haru, but there was now something between them that had never been there before. Haru might not have understood what Makoto was trying to give him, but he had still rejected it. Embarrassed and disappointed, Makoto resolved that this thing wasn't going to ruin their friendship so he pushed his love aside and carried on like nothing had happened. He tried to express himself in other ways, but he never asked Haru to engage in their ritual again.

Rin came back into their lives and Makoto felt a little jealous of the spark Rin and Haru shared. There was a lot of physical components to their feelings and Makoto wished he could have that with Haru. Makoto wasn't a jealous person and he taught himself to be happy for Haru, because really he wanted Haru to be happy and it was great if Rin could be that person. But even with Rin in the picture, Haru was still his special friend and through their second year, they grew closer than ever through their revived swimming and Makoto was content and happy.

As close as they were, the third year and final year of their high school careers drove a wedge between them because the future cast a dark shadow over them that neither could escape. For the first time ever, Makoto couldn't tell what Haru was thinking and he had the terrible feeling that Haru was just as lost. They couldn't talk about it, because Makoto didn't want to push Haru into anything and he didn't want to influence him at all. But as the year progressed and the burden of the future began to take its toll on Haru, Makoto had a gut feeling that the end of their time together was approaching. As much as he hated it, he understood his life wasn't moving in the same direction as Haru's anymore and it broke his heart to think that the day was coming when their paths would split. They'd always be friends, but what they had now, it was very possible that it would fade away as they made separate lives for themselves. And Haru simply refused to talk about the future at all. So Makoto thought about what he wanted and he made plans for the future he wouldn't be sharing with Haru. To spare Haru, they didn't discuss any of this. But really, Makoto was afraid to talk seriously about the future because he wasn't ready to give Haru up. He didn't want it to end. Even if Haru had rejected him, Makoto still loved Haru.

Then came The Fight.

In one terrible night, the realities of their futures hit them with full force and Makoto's heart broke to hear Haru's words. When it came time to tell Haru they wouldn't be together Makoto tried to let Haru go. Their ways were already parting and it hurt, but Haru couldn't be his special friend anymore because Haru's future didn't lie with Makoto. They'd always be friends, but their time was up. Makoto's chance was gone. And Haru was more upset than he'd ever been in his entire life.

Haru flew to Australia with Rin, Makoto worked on letting go of those feeling he'd been holding onto for so long. For his whole life really.

He had to. For Haru.
Returning from Australia, Haru was calmer and happier. He told Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa that he was going to keep pursuing swimming after high school and Makoto was very happy that Haru had finally worked out a future for himself. Haru could be happy with Rin in Australia, and if Haru was happy Makoto was happy. It was bittersweet because Makoto loved Haru, but they had their last relay together, earning sixth at nationals, and that victory would always stay with Makoto. When his special friend was gone, he'd still have this precious memory. Everyone was happy and hopeful and so terribly sad. But they had had so much time together and they'd always be friends, no matter what.

And that was ok.

That was enough for Makoto.

A few nights after they returned from Nationals, Haru asked Makoto to spend the night and of course Makoto agreed. Sleepovers weren't really requests with them, more like statements that yes, the other one was spending the night. As Makoto walked up the stairs to Haru's house, he wondered how many sleepovers they had left. Makoto would guess not many.

The moment Makoto saw Haru, he knew that something was on Haru's mind. Makoto of course didn't ask any questions because he knew Haru would tell him what was going on eventually. So they ate saba for dinner and watched an old movie afterwards, all without saying a word.

"Let's lie down, Makoto," Haru finally said when the credits began to roll.

Although it was still early, Makoto agreed because he could tell this was leading to something. He didn't have much time left with Haru before Haru went to Australia and he didn't want to leave anything unfinished between them.

Together they climbed into bed, taking their usual spots. Makoto noticed that Haru was wearing the orange and yellow shirt and it made him smile. In his own way, Haru really did care about Makoto. Makoto decided he'd let Haru have it if he wanted, so he'd have something of Makoto's to take to Australia.

God he was going to miss Haru...

For a few minutes, they lay side by side, a cool breeze blowing in through the open window. Makoto waited patiently for Haru to say something and when he was ready, they got down to business.

"Makoto," Haru whispered into the dark, "will you hold me tonight? Like you did?"

In the safety of Haru's bed, Makoto had been expecting Haru to tell him his departure date for Australia and about the future he would be sharing with Rin. The last thing he'd expected was the revival of the long discarded ritual. Vivid memories of Haru's body pressed into him, memories he'd been trying hard to forget, flashed through Makoto's mind and his love for Haru made him shudder.

How was he expected to let go when Haru asked something like this?

But Makoto was more curious to know what was going on than anything and the only way for Makoto to find out was to go with it. So he did. They turned on their sides and Haru scooted into Makoto so that Makoto could wrap his arms around Haru.

The novelty of the situation was a bit much for Makoto to handle.

Haru had never initiated the ritual. He received Makoto's feelings, he'd never given them to Makoto.
What was going on? Was Haru alright?

Curious as he was, the feel of Haru in his arms soon soothed Makoto into a state of bliss and he forgot to panic properly. They'd not partaken in the ritual for years now and Makoto had forgotten how good and perfect it felt to hold Haru. Vaguely, Makoto observed that he was bigger now than the last time and Haru felt even more fragile and delicate. More precious and special. Makoto didn't put his mouth against Haru's neck like he had before, because he was now the receiver so he needed to let Haru do whatever he needed to do. The ritual, more than anything else, was meant as a way to communicate strong emotions that were otherwise impossible to express and Haru so very rarely shared what he was feeling.

Whatever was on Haru's mind, Makoto needed to be there for him, despite the desire he had for more. And in the meantime, he was going to enjoy the feeling of Haru because it would probably be the last time he'd be allowed in like this.

For a half hour probably, they lay perfectly still and Makoto tried his best to breathe as little as possible, so as not to ruffle whatever was taking place inside of Haru. It was hard, because the whole time, he had to fight the urge to let his hands explore Haru's body, touch places they never had.

Then, slowly, Haru began to move.

His hand found Makoto's and he moved it down, so it was against Haru's belly. Makoto stiffened because he'd never, ever touched Haru there and it was both wildly confusing and erotic. Sensing Makoto stiffen, Haru backed his hand away until Makoto relaxed again. Then Haru pressed his body deeper into Makoto's and laced his fingers through Makoto's.

"I'm coming to Tokyo," Haru said quietly, squeezing Makoto's fingers, "I've accepted a scholarship for swimming at one of the universities there."

Just as he'd been the night the twins were born, Makoto was instantly too happy to say anything. Haru, however, misunderstood his silence.

He rolled over and propped himself up on his elbow, so he was leaning over Makoto.

The light from the streetlight filtered in and even in the dark, Makoto could see the beautiful blue of Haru's eyes. Those eyes looked troubled as they looked down at Makoto.

"I couldn't go somewhere without you," he explained quietly, though it was just the two of them in the house, "I couldn't imagine a future without you in it so I have to go to Tokyo. So I can be with you."

There are moments in life that knock the stuffing out of you, that hurt so bad you think you'll never feel anything but pain again. But then there are those moments that take your breath away, that make you so incandescently happy that you could very well burst. You remember every detail, every sensation, every feeling going through you for the rest of your life.

For Makoto, this was one of those moments.

Haru, his special friend whom he loved with all his heat, was going to Tokyo. For him!

Without thinking, Makoto brought a hand up and caressed Haru's cheek, tears spilling out of him as he realigned the future he'd prepared for himself without Haru with a future shared with Haru.

"Oh Haru!" Makoto sputtered joyfully, stroking Haru's cheek.
Haru generally did not show his emotions and it was rare for Haru to truly smile. Makoto could tell when laughter danced in Haru's eyes, but it was only for special occasions that Haru truly smiled.

That moment was one of those occasions.

He beamed down at Makoto, his eyes tearing up. Although Makoto tried to hide it and not let it bother him, the thought had crept up more than once that his feelings for Haru were stronger than Haru's were for him. But it was these divine moments that reassured Makoto that yes, their hearts were in synch and their feelings were mutual. The space between them suddenly felt too great and Makoto wanted, needed to feel Haru. He stopped crying and Haru, sensing the change, became perfectly still. Cautiously, Makoto's hand moved towards the back of Haru's head and waited there, testing whether this was alright. When Haru didn't pull away, he gently brought Haru down, coaxing Haru to lay against his chest. Haru complied easily and once down, wrapped his arms around Makoto, hugging him tightly. Makoto, of course, put his arms around Haru and hugged him back.

This was new. This was very new. They'd never done anything like this before.

In fact, this felt almost romantic.

Could Haru feel...

No, it was too much to hope for and Makoto wasn't going to ruin anything by asking. For a very long time, they lay in each other's arms and Makoto was at a complete loss about what he should do or say. Thankfully, Haru still had the power of speech at his disposal.

"Do you remember what you said during the fireworks?" Haru asked quietly.

Makoto grimaced. Of course Haru was referring to The Fight. Makoto had tried really hard to forget all the terrible things they'd said to each other during The Fight. Instead of answering, Makoto decided it would be better to let Haru continue on his own.

"You said you loved me."

Makoto froze. Of course he'd meant it, but Haru hadn't brought it up until now. Makoto had hoped Haru had forgotten that spur of the moment confession.

"I love you too, Makoto." Haru said, squeezing Makoto harder, "I really, really do."

Nothing more had happened that night except that they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms, but it was a turning point. They had a few, regular sleep overs while they remained high school students, but something had definitely changed between them. There was an understanding between them, that things were going somewhere new. As they had such a long, close history together, neither Makoto nor Haru seemed particularly eager to rush things. Makoto cared about Haru more than anything and he wasn't keen on going too fast and messing them up.

When things failed to progress, Makoto got to thinking that there were lots of different ways to love someone, and even though Haru had told him he loved him, he hadn't exactly specified in what way. What if he'd meant something besides romantic love? Up until that point, Makoto had honestly gotten the impression that Haru wouldn't be interested in anything romantic or...sexual...and the last thing Makoto would ever want to do is pressure him into taking their relationship to a place he wasn’t comfortable with. That was the state of things when they graduated and moved to Tokyo.

They spent the first night in Tokyo at Makoto's new apartment since Haru didn't have a bed yet.
When it was time to go to bed, they got ready as usual and hopped into bed without much fuss. But once they were settled, Haru moved up on Makoto's chest.

Not knowing what to do, Makoto lay there stiff as a board. That is until Haru began tracing circles with his fingers on Makoto's hip bone.

Unbearably ticklish, Makoto began rocking with suppressed laughter. Encouraged by his reaction, Haru moved to tickle Makoto's sides. Makoto was unable to bear it any longer, he cracked down into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. When Haru finally relented and let Makoto catch his breath, Makoto grabbed Haru and flung him down on the bed, rolling on top of him so he could pin Haru and exact his revenge.

Unfortunately for Haru, he was much more ticklish than Makoto. Within seconds, he was completely at Makoto's mercy and laughing his head off. The amount of times Makoto had heard Haru really, truly laugh could be counted on a hand and that beautiful, wonderful, rare sound, echoing off his bedroom walls, was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. He let up and rolled off of Haru. For a few minutes, they both caught their breath and Makoto fought down all the excitement he'd felt so Haru wouldn't get weirded out.

"Everything alright, Makoto?" Haru asked. Haru was never the one to ask that. Makoto turned his head to find Makoto looking at him. He could see panic in those crystal clear eyes. Haru was worried he'd crossed some kind of line. Makoto smiled. Nothing could be further from the truth. "You have a really beautiful laugh," Makoto said, "I love it when you laugh."

Haru smiled back and gently took Makoto's hand.

"You're really beautiful, Makoto." he countered, "I love you."

Haru rolled over and cuddled into Makoto's chest. Makoto smiled and enfolded Haru in his arms, the doubts about Haru's feelings floating away into the air.

"I love you, Haru-chan." Makoto replied, stroking Haru's hair.

"Drop the chan already. And get some sleep, my love. Tomorrow the future really begins."

Breaching the divide that separated friends from lovers had been terrifying and confusing and more thrilling than anything Makoto had ever experienced before. But with Haru and Makoto, it had also been tender and considerate, really just perfect for them. It was important to take their time, getting to know each other in a new way. Neither of them had any experience whatsoever so they weren't really prepared to jump full into everything a romantic, physical relationship meant right away. It was like they were both explorers, charting a new frontier together. Even though they took the physical part slow, the commitment part came almost instantly. By the end of that first week in Tokyo, they'd already decided they would get married one day and adopt two kids when the time came. Then again, they'd been pretty committed to each other their entire lives, it wasn't that huge of a stretch. It was more an expression of how they already felt about each other than something new.

Haru came over to make dinner one night, about two months after arriving in Tokyo, and while he did that, Makoto studied for a test. It had been a long day because Makoto had classes and work so he dozed off. When dinner was ready, Haru shook Makoto awake but Makoto was having a nice dream and grumbled for Haru to leave him alone. To wake him up, Haru jumped on top of Makoto and began tickling him. During their first two months in Tokyo, they'd gradually become more
comfortable being a bit more physical with each other so tickle fights were more of a common thing than before.

Finally when he stopped, he pinned Makoto's hands above his head. Makoto's laughter died down as he caught his breath and he smiled up at Haru, his heart overflowing with the love he felt for his special friend. Haru stopped smiling as he looked down at Makoto, his eyebrows furrowing with thought. Then, he leaned down and brushed his lips lightly against Makoto's. It was a whisper of a kiss, shy and nervous, but it was enough to set Makoto's whole body on fire. Poor Haru got really flustered and quickly jumped off Makoto, saying dinner was ready. They ate in complete silence. Makoto's heart was throbbing for Haru and he couldn’t quite get the blush out of his cheeks. Haru was too flustered to even look at Makoto.

After dinner, Haru insisted on doing the dishes and Makoto watched him, wanting him more than ever before because that...that had been something. He’d opened a door and Makoto was ready to run headlong through it.

So Makoto stood up and walked up behind Haru. He put his hands on Haru's hips, leaned forward, and finally kissed the back of Haru's neck with his lips. It was so soft...so perfect...

The noises Haru made, the shudders that went through him when Makoto's lips met his skin - it was unbelievable! Makoto couldn’t help himself – he spun Haru around, took that beautiful, precious face he’d been in love with his whole entire life into my hands, and finally, after years of wanting him, of wondering what it would be like, of loving him, Makoto kissed his Haru-chan.

He kissed Haru with absolutely everything he had. It was the most incredible thing Makoto had ever experienced up until that time. His whole body seemed to buzz, to burn, and it was all for his beloved Haru! Makoto knew Haru felt the same way because he was trembling in Makoto's arms and clutching to Makoto so greedily. Before that moment, Makoto thought he was in love with Haru but he didn’t really understand what it was to be in love until they were like that, joined as they’d never been joined before.

It only lasted a few seconds, but they were both so breathless afterwards. Makoto was so happy he burst out laughing and Haru joined in, just as enthusiastically. Makoto held him close and put his forehead against Haru's, but neither of them could stop laughing. At some point they started crying but they never stopped laughing. That is until Haru pulled Makoto's head down so he could kiss Makoto again.

A tear of happiness trailed down Makoto’s cheek as he remembered the intense joy he felt then. It truly had been a perfect moment. Sousuke was smiling.

“What about the first time…” Sousuke began to ask, but Makoto interrupted him.

“I don’t think I should tell you anymore about our firsts because then it gets sexual and that’s something I’m only willing to share with Haru. I will say that Haru and I didn’t have sex for at least a year after we kissed and by that time, we were already living together. Slow worked best for us.”

Sousuke nodded, acknowledging that he’d reached the limit but not complaining.

“I guess the point I was trying to make with all that, Sousuke, was that physical expression of love is much more gratifying than simply fulfilling your physical needs. I don’t have any experience with casual sex, but having sex with someone you love and care for would never leave you feeling terrible
Sousuke thought long and hard about what Makoto said.

“Thanks for confiding in me, Makoto,” Sousuke finally said, patting Makoto on the shoulder, “I appreciate it, really.”

“Glad I could help!” Makoto said happily as he got up off Sousuke’s bed. He was walking out the door when Sousuke called out to him again.

“Do you think it’s possible for me to have something like that?” Sousuke asked. There was desperation and such profound sorrow in his voice. Makoto wanted to go back over there and give him a huge hug. But that would have been weird.

"I think it’s possible for everyone to have a love like that."

Smiling with the truth of the thought, Makoto left Sousuke to think about what he’d said while Makoto went off to find his Haru-chan.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading wonderful people :) You can follow me on tumber: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/tornadoquakes
The strawberry-scented fresh breeze that was Shigino Kisumi blew into Matsuzaki Yasutomo’s life at a very critical moment.

For starters, Yasutomo had just moved back home after a disastrous six months living with his former boyfriend. Nishimuro Rajin had told Yasutomo that after three years together, he simply didn’t love him anymore and, as Rajin’s parents owned the apartment they’d been living in, Yasutomo had to leave immediately. So Yasutomo left. Three weeks later, Yasutomo saw Rajin on campus, holding hands with one of their former friends, Sato Hajime. Rumor had it, they’d moved in together but Yasutomo was having a hard time wrapping his mind around that.

Before the New Year, Yasutomo found himself abandoned by most of his friends in favor of the far more charismatic and attractive Rajin. It hadn’t been a very pleasant time spending New Years at home with his parents but Yasutomo didn’t have anywhere else to go.

But then school started up again and Yasutomo had the great fortune of sitting next to Shigino Kisumi in his Organic Chemistry class. The class wasn’t especially large and Yasutomo had had classes with everyone except Kisumi before.

“I haven’t seen you before,” Yasutomo said. He still was stuck in the lonely muck he’d been in all break and had forgotten how to socialize properly.

“No you haven’t!” Kisumi had agreed before launching immediately into his life story.

He was from Iwatobi where he’d been attending a local university. After his younger brother Hayato had gotten pneumonia, Kisumi had decided to switch from physical therapy to becoming a doctor that specialized in respiratory illnesses. So he’d needed to transfer to a school with a better medical program, hence his move to Tokyo. He lived with a couple he’d known in middle school and one of his friends from elementary school. And he was really enjoying being in Tokyo.

‘Wow’ Yasutomo had thought, ‘Who the hell is this guy?’

Yasutomo had expected Kisumi to brush him off like everyone had been doing those days; he hadn’t expected such an enthusiastic reply.

Talking to Mr. Bubblegum had been the first time Yasutomo hadn’t felt completely miserable since Rajin kicked him out.

That very first lecture of Organic Chemistry, it became abundantly clear that this class would be consuming their lives until the summer final.
“We should be study partners!” Kisumi told Yasutomo as they walked out of class. Yasutomo had been almost too distracted by Kisumi’s unexpected height to hear him.

“Sure,” Yasutomo agreed as Kisumi’s request brought him back down to Earth.

So they began meeting up almost every day to study, always in coffee shops as Yasutomo didn’t feel like having Kisumi be subjected to his parents and because Kisumi’s apartment was usually ‘crowded’ and not an ideal place for the complexities of Organic Chemistry.

Almost immediately, it became abundantly clear that Kisumi was straight as an arrow and there was absolutely no possibility those long legs would ever be wrapped around Yasutomo.

But that was alright.

What Yasutomo needed right now was a friend, not a rebound, and he did enjoy spending time with Kisumi, especially because Kisumi was just as nerdy about biology as Yasutomo was. Yasutomo had been a tennis player in high school so the majority of his friends were from the tennis team. At university, Rajin had been Yasutomo’s dorm roommate their first year and, as he was Mr. Charisma, most of their friends had come from Rajin’s economic courses. From the beginning Rajin had drawn him in and it had been such a miracle when beautiful, charismatic Rajin confessed his feelings for his roommate way back when. While Yasumoto revolved around Rajin’s sun, he hadn’t made any of his own friends. Yasutomo preferred to study on his own, so Yasutomo hadn’t ever had anything more than a casual acquaintance with any of his classmates.

But Kisumi…he seemed to have been sent for Yasumoto.

On Valentine’s Day, they’d met to study as usual. Yasutomo had been feeling down about Rajin – who he’d seen again with Hajime. Kisumi had asked what was wrong and the whole story of Yasutomo and Rajin’s ill-fated romance came spilling out all over the place. There was another thing, a much more painful thing, that was just beneath the surface, but for now, Rajin was enough. Kisumi listened to Yasutomo’s story and didn’t complain once that they weren’t focusing on their work. A lot of stuff had been building up and Yasutomo hadn’t had anyone to talk to for so long. By the time the overwhelming tsunami of his broken heart calmed down, Yasutomo was completely spent.

The only thing he could possibly feel was surprise because their waitress hadn’t asked them all to leave when Yasutomo’s tears started pouring.

Kisumi’s response was to buy Yasutomo an ice cream.

“You’re alright with me being gay?” Yasutomo had asked as he devoured the sugary monstrosity Kisumi had made him order. It was, of course, strawberry themed.

Over his matching monstrosity, Kisumi actually laughed, “Of course! I live with three gay dudes, two of which are madly in love and just about the most sickeningly adorable couple in the universe. I feel like I should be the token straight boy in some romantic drama. I really don’t care if my friends are gay, less competition in the long run.”
Kisumi winked and stuck out his tongue, which brought the first smile to Yasutomo’s face all day long. As he scooped up more whip cream and strawberry goodness, a warm feeling Yasutomo hadn’t experienced in a long time washed over him.

Kisumi had called him his friend.

It felt so incredibly good to hear someone say that after months of so much confusion, solitude, and self-hatred. And he could tell, Kisumi was just as happy to use that word too.

“Hey, Yasutomo,” Kisumi whispered one March day in the middle of class, “It’s…uh…my birthday this weekend and my roommate Makoto is throwing me a party. I still don’t know many people in Tokyo and it would be great to have a new friend here, show Sousuke that I am making friends and not just studying in my room all the time. Um, would you like to come?”

His whole face was as pink as his hair.

“Of course!” Yasutomo agreed, “I’m excited to meet these famous roommates of yours!”

Kisumi had told him an awful lot about them.

Friday night, Yasutomo arrived at the designated restaurant ten minutes after Kisumi had asked him to come. There had been some problem on the subway and Yasutomo had nearly had an anxiety attack, looking constantly at his watch. This was the first time since Rajin broke up with him that Yasutomo had been out with someone besides his parents and he didn’t want to screw it up. Fortunately, Kisumi didn’t seem to even notice.

“Yasutomo, great to see you!” he greeted enthusiastically when the waitress led Yasutomo to the little room they’d reserved.

“Hi!” Yasutomo greeted with a smile. Kisumi was about the most enthusiastic person Yasutomo had ever met and it was impossible for him not to feed off that positive energy.

“Sit, sit!” he insisted and Yasutomo obeyed. Once settled in, he got to look at the four other people at the table. There was a kid with black hair that fell into the most beautiful blue eyes Yasutomo had ever seen. He was stunning, but he didn’t look like he smiled very often. He must be Nanase Haruka. Haruka was leaning against another giant, this one with shaggy brown hair, sparkly green eyes, and the warmest possible smile. No doubt about it, this was Tachibana Makoto. Kisumi made the introductions, confirming Yasutomo’s guesses. The girls were two classmates of Makoto’s, Minami and Miyashi. They were both cute and they both clearly adored Kisumi. Of course they did.

Everyone was assembled except for the Yamazaki Sousuke kid. Kisumi and Makoto both started to worry.

“There was a bit of a gridlock on the subways this afternoon,” Yasutomo explained, “he probably just got held up.”
Kisumi smiled, though there was an edge of worry that Yasutomo didn’t understand, “You’re probably right. We should order something while we wait, I’m starving!”

Yasutomo liked Kisumi’s friends very much. Almost instantly, Yasutomo decided that Makoto was just about the nicest human being Yasutomo had ever met. Some warm energy radiated out of him that felt like freshly made Sata andagi and soup, tea, hand-knit sweaters, a pile of puppies and kittens, and a snuggly futon over the kotatsu. The girls were really great too. Miyashi was a riot, bantering skillfully with Kisumi and working very hard to make sure he was laughing the whole time. Minami didn’t contribute a whole lot, but she smiled pretty much the whole time. She seemed like a very nice person.

And then there was Haru.

From the moment Yasutomo first spoke to Makoto, he’d been eyeing Yasutomo wearily, clinging closer to Makoto as if to remind Makoto he was there. Makoto always found a way to include him in the conversation, but Haru was concise with his conversation, even speaking less than Minami. It was hard to tell if he was just weary of new people or if he was being rude. In any case, there wasn’t a single point where he wasn’t in some way touching Makoto.

There was a lull in the conversation.

“I do hope Sousuke is ok,” Kisumi took the opportunity to remark.

Makoto nodded and looked at his watch, “You don’t think something happened to him, do you?”

As if on cue, the waitress slid back the door to their room. Standing behind her was a very tall, very well built guy with dark hair and spectacular teal eyes. He was wearing a navy blue pea coat, opened onto a light gray deep V T-Shirt, a pair of perfectly fitting dark gray cargo that were tucked into a big pair of black Dr. Marten boots.

He surveyed the gathered group and smiled a gorgeous, pearly white smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“Sorry I’m so late!” he apologized in a deep baritone that made Yasutomo’s toes curl, “My train was delayed so long from the ship yards.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Kisumi said, “You made it! Here, this is my buddy from school, Matsuzaki Yasutomo. Yasutomo, this is Yamazaki Sousuke.”

Sousuke turned his attention to Yasutomo, sending Yasutomo’s heart racing and his cheeks flaming.

“Nice to meet you,” Sousuke said politely as he sat down across from Yasutomo.

Flustered as he was, Yasutomo was able to choke out a “Nice to meet you.”

“Now that Sousuke’s here, let’s order!” Makoto said happily.

While Sousuke, Kisumi, Makoto, Miyashi, and Minami discussed what to get, Yasutomo couldn’t help staring at Sousuke. He racked his brain, trying to remember everything that Kisumi had told him about this guy.
In high school, he was a swimmer like the wonder couple, but he’d been forced to quit because he’d destroyed his shoulder. After the surgeries, he’d disappeared for three years, traveling the world and avoiding everyone. Somehow, he’d wound up in Tokyo, living with Haru and Makoto, and then it was almost by luck that Kisumi had reconnected with these guys. Now he was working towards becoming a welder. Yasutomo couldn’t help but fantasize about shirtless Sousuke with one of those big welding hoods on, holding a sparking welding rod. He would be wearing leather pants, for protection of course, and…damn…But he had a beautiful face, so maybe that hood thing would be up so Yasutomo could see those eyes.

What a perfect image.

Kisumi had mentioned that Sousuke had a lot of scars from the surgeries on his shoulder. Without a shirt, Yasutomo would probably see everything. Just looking at him, Yasutomo could tell he was ripped; he was no doubt a stunning specimen of a human body. The desire to see someone without their shirt on had never hit Yasutomo stronger.

What else had Kisumi said? He was dramatic, brooding, rough around the edges, yet very kind and good. Kisumi had said Sousuke was a really good friend and any friend of Kisumi’s had to be fantastic because Kisumi was so great.

The craziest part of all was that according to Kisumi, Sousuke was gay. Yasutomo’s mind was a little blown because he looked the furthest thing from gay. All through high school, Yasutomo had fallen in love with his straight friends left and right and still, there was something very alluring about straight guys. Forbidden fruit or martyrdom of the heart or something like that. But this Sousuke guy, who looked a paragon of manliness, liked guys? How was that even possible? Yasutomo thought it was too good to be true.

By the time the others had given the waitress their order, Matsuzaki Yasutomo might have fallen just the tiniest bit in love with Yamazaki Sousuke.

Kisumi asked Sousuke about his day and Sousuke went off about some guy at work welding a rose for his wife. While he spoke, Haru caught Yasutomo’s eye. He was watching Yasutomo, the tiniest, knowing little smile tugging up the corner of his mouth.

Oh no! He had probably seen the entire thing!

Embarrassed as he was, Yasutomo did notice that Haru wasn’t clinging quite so close to Makoto.

After dinner, Kisumi was beaming brightly with joy and a bit too much sake. Since coming to Tokyo, it was kind of hard to convince Kisumi to leave his room and take a break from studying. Sousuke was so glad he had made it for Kisumi’s birthday dinner; it was well worth standing in that jam-packed subway car for far too long to see the smile of utter happiness Kisumi had been wearing all night.
“That was such a lovely dinner, guys, thanks!” Kisumi said, “It’s been a great first birthday in Tokyo!”

“The night is still young, young Shigino!” Miyashi teased, “What would you like to do now, birthday boy?”

Kisumi looked around at everyone, his eyes lingering a bit long on Sousuke. That precious, joyful smile suddenly looked devious.

“Know any good gay bars around here, Yasutomo?”

Sousuke’s jaw literally dropped.

“Why the hell would you want to go to a gay bar on your birthday!?” Sousuke demanded, “You haven’t switched teams, have you?”

Kisumi shook his head.

“Definitely still straight but it seems I have nothing but gay guys for friends and I know Miyashi and Minami would love to go dancing.”

Sousuke glared venomously at the girls; they didn’t notice.

“Besides,” Kisumi continued, “Haru and Makoto don’t get out of the apartment enough,” Makoto turned a fearsome shade of red. Haru, at least, looked just as indignant as Sousuke.

“You’re one to talk, Mr. Future-Docotor-that-doesn’t-have-time-for-drinking.” Sousuke muttered.

Kisumi’s grin turned downright evil, “And I can think of no greater birthday present than seeing you, dear Sousuke, drinking some frilly, fruity drink and trying to dance with some guy.”

Sousuke pounded his fist against the table, “I’m not going to a damn gay bar!” he shouted.

“Why not?” a voice peeped up. It belonged to that Yasutomo kid, the one who studied with Kisumi. Sousuke glared hard at him, making the kid turn crimson and wilt.

“Uh…” he stuttered, “I mean…you’re gay, right? So…like…what is the problem?”

Everyone was staring at Sousuke, waiting for him to say something back.

“Maybe I like men, but you don’t find men at places like those.”

Yasutomo made a surprised noise.

“Finding someone to sleep with is a reason that people go to gay bars,” he said, “but more than that, going to gay bars is more about feeling good about who you are and celebrating yourself. Gay bars are built on acceptance and who doesn’t want to feel accepted?”

Sousuke had been punched plenty of times, but words had never knocked the wind out of him up until now.
While Sousuke caught his breath, he looked around the table for help.

Haru wore the smuggest smile Sousuke had ever seen, the girls and Kisumi looked like they were about to die from squeeing too much, and Makoto was looking at Sousuke, well like Sousuke was his son going to his first day of school. There would be no help for Sousuke at this table.

“Fine!” Sousuke roared in defeat, “But no frilly umbrella drinks!

Half an hour later, Sousuke was standing up against a bar, looking down in disgust at the drink in his hand. It was brightly colored. It had an umbrella.

“Cheer up, Sousuke,” Kisumi laughed, clapping him hard on the shoulder, “It’s my birthday so I order you to have a fun time and enjoy yourself!”

Kisumi clinked his glass against Sousuke’s, spilling a little on Sousuke’s hand.

“Kisumi! Come dance with us!” Minami shouted over the thumping house music. Kisumi immediately darted off after the girls into the mass of sweaty, gay men.

What had Sousuke done in a past life to deserve this hell?

“We’re going to go dance too!” Makoto said over the music. Haru was tugging at his hand, blushing slightly but also looking unusually excited. It was hard to be mad at either of them when clearly they were both very happy to be here. They didn’t go out enough.

“Have fun!” Sousuke called as Makoto relented and followed Haru out onto the dance floor, leaving Sousuke with Yasutomo.

Sousuke turned toward him, ready to argue this whole ‘acceptance’ and ‘safe place’ thing, but he stopped when he saw the look on Yasutomo’s face. Sousuke followed his eyes, but couldn’t tell who he was looking at. There were just too many dudes everywhere. Well, whoever it was, there was bad history there because the poor kid looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Suddenly, Yasutomo jolted up and turned back toward the bar, obviously trying to avoid being seen by someone. But apparently it was too late, because these two guys walked up to him. They were pretty good looking, but they were both dressed far too flamboyantly for Sousuke’s taste. And they were hanging all over each other. Whoever these guys were, clearly they were Yasutomo’s business, not Sousuke’s. He turned more towards the bar to give them some privacy.

“I see you, Tomo-chan!” one of them said, “Don’t ignore me!”

Yasutomo turned around slowly, the most pathetic look on his face.

“Hi Rajin.” he said, barely loud enough to be heard.
“You remember Hajime, right?” Rajin asked acidly.

The other one wiggled a finger at Yasutomo, smiling in a completely unfriendly way.

Yasutomo nodded.

“He’s been staying with me since you left, we’re really in love!” Rajin practically yelled unnecessarily. Someone nearby heard and cheered. The one name Hajime made an ‘oohh’ing face, then grabbed Rajin and kissed him deeply. When they broke free, Rajin laughed.

“And what have you been doing, Tomo-chan? No one’s seen you in ages!”

Yasutomo looked like he was about to cry.

Sousuke suddenly felt irrationally angry. He had only just met Yasutomo and he certainly wasn’t his biggest fan after the scene in the restaurant, but clearly this Rajin and Hajime were flaunting in front of Yasutomo. Gay or not, Sousuke detested people acting unnecessarily cruel when it came to matters of love and romance. From the looks of it, this Rajin guy had shattered Yasutomo’s heart. These two deserved to be put in their place and Sousuke was the only one here.

Sousuke sneakily grabbed Yasutomo’s drink from behind his back and turned towards them so he could give it back to Yasutomo.

“Here, sweetie,” he said, blushing furiously at how ridiculous he sounded.

For a split second, it was impossible to say who looked more shocked; Rajin, Hajime, or Yasutomo. For good measure, Sousuke leaned down and kissed Yasutomo’s cheek.

“W..wh..what the h..he..lll!” sputtered Rajin angrily. He was now glaring furiously at Yasutomo and was too distracted to hold onto Hajime any more.

Yasutomo looked up at Sousuke in complete and utter confusion. For a second, Sousuke worried he’d broken Yasutomo’s brain. But on the plus side, Rajin looked like he was going to have an aneurism.

“He will.” Sousuke yelled at their retreating backs.

“Too bad it hadn’t escalated into a fight.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Yasutomo said, “but thanks.”

“No problem,” Sousuke said as he took a big long swig of his drink.

For a while, they leaned against the bar, watching the dancing out on the floor. Kisumi and the girls
were laughing hysterically as they pranced around, looking both ridiculous and gorgeous because of how much fun they were having. On the edge of the floor, Sousuke found Haru and Makoto dancing. Makoto was laughing and waving his hands around like an idiot. But Haru...Haru was smiling bigger and brighter than Sousuke had even thought him capable. He had his hands on Makoto’s shoulders, trying to pull Makoto’s arms down, and it was very, very possible he was laughing too, crazy as it sounded. Finally, Makoto relented and wrapped his arms around Haru, leaning in for the most passionate kiss Sousuke had ever seen them share.

Sousuke’s fruity, frilly, umbrella drink wasn’t tasting so ridiculous and dumb anymore.

Everywhere Sousuke looked, it was the same. Guys were kissing, guys were dancing, guys were having a fun time with their friends. Everyone just looked so freaking happy. They were gay and had to deal with it too, and they were all so happy.

And Sousuke was here with people who called him their friend too.

He was a part of this.

His dad would say it was wrong, but honestly – barring the scene with Rajin – Sousuke saw nothing but happiness. There was nothing wrong about any of this.

“Thanks again back there,” Yasutomo said after a few minutes, “I owe you one.”

“Ex?” Sousuke asked. Yasutomo nodded.

“He kicked me out to be with Hajime. We were living together.”

“It won’t last. He was showing off in front of you to get a reaction.”

“Well thanks again.”

“No need.”

“Hey, um, Sousuke?”

“Yeah Yasutomo?”

“Would you like to...uh...go dance too?”

“Why?”

“It would be fun, maybe? I just feel kind of silly standing around, watching everyone else.”

Sousuke thought about it for a minute.

“Sure.” he finally agreed.

So they finished their drinks and went over by Kisumi, Miyashi, and Minami. At first, both Yasutomo and Sousuke were stiff and awkward, but Kisumi and Miyashi both coaxed them out of their shells. Soon, Sousuke was jumping around in time with the music, the flashing lights of the
dance floor glinting off the white of his smile.

After a while, Makoto and Haru joined back up with them. Haru, surprisingly, was a really excellent dancer. Makoto, unsurprisingly, was terrible. But it didn’t matter at all because Sousuke was terrible too, so they were awkward giants together. Tonight, even Haru seemed to let loose. He was having too much fun to even watch anyone around Makoto suspiciously.

The night was the happiest Sousuke had been since high school.

For the first time ever, he felt happy that, like Yasutomo had said, Sousuke belonged here.

It would have been perfect if Rin were there too.

Three in the morning and Yasutomo finally collapsed down into his bed, reflecting with pleasure on the night. That thing with Rajin had been completely priceless! For how long had Yasutomo been crying over that jerk? Yasutomo brushed a finger against the spot on his cheek Sousuke had kissed. It still burned, as it had been all night.

Yamazaki Sousuke.

He was definitely going to be a problem for Yasutomo.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Next chapter, Rin makes his first appearance! (So excited :D)
Chapter Summary

Haru talks to Rin over Skype. There are lots of tears.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a quiet Saturday afternoon in April and Haru was on his laptop at the kotatsu. Sousuke was sitting across from Haru, reading some obscure book. They were the only ones home. Contrary to what Haru had at first believed, it wasn’t so bad, living with Sousuke; he generally stayed to himself, he gladly paid for more than his fair share of groceries, he was the only one besides Haru who actually knew how to clean, and he thanked Haru for every meal he’d made him.

If only Rin wasn’t hanging over them, Sousuke would be a pretty perfect roommate.

But Rin always put a damper on how Haru felt about Sousuke.

A notification announced Rin had just logged into Skype and, as usual, it took Rin about five seconds to start typing at Haru:

Sharknado – HARU!!!!!!

Haru – Hi Rin.

Sharknado – How R U????!!! We haven’t talked in a few weeks!

Haru – I am good.

Sharknado - ….

Sharknado – Well I’m fabulous too!

Sharknado – How is Makoto????!!

Haru – Makoto is good.

Sharknado - …

Sharknado – Tell him I said hi, I guess

Haru – Ok.

Haru looked up at Sousuke, a sudden surge of anger seizing him as he looked at stupid Sousuke. Lying was bad enough for Haru, but forcing Makoto to lie on Sousuke’s behalf was just plain wrong. Makoto had begged Haru to respect Sousuke’s wishes, but Haru could see how tense
Makoto got anytime they talked about Rin or, worse, Makoto talked to Rin. Makoto even forbade Haru from talking about Rin in front of Sousuke for fear of hurting his feelings. It felt like they were both sacrificing a lot for Sousuke and for what?

Makoto was too gentle with Sousuke. This ridiculous thing with Sousuke and Rin needed to be resolved or at least moved forward. And Makoto wasn’t here right now to stop Haru.

Haru – Rin, would you like to video chat?

Sharknado – YES!!!!!!!!!!! You suck at typing :D

Haru clicked the call button next to Rin’s name and a few seconds later, Rin answered.

“Haru! Look who’s getting all fancy with the computer!” Rin teased.

Haru looked up at Sousuke and felt grim satisfaction that, upon hearing Rin’s voice, Sousuke had dropped his book and his face looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“Not really, Rin.” Haru answered, sure to say Rin’s name so Sousuke had no doubts about who he was hearing. “How’s swimming going?”

“Oh, great! I’ll be racing you at the Pan Asian Games soon, so be prepared to lose!”

“Not going to happen. You’re taking care of yourself?”

Rin laughed. “Just because there isn’t as much Japanese food here doesn’t mean I’m not eating properly, Haru! Man, I still think about how funny you were when I brought you here. Besides Russell and Lori’s food, you hated everything!”

“Rin. There wasn’t enough mackerel.”

Rin laughed at Haru and Haru let himself smile at the memory. He’d hated Australian food, much to Rin’s great amusement.

“But Rin, besides food, you are taking care of yourself?”

Rin stopped laughing and started to look really thoughtful.

“I am,” he confirmed, “I probably drink too much, but a lot less than I used to. I stopped going to gay clubs.”

“That’s good, you need to be focusing on swimming, not sex.”

Haru flicked his eyes up at Sousuke. He looked like he was about to run screaming from the room or start crying.

“Haru,” Rin said quietly, “It’s just not fun anymore, picking up guys. Even when I was at my worst club rat phase, it never was as fun as it should have been. Now I can’t stand it at all. My teammates all make fun of me because I’ve become some kind of monk or something. Pining away for someone I haven’t seen for years.”
Haru looked carefully at Rin. Even though they were 7,000 km away, Haru could see the deep sadness, the deep longing in his face.

“Do you think he’s alright, Haru?” Rin asked, practically in a whisper.

“I don’t know, Rin.” Haru answered. It was the same answer he’d given Rin for years now and it clearly still pained Rin to hear it. It pained Haru horribly to have to lie, seeing Rin look so hurt.

They hadn’t talked about Sousuke for a very long time and everything had changed in the last few months.

“Sorry from bringing him up again. I was just going through some old playlists we’d made for each other.”

Haru nodded, urging Rin to continue though he didn’t say anything.

“I still make them for him, you know. I have like 50 I’ve made him over the years. I wish I could give them to him and hear what he has to say about them. He always did have great taste. Maybe if I didn’t listen to them all the time, I could enjoy going out and hooking up more, but always after a certain lyric or a certain sound will pop up in my head and ruin everything. The worst part is that I can’t stop myself from listening to them. I know it’s so pathetic, that I should just let go of him and accept he’s never going to come back, but I just can’t. I still believe he’s out there somewhere. I still believe I’ll see him again someday.”

Haru looked quickly up at Sousuke again. Sousuke was crying silently, though he was too shocked to seem to notice.

“Could you send me one?” Haru asked.

Rin looked surprised, but then he smiled.

“Sure, Haru! Maybe the more people who play it, the more likely he is to come home! Like some sort of signal calling him back where he belongs! I’ll send you a couple.”

Almost instantly, Rin sent Haru ten playlists.

“Thanks Rin. I’ll share them with Makoto. But give me a second, I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Sure thing Haru.”

Haru got up and left Sousuke alone with the computer. He hadn’t really needed to go to the bathroom, he was mostly curious to see if Sousuke would do anything after hearing Rin’s words. But when Haru came back, Sousuke was staring at the back of the laptop. He hadn’t moved a muscle. Disappointed, Haru sat back down.

“I was wondering, Rin, what would you do if you were to see Sousuke again?” he asked.

Rin’s eyes widened with surprise, “Wow, Haru! Usually you don’t let me talk about anything but swimming! Hmmm…honestly, I have no idea what I would do if I saw him again. I couldn’t even say if I would be too happy to be angry or if I would punch him. It seems almost an impossible hope so I try to not think about it too much. It always makes me feel so sad because, logically, I know it might not ever happen.”

Haru nodded. Rin took that as a sign that he could continue:
“If I were to see him again, I think the thing I’d want to know more than anything was why. I mean, I know about his shoulder surgeries not working and I know his fucking father kicked him out. But it doesn’t explain why he left without telling anyone where he was going. Ichirou and I have exhausted all possibilities and we just have no idea.”

“Who is Ichirou?” Haru asked.

“Oh, his older brother. Him and I have become pretty good friends since Sousuke disappeared; I think Ichirou feels really guilty about it. It was because of Ichirou that their dad left in the end. Man, if my dad had lived long enough, I’m sure he would have beat the crap out of Mr. Yamazaki. They went to school together and I remember as kids that our dads didn’t get along at all. My mom and his mom remained friends and my mom is always saying how sad it is that such a nice woman married such a narrow-minded ass hole. Thank goodness Sousuke and Ichirou turned out as good as they did.”

Rin sighed heavily, “You know what sucks a lot is Sousuke is an uncle, twice over now, and he doesn’t even know it. I’ve held his niece and nephew and Sousuke doesn’t know they exist. They have Sousuke and Ichirou’s eyes.”

Sousuke made a strangled little gasp and quickly covered his mouth with his hand so Rin wouldn’t hear.

Suddenly, Rin broke down and began to bawl.

“Rin!” Haru said nervously. He didn’t see this side of Rin enough to know how to handle it properly.

“Haru,” Rin sputtered, “I failed Sousuke! I’ve been over this a thousand times in my head and I’ve figured out that it’s probably because of me he ran away like he did! I told him that I would be waiting for him, that he shouldn’t crush his own potential before he even tried to reach his swimming goals! He got those surgeries because of me and they made it impossible for him to swim! If only I hadn’t put so much pressure on Sousuke to swim! I didn’t appreciate him enough and I pushed him to be someone I wanted him to be, not someone he was capable of being! And now I’ve lost him!”

“Rin,” Haru said firmly, feeling furious suddenly, “It’s not your fault Sousuke ran away. He is responsible for his own actions, not you. Whatever Sousuke’s reasons were, don’t you dare blame yourself. You did nothing wrong.”

Rin took a few deep breaths and wiped away his tears. While he recovered, Haru glared murderously at Sousuke. He looked like he was dying.

It was a pretty shitty and immature thing for Haru to do, talking with Rin about Sousuke when Rin didn’t know Sousuke was listening. But Sousuke needed to see how much pain he was still causing Rin, and this had been the only way Haru could find. Haru cared enormously for Rin and not just as his sworn swimming rival.

“Thanks for listening, Haru,” Rin said once he’d regained some composure, “There isn’t anyone besides you, Ichirou, and Ai I can talk to about Sousuke anymore.”

“You are still in touch with Nitori?” Haru asked. Rin looked incredibly grateful for the subject change.

“Of course! He was swimming for a university in Canada, but the funding was cut and so he’s going to have to come back to Japan. I helped him find a university in Tokyo to swim for, so you might see
him around at swim meets next season. He’ll be back this summer. Speaking of our underclassmen, do you and Makoto still keep in touch with Rei and Nagisa?”

Haru nodded, “Makoto talks to them both pretty regularly. They had some big fight right before Nagisa left to swim in America and they haven’t talked since. Gou still talks to Nagisa, I think. Rei is in America too, studying rocket science so he can become an astronaut.”

Rin chuckled, “That’s just like Speedo-glasses. I’m sure he’ll be the most fabulous astronaut ever. Yeah, Gou still talks to both of them pretty often as she’s in New York and Rei is in Massachusetts. She’s tearing it up at design school with Chigusa Hanamura though their program is ending next spring; they go on tons of dates with all sorts of hot guys and are generally being fabulous. It’s really fun going to visit them. They have a lot of gay friends they always try to hook me up with when I’m visiting which I’ve always thought was pretty weird. But Gou is doing really well; I’m really proud of her.”

Haru smiled. Though he’d heard all this from Makoto, Haru really liked hearing Rin talk about his little sister.

For a few minutes, they fell into a contemplative silence.

“Oh gosh, Haru,” Rin finally said, as though he’d just remembered something he needed to do, “Chris and Sam will be home soon and I don’t want them to see me crying. And I didn’t even get to hear about how you and that freaking Tsukino kid have been doing in practice! I’ll talk to you later and give my love to Makoto!”

“I will do no such thing.” Haru said angrily, “I am the only one who gets to love Makoto.”

“Come on, Haru! I didn’t mean it like that! Just..bye!”

“Bye.”

Rin logged off with Haru, feeling kind of crappy for lying. His roommates and teammates Chris and Sam weren’t expected home anytime soon; Rin just wanted an excuse to get off so he could sift through his tumultuous feelings in peace. For so long, Rin hadn’t talked with anyone about Sousuke and it had surprised him how upset he’d gotten during this unexpected conversation with Haru.

Why the hell couldn’t he just let Sousuke go?

Because he loved him, that’s why.

And wherever he was, Rin knew Sousuke was hurting.

Rin started crying again.
Instead of curling up in bed to nurse his feelings as usual, Rin left the house and went to the convenience store across the street. The guy working the checkout stand was Rin’s favorite employee because he never asked questions when Rin came in there crying. Which was embarrassingly often. Rin bought a can of soda and left without having to explain himself at all.

Rin, Chris, and Sam had found a reasonably priced apartment just across the street from a beach. It wasn’t an especially spectacular beach, but it was really nice living next to the ocean. It had rained earlier that day and the pewter clouds above threatened more. The weather fit Rin’s mood perfectly and had the added bonus of keeping everyone else off the beach.

Rin was alone with the ocean.

Rin took off his shoes and walked up to the ocean’s edge.

As it always had, the ocean calmed Rin down. Something about the sea air, the waves, and the immense possibilities of its vastness made the distance separating Rin from home seem smaller. Rin was less lonely when he looked out at the ocean because he knew his friends and family were out there. And since his death, Rin had always imagined his father in the water, watching Rin grow and gently guiding him through life. Though less vocal and weird than Haru on the subject, Rin loved water just as much.

A wave lapped against Rin’s feet then retreated sending a shiver through Rin. The water was cold. But more importantly, touching the ocean was like tapping into the life force of the world. It was a very powerful and profound thing to experience. That contact soothed Rin’s suffering soul because it reminded him that everyone and everything were connected.

Somewhere out there, Sousuke was alive and thinking about Rin. And Rin would see him again.

Rin believed it with all his heart.

From his pocket, Rin grabbed the can of soda and opened it.

“Here’s to you, big guy,” he said as he toasted the ocean, “Come back to me already.”

Rin tipped the can and poured its contents into the ocean. For a brief moment, the brown, sugary liquid Sousuke loved so much bloomed out into the water, creating an entrancing pattern. Then, another wave came in and carried the soda out to sea, where somewhere, somehow, Rin believed it would reach Sousuke.

“I love you, Yamazaki Sousuke,” Rin whispered into the undulating waves, “So please come back to me.”

Having completed his ritual, Rin turned around and left the beach. He felt better because he believed that his offering and his prayer would somehow, someway, reach Sousuke and bring him back.
For a long time after Rin signed off, Haru and Sousuke sat in complete silence. That Skype call had wreaked havoc on Sousuke; Haru could see it in his posture, in every line of his face.

Makoto had insisted on being gentle with Sousuke and to a great degree, it had worked. Sousuke laughed and talked a lot more than he had when he first arrived and Makoto and Haru had been pleased to find his book choices were now more pleasant. But still, Rin was Haru’s best friend and he detested seeing him suffer. He’d been dying to do something, anything, for weeks now. The time for being gentle was passed, now Sousuke needed to start taking some action. The Skype call had clearly been super effective. Sousuke was clearly rocked to his core.

“You need to fix this,” Haru finally said.

Sousuke looked up. He was crying silent tears.

Haru didn’t like seeing people cry, so he decided he should go do something in his room, leave Sousuke be.

But Haru wasn’t done yet.

As he got up to go, he pushed play on the first of Rin’s playlists. Music started to play. Sousuke buried his face in his hands, overcome because yes, the music was just like Rin.

Haru left Sousuke to listen while he went to his room for a nap.

Two hours later, Kisumi and Yasutomo came to the apartment after a long day of studying. They were both surprised to find Sousuke sitting at the kotatsu, not reading for once. Haru’s laptop was opened and a woman was wailing beautifully out of the computer’s speakers. Sousuke’s head was lying with his head on the table, his face turned away from the door.

“Everything all right there, Sousuke?” Kisumi asked.

Sousuke lifted his head off the table and looked at them. His eyes were red, tears still bathed his cheeks, and he wore the saddest, most heartbreaking smile Yasutomo had ever seen. Sousuke always put up such high walls; Yasutomo had never seen him so opened and exposed before. His heart beat a little faster.

“Not really,” Sousuke said hoarsely. He slowly stood up, gathered his book and Haru’s laptop, and retreated into his fortress of solitude.
“What was that all about” Yasutomo asked.

“Absolutely no clue.” Kisumi answered.

Until the battery ran out, Sousuke held Haru’s computer hostage.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so very much for reading!

I'm not much of a music person, but if anyone has any ideas about what Rin would put on Sousuke's playlists, I'd love to hear them :D
Makoto's Appendix

Chapter Summary

Makoto's appendix bursts. There are many tears. The Tachibanas come to see Makoto.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yasutomo and Kisumi had a test on Friday morning, so they were holding a cram session at Kisumi’s apartment on Thursday night. Makoto and Haru had retreated to their room right after dinner and Sousuke was nowhere to be found, as had become his habit over the last few weeks. Studying at Kisumi’s was pretty productive, actually, though Yasutomo couldn’t help but glance at Sousuke’s closed door more often than he should have. It would be nice to see him again; it had been awhile.

“So tell me about fullerenes again?” Kisumi asked Yasutomo, interrupting his thoughts.

“Fullerenes are…” Yasutomo began, but was interrupted by the front door slamming open.

As though summoned by Yasutomo’s thoughts, in walked Sousuke and some other guy, laughing their heads off. They were both bruised and bloody; clearly they’d been in a fight.

Yasutomo had never seen Sousuke laughing so hard; he seemed a little deranged.

“Thanks for the night, man!” Sousuke said brightly to the stranger, “I’ll see you at the studio next week!”

“Sure thing, Yamazaki! Take care of that eye. We want that pretty face of yours to attract customers, not send them away screaming!”

“Will do, chief!”

Laughing still, Sousuke shook the stranger’s hand and sent him on his way.

“What have you been doing?” Kisumi asked dryly after Sousuke had closed the door.

“We got in a fight with these two idiots at a bar by the studio,” Sousuke laughed as he came over and flopped down on the ground next to the kotatsu, “It was an awful lot of fun.”

“Yeah sounds like tons of fun,” Kisumi said mockingly, “Who wouldn’t want to get punched in the face. Haru will not appreciate you bleeding all over the place, so be careful.”

The smile slid right off Sousuke’s face.

“Fuck Haru,” he spat with surprising venom.

Kisumi sighed in exasperation, “Tomo, here’s as good a place as any to stop. I declare us both good for the test tomorrow. Help me get this idiot cleaned before you leave, though. I’ll get the first aid kit. Make sure he stays put while I find the stuff we need.”
“What?” Sousuke laughed, “You going to play doctor with me, Kisumi? How very kinky of you, but sorry, you’re not my type.”

Kisumi frowned deeply, “Yes I’m going to clean you up, you fucking idiot. And we all know you like your guys with purple hair, not pink.”

Yasutomo’s heart suddenly hammered hard against his chest. He had purple hair! Were they talking about him? Did Sousuke…

No…of course they weren’t…but maybe?

Yasutomo looked down at Sousuke’s long, lean body stretched out before him. He had a bloody lip, his left eye was starting to swell into a black eye, and his knuckles were wrecked and bleeding.

But he was still the most beautiful guy Yasutomo had ever seen.

Now that Kisumi had gone to get the first aid kit, Yasutomo was completely alone with him.

For the first time ever.

This was all a little too much to bear, but Yasutomo had to make the most of this opportunity.

“Sousuke?”

Sousuke leaned his head back so he could look at Yasutomo, upside down.

“Sousuke, what happened?”

Sousuke smiled.

“Got into a fight,” he said proudly.

“Clearly. What happened?”

Sousuke flipped over and laid his head on the ground, watching Yasutomo with those transcendent teal eyes.

“I’m a coward. That’s not new, though.”

“What are you afraid of?” Yasutomo asked, hoping he’d learn some secret about this enigmatic guy he’d been fantasizing about for weeks.

Sousuke laughed bitterly.

“Why, do you want to fix me too?”

“Besides everything from the fight, you don’t seem very broken to me, Sousuke.” Yasutomo replied. It was the truth. Every time he saw Sousuke, he smiled and laughed with his friends a little more. Even in the short time Yasutomo had known Sousuke, he’d become so much happier. No broken person could pull off such genuine happiness. He knew from personal experience.

Sousuke smiled a sad smile, “You just don’t know me well enough to see how broken I am.”

Yasutomo shook his head. No, Sousuke, you just refuse to see how whole you are. Sousuke raised a
questioning eyebrow at Yasutomo.

“I volunteered at a hospice last summer,” Yasutomo explained, “and I know what tragedy looks like. Trust me, Yamazaki Sousuke, despite what you might choose to believe of yourself, you aren’t as broken as you think. I can tell. So quit pretending you are.”

Sousuke opened his mouth to say something, but Kisumi chose that moment to return with the first aid kit.

Yasutomo’s heart leapt up into his throat as his face flushed. Thankfully, Kisumi was too preoccupied trying to get Sousuke sitting up to notice.

Sousuke was going to be the death of Yasutomo; he had barely thought of Rajin since that night at the gay bar. He had heard that Rajin and Hajime had broken up, but Yasutomo didn’t care. He had someone new to think about. Yasutomo had never wanted someone so hard as he’d wanted this dark, handsome, brooding guy.

And really, he barely knew him.

Once Sousuke was propped against the kotatsu, Kisumi got to work on his left hand.

“You do the right,” Kisumi commanded, handing some antiseptic wipes to Yatusomo.

Sousuke’s hands were big and really warm. As he got to work swabbing Sousuke’s tattered knuckles, Yasutomo couldn’t help but imagine what those hands would feel like on his body. Someone so intense as Sousuke, so passionate, was bound to be an extraordinary lover. And oh, that body! Yasutomo had to force himself to recite chemical compounds over and over. He was blushing enough as it was; he didn’t need to further embarrass himself with tented trousers caused by fantasies.

To make everything worse, when Yasutomo happened to look up, Sousuke was staring at him.

Quickly, Yasutomo dove back down into his work but it was no use, his blush was deeper than ever.

Kisumi and Yasutomo were just finishing when Haru emerged from their bedroom. At the sight of him, Sousuke instantly tensed up.

“What’s wrong, Haru?” Kisumi asked urgently. Yasutomo looked at Haru and was disturbed to see his expression. It was one of deathly panic.

Haru was not one for displaying his emotions so something must be really, really wrong.

“It’s Makoto,” Haru choked out, “I…I don’t know....”

Kisumi and Sousuke jumped up and ran into Haru and Makoto’s bedroom, leaving Yasutomo with Haru. Haru sank to his knees and covered his face with his hands, completely overcome by despair.
An ominous groan came from the bedroom and a violent shudder went through Haru’s whole body.

Kisumi ran out and grabbed his phone, dialing a number.

“Hi yes, I need a taxi immediately,” Kisumi said, then gave their address.

“What’s going on, Kisumi?” Yasutomo ventured to ask once Kisumi had snapped the phone shut.

“Something is wrong with Makoto’s stomach,” Kisumi explained over his shoulder as he went back in to Makoto.

Five minutes later, Kisumi’s phone rang, announcing the taxi had arrived. Only then did the guys emerge from Makoto’s bedroom, Makoto leaning heavily on Sousuke.

Laboriously they made their way to the front door.

“Yasutomo!” Sousuke snapped, “Bring Haru and Kisumi’s phone and Makoto’s wallet. And lock the door with Haru’s keys.”

As quickly as he could, Yasutomo obeyed, darting into Haru and Makoto’s bedroom to find Makoto’s wallet and Haru’s keys on the dresser. It took all Yasutomo’s strength to pull Haru up to his feet. Haru was incapable of anything at the moment, so Yasutomo guided him out to the taxi, pausing only to lock the apartment up behind him.

It took some effort, but they managed to squeeze everyone in. Kisumi and Yasutomo sat up front with the driver while Makoto sat between Sousuke and Haru in the back. While Kisumi called the hospital to inform them about Makoto, Yasutomo watched Makoto in the rearview mirror. His face was pale, he looked clammy, and he was failing at masking the pain he was experiencing. Next to him, Haru was clinging onto Makoto’s sleeve as though his life depended on it, watching him helplessly. Every time Makoto groaned in pain, Haru looked more like he was dying. Of course Makoto noticed Haru’s distress and, being as he was Makoto, he was the one who tried to comfort Haru.

“I will be just fine, Haru.” Makoto tried reassuring him, “Please, don’t worry.”

That just made Haru more upset.

It felt like ages before they reached Tokai University Tokyo Hospital, but in reality it was only seven minutes. When they finally did pull up, Sousuke flung cash at the driver and practically busted down the door to get it open. Before Kisumi had gotten out, Sousuke had Makoto out of the back and was helping him towards the Emergency Room doors.

Kisumi ran after them, leaving Haru up to Yasutomo.

Just as Yasutomo finally coaxed Haru out of the back seat, Makoto suddenly screamed in agony and collapsed, clutching his stomach hard. Luckily, both Kisumi and Sousuke were already by his side to catch him. It was a good thing Makoto had friends just as big as he was; Yasutomo probably wouldn’t have been able to help much if it had been him alone.

And Haru wouldn’t have been able to do anything at all.
Although they weren’t really friends, Haru grabbed onto the back of Yasutomo’s shirt and held on tight when Makoto collapsed. Without saying a word, Yasutomo snaked his arm around Haru’s shoulders so he could hold on to him better. Instantly, Haru crumpled into him.

“We need someone immediately!” Sousuke was bellowing by the time Yasutomo had gotten Haru inside.

Makoto hadn’t stopped screaming.

A nurse came up to them and asked them Makoto’s name.

“Tachibana Makoto,” Sousuke replied urgently, “Something is very wrong with his stomach.”

The nurse reached out a hand and gently brushed Makoto’s stomach, but that made his screaming worse.

“They’ve been expecting you, Tachibana-san. Please wait here.”

She darted down the hall and in a few seconds, returned with a wheelchair. Sousuke and Kisumi both helped Makoto into it.

“I’ll go with Makoto,” Kisumi declared, “You figure out paperwork and whatever else. Yasutomo, I guess just help Haru”

“Okay.” Sousuke and Yasutomo agreed instantly.

They watched as the nurse wheeled Makoto through a set of swinging doors, Kisumi right behind her.

“Right. Yasutomo, sit down with Haru and make sure he’s ok. Haru, I need your phone. I’m assuming you have a number for his parents in there. I’m going to get the papers to check Makoto in.”

Haru didn’t respond in any way to Sousuke’s request. He was lost to the world.

“Haru, I need your phone.” Sousuke repeated, patting Haru gently on the shoulder to get his attention. Yasutomo gave Haru a nudge and finally, Haru fumbled in his pocked and retrieved his phone. His hand was shaking so bad, he nearly dropped it before handing it to Sousuke.

Having gotten everything he needed, Sousuke went off to the front desk. Yasutomo gently led Haru away and helped him sit down in a corner of the waiting room. Immediately, Haru hung his head down and buried his face in his hands.

Yasutomo didn’t try saying anything because he figured any attempt would be useless. However he did keep his arm wrapped around Haru’s shoulder, just so Haru would know he wasn’t alone in his nightmare.

Sousuke returned a few minutes later; he was already on the phone with Makoto’s mother, asking
her for information and furiously filling out the papers on the provided clipboard. Yasutomo listened to Sousuke’s side of the conversation:

“Yes, Mrs. Tachibana, we got that…Yes Haruka is here….Well you know Haru, he’s not taking this very well…no we haven’t heard anything yet, but Kisumi is with him….he’s a medical student and he will understand better than I would…I didn’t want to leave Haru…no, our friend has been with him…Matsuzaki Yasutomo…yes, he’s a nice kid, he's studying medicine with Kisumi. He’s been taking care of Haru while Kisumi and I took care of Makoto…Ok, I will call you as soon as we hear anything. Thank you very much for your help…well your son is a very good friend so of course it’s no trouble at all…alright, we will talk again soon.”

Sousuke smiled as he snapped the phone shut.

“Mrs. Tachibana was almost as worried about Haru as she was about Makoto,” Sousuke said, mostly to himself, as he got back to Makoto’s paperwork.

Using Makoto’s insurance card in his wallet and the information Mrs. Tachibana had given him, Sousuke finished the paperwork quickly and went off again to turn it in. His absence this time was longer. The gravity of the situation seemed to have sobered Sousuke up quickly. Despite the situation, Yasutomo’s mind came back to earlier...

Was it possible Sousuke had meant Yasutomo when he’d said purple hair? But surely they wouldn’t have said something like that in front of Yasutomo if they were talking about Yasutomo…right?

When Sousuke did return, he had two cups of coffee and a bottle of soda with him.

“I wasn’t sure how you would like your coffee, Yasutomo,” Sousuke apologized as he handed a cup to Yasutomo, “I hope this is alright.”

“Thanks, Sousuke,” Yasutomo said, accepting the paper cup. He took a sip and was pleasantly surprised to find it with just a bit of cream and no sugar. Just how he liked it.

“Drink this, Haru,” Sousuke commanded as he thrust the cup at Haru.

Haru didn’t respond.

“It’s going to be a long night for us and I know you are going to want to be at your best when you get to see Makoto again. So drink this. It’s what you do in hospitals.”

Haru finally looked up at Sousuke.

Yasutomo felt bad for thinking about who Sousuke’s purple-haired guy was when he was supposed to be taking care of Haru. He hated seeing people looking so completely crushed.

“Thank you, Sousuke” Haru said as he quietly accepted the cup.

Sousuke sat down in the seat next to Haru, cracked open his bottle of soda, and took a long sip. When he finished, he was smiling.
“Makoto’s mom seems like a very nice woman,” Sousuke said, gently hitting Haru on the shoulder, “You’re a lucky guy to have a mother-in-law who cares so much about you.”

“What did she say?” Haru asked.

“You know, she was obviously very concerned about Makoto. It sounds like we can expect the whole Tachibana clan tomorrow. I told her they could stay with us if they wanted. She said she would get a hotel room nearby for herself and Mr. Tachibana, but his younger siblings will stay with us. I can give them my room and I can sleep in the living room, that’s no problem.”

Sousuke’s words undid whatever was keeping Haru together and he burst out into wild sobs.

Sousuke took the cup from his trembling hands so Haru could cover his face up.

Then, Sousuke put a hand on Haru’s head as though to ruffle his hair, but he kept it there, scratching Haru’s head occasionally in an effort to soothe him.

Sousuke really was a good guy.

For an hour, they sat waiting until finally Kisumi returned. He didn’t look very happy.

“Makoto’s appendix burst,” Kisumi explained, “He’s in surgery. They say it will take awhile.”

Against Yasutomo, Haru crunched into an even tighter ball.

Kisumi took a seat on Yasutomo’s other side and Sousuke flipped open Haru’s phone so he could tell Mrs. Tachibana the unfortunate update.

“Go home, you guys.” Sousuke commanded. They’d all been sitting in the waiting room for two hours and Sousuke knew Yasutomo and Kisumi had an important test in the morning.

“But, Makoto!” Kisumi began to protest, but Sousuke wouldn’t let him.

“Haru is who Makoto will want to see and I’ll stay here for Haru. Go home so you don’t flunk your test tomorrow. We all don’t need to be here.”

Kisumi looked at Sousuke for a minute before nodding in agreement.

“You’ll call me as soon as he’s out of surgery?” Kisumi asked.

“Yes. Of course. Now get going.”

Kisumi sighed in defeat.

“Come on, Tomo,” he finally said, “Your mom will be worried sick about you. Talk to you soon, Sousuke.”

He stood up and hovered above Haru, not knowing whether he should say anything or not. They hadn’t been able to get a word out of Haru since Sousuke had given him coffee. Finally, Kisumi
settled on giving Haru a pat on the shoulder.

“Call me when you hear something,” Kisumi said again.

“I will. And Yasutomo,” Sousuke paused, “thanks so much for everything you’ve done for Haru tonight. You’ve been a good friend.”

Yasutomo and Kisumi both smiled and then left Sousuke alone with Haru.

Ever since the Skype call, Sousuke’s old resentment of Haru had returned full force and he’d been studiously avoiding Haru. Of course he’d been very busy doing something important, but he still had worked hard to stay away from Haru. However, it was impossible to stay mad at Haru when he was in such a bad way. He couldn’t even imagine what he’d be like if Rin had something like this happen to him and Haru and Makoto, well they were so wrapped up in each other it was hard to separate where one ended and the other started sometimes. And Haru really was a pretty sensitive kid; who knew what was going through that head of his for him to collapse so hard. Sousuke could tell Haru was in absolute pieces because when Kisumi and Yasutomo left and he pulled Haru into a hug for comfort, Haru didn’t resist at all. Sousuke felt like Haru might actually fall apart if Sousuke didn’t hold him together. Sousuke didn’t mind the physical contact either because this, well this was pretty fucking scary.

Another hour passed before a doctor finally came to talk to them.

“Tachibana-san is doing very well and is in recovery.”

“Can Haru see him?” Sousuke asked the doctor. She was very tiny, but Sousuke got the feeling she wasn’t a type to cross.

“What’s the relation?” she asked, eyeing them both suspiciously.

For the first time probably ever, Sousuke regretted getting in a fight. His tattered knuckles and battered face probably wasn’t helping Haru’s cause.

“Haru is his fiancé,” Sousuke lied. Well it wasn’t really lying; they were going to get married someday anyways, they just hadn’t officially proposed to each other yet.

The doctor raised her eyebrow at Haru.

“If you’re his fiancé, that’s alright. But I can only allow you in to see him and you can only stay for ten minutes, understood? He needs rest.”

“Please,” Haru said pathetically, breaking his silence, “Just take me to him.”

While Haru visited Makoto, Sousuke called both Kisumi and Mrs. Tachibana to give them the update. Kisumi said he and Yasutomo would pick up Miyashi and Minami after they were all done
with classes and head over to the hospital to visit Makoto in the afternoon. It was a nice sentiment, but Sousuke didn’t want to overwhelm Makoto. They’d just have to see how he was feeling tomorrow. Sousuke made plans to meet the Tachibanas at the airport tomorrow morning at 10:30 and then they would come straight to the hospital. After buying several massive plushies, of course.

When Haru rejoined Sousuke in the waiting room, he looked marginally better though he was still pretty much catatonic. Sousuke took that as enough of a sign that Makoto was doing well, so he didn’t ask. Instead, he draped an arm around Haru and led him outside to hail a taxi home. A train or a bus would have taken more time and Haru, he needed to be home.

When they finally got back to the apartment, it was 2:43 in the morning. Sousuke helped Haru brush his teeth and tucked him into the bed that had a noticeable, Makoto-shaped hole in it. For a minute, Sousuke looked down at Haru, curled up and alone under the blankets before he ran off to grab the extra futon, his pillow, and some blankets. By the light of the aquarium, Sousuke set up a little nest by Haru’s side so Haru wouldn’t have to be completely alone tonight.

And it was really, really comforting to hear another human being.

The next morning, Sousuke’s alarm went off at 9:00. He quickly bolted up awake. Maybe it was the effect of the beers last night, but Sousuke had fallen asleep almost immediately last night. Haru, obviously, had had a more difficult time. When Sousuke went to shake him awake, Haru peeked out from under his covers, his eyes ringed by dark circles.

“You should go to the hospital, Haru,” Sousuke said, “I need to go to the airport to pick up the Tachibanas. Can you get there by yourself?”

Haru’s blue eyes surveyed Sousuke for a full minute before Haru nodded his head, still half covered with the blankets.

“Alright, you better get there quick so you can have plenty of time with Makoto by yourself.”

Haru disappeared under the blankets and Sousuke left him to call into work and get ready to pick up the Tachibanas.

“Ran, you have a boyfriend!?” Makoto cried in horror. Ran blushed from the tips of her ears all the way down to her toes, very much like Makoto would have done.

“Makotooooo,” she whined, “It’s not that big of a deal! You have a boyfriend!”

Makoto squeezed Haru’s hand. Haru had been pretty quiet all day, but he hadn’t let go of Makoto’s hand the entire time, except once to go the bathroom. Makoto hated seeing him so upset, but there wasn’t a whole lot he could do while he felt so terrible.

“But Makoto doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Sousuke laughed from his spot on the window sill, “Haru is
his soulmate. And Makoto is also going to be twenty-two soon.”

Ran blushed even fiercer and looked down at her feet.

It had soon become very apparent to everyone that Yamazaki Sousuke was the only person in the world capable of rendering Makoto’s audacious little sister speechless. Something told Makoto, whoever this new boyfriend was, he was probably going to get his heart broken because he couldn’t measure up to Sousuke.

Makoto chuckled, but his laugh turned into a yawn. Makoto hadn’t woken up until his family arrived and he’d already taken a three hour nap while Sousuke took his family out to lunch and around the neighborhood a bit. Still, Makoto was exhausted.

“You need to rest, sweetie,” Makoto’s mom cooed, “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

“And bring you so many new toys!” Ren declared triumphantly.

“You’re going to drown Makoto in stuffed animals!” Kisumi laughed.

Everyone had gone a little overboard; Makoto wondered what he and Haru were going to do with so many stuffed animals! They were all very cute though…

“Alright, Makoto, we’ll see you tomorrow,” Miyashi said as she grabbed Kisumi by the elbow, “Feel better, big guy!”

“Feel better, my precious angel!” Makoto’s mom said as she leaned down and kissed Makoto’s forehead. She smiled warmly at him.

“Feel better, son,” Makoto’s dad said affectionately, ruffling Makoto’s hair.

“But we don’t want to leave Onii-chan!” Ran complained. Ren looked like he might cry again.

It hadn’t been that long of a separation, but Makoto always loved seeing his family so much. It filled him with so much warmth to know they’d all come all the way down here for him!

“Have fun at my apartment tonight, ok? but don’t have too much fun without me! Sousuke will be reporting back.”

“We won’t!” Ren said confidently, hugging his big brother hard around the neck.

Ran bent down and gave him a kiss on the forehead, just like his mom had.

It was crazy how big they’d gotten since the last time Makoto had seen them and it really hadn’t been that long ago.

Having said their goodbyes, everyone began filing out. Everyone except Haru, of course.

“Are you coming, Haru?” Sousuke asked from the doorway.

“No, I’m going to stay with Makoto for a little while longer.”

“Suit yourself, see you back at the apartment.”
Once alone, Haru put his head down on Makoto’s leg, still holding Makoto’s hand. He looked at Makoto with his beautiful eyes and Makoto felt his heart contract with how much sorrow filled those blue depths. With his free hand, Makoto stroked Haru’s hair.

“What’s wrong, Haru-chan?” Makoto asked softly, though the answer was obvious.

Haru wasn’t a crier. Neither was Makoto, really. That’s why it was so alarming when Haru’s crystal clear eyes flooded with tears.

“I was so scared, Makoto,” he whispered as the tears began to spill. Makoto squeezed his hand tighter.

“I’ll be fine, Haru-chan. There’s nothing to be afraid of anymore.”

Haru turned his face into Makoto’s leg so Makoto wouldn’t see him cry harder. Makoto started to tear up too; there was nothing worse than seeing Haru upset.

“I was so useless!” Haru blubbered, “Kisumi and Sousuke and Yasutomo were the ones who could help you, not me!”

“Haru,” Makoto said softly, running his hand down Haru’s face so he could pull Haru’s head up.

With some reluctance, Haru looked up at Makoto.

Makoto smiled and opened his arms wide, “Haru, I’d like to hold you.”

Haru wiped away his tears and carefully climbed into bed next to Makoto. Nothing made Makoto feel more at peace than holding his Haru-chan close to him, listening to him breathing and feeling his heartbeat. Makoto began stroking Haru’s hair again because he knew Haru liked it.

“Haru, you did the best you could. It probably wouldn’t have gotten so bad if I’d listened to you in the first place and went to the doctor right when I started to feel bad.”

“My best wasn’t good enough…people die from burst appendices.”

For a long moment, Makoto didn’t know what to say.

Haru buried his face in Makoto’s chest, his hand clutching harder to Makoto’s hospital gown. Judging by the shudders going through Haru’s body, Makoto knew Haru was crying again.

After some time of that, Haru finally turned his head enough so he could be heard.

“I don’t want you to ever die, Makoto. I don’t ever want you to leave me,” he whispered.

Makoto wiped his own tears away and squeezed Haru tighter.

He didn’t ever want to leave Haru either.

“We will both die someday, Haruka,” Makoto said quietly, “but I think our souls will live forever.
And it’s true what Sousuke said. You aren’t just my boyfriend; you are my soul mate. I couldn’t love anyone more than I love you. And I think being soul mates means that our souls will stay together after our bodies are gone. So I will never leave you, even if I should die.”

Haru lifted his head so he could look at Makoto, tears spilling freely down his cheeks.

“But for as long as I live,” Makoto continued, cupping Haru’s cheek in his hand and wiping away tears with his thumb, “I promise to take the best care of you I possibly can if you promise me the same thing. That way we can live a long, happy life together.”

Haru nodded his head solemnly, “Of course I promise that, but my best isn’t very good. You’re too important to be left up to me.”

Makoto leaned in and kissed Haru’s forehead, “I couldn’t ask for anyone better to give myself to, Haruka. But if you feel that way, these are things we can work on. You can work on responding better to bad times. And I’ll work on asking for help and relying on you for help more too, so things don’t get worse than they need to. I intend to keep you for my whole life.”

Finally, Haru managed to smile. Just a little bit.

“Makoto, I love you with everything I am.”

Makoto leaned in so his forehead touched Haru’s. It hurt like hell because of the surgery, but this was important.

“And I love you, Haruka, with everything that I am.”

Haru smiled brighter and tilted his head up so he could kiss Makoto, long and deep. Makoto pulled Haru back so he didn’t have to sit up and wound his hands through Haru’s hair, enjoying the familiar warmth that always went through his body when Haru kissed him.

His whole body hurt and he was completely exhausted, but Makoto was very happy.

When Haru pulled away, he snuggled up close to Makoto, but took lots of care that he didn’t go anywhere near Makoto’s abdomen. Makoto hugged Haru close and almost instantly drifted off into a peaceful sleep. It was always so easy to sleep when he was holding Haru.

Two hours passed before a nurse came in to check on Makoto. She made Haru leave, though she gave Haru time to write Makoto a little note for him to read when he woke up.

At the apartment, everyone’s attention was dedicated to entertaining the twins. Yasutomo, Kisumi, and Sousuke were battling Ren on Mario Kart (Sousuke was terrible). Miyashi and Minami were doing Ran’s hair and nails, listening attentively as Ran told them about her new boyfriend and all the things going on at school. After having a really nice dinner with Makoto’s whole family and all Sousuke’s friends and coming home to all this togetherness, well Sousuke was really, really happy.

The front door opened and Haru came in.

“Haru!” Ren cried, pausing the game.
“Hi everyone,” Haru greeted.

He seemed to be more alive than he had all day. Some time alone with Makoto had done him good.

Ran got up from the couch and went over to give Haru a hug.

“Onii-chan will be better in no time, Haru! He’s so big and strong! So please don’t be so sad! You’ll make Makoto sad!”

Haru actually pulled himself together enough to smile at her. She wasn’t much shorter than he was now.

“I know, Ran.”

Ren dashed over to hug Haru too.

“Onii-chan will get better really soon, just you wait and see, Haru!”

“I know, Ren.” Haru agreed.

Haru was still smiling at the twins.

“I’m very tired,” he said, “If it’s ok, I think I should lay down. Where do you two want to sleep?”

“Can I stay with you, Haru?” Ren asked.

Haru nodded.

“Ran can take my room,” Sousuke offered, “I can sleep on the floor in your room again, Haru. My stuff is already set up there anyways.”

Haru looked up to meet Sousuke’s eyes, then looked away quickly.

“If you want.”

The next day, Makoto was feeling a bit more energetic. Haru stayed by his side all day but everyone else came in smaller groups and didn’t stay quite so long. What made Makoto so happy was that Sousuke had appointed himself the official Tachibana keeper. An hour after Haru arrived in the morning, Sousuke led Makoto’s parents and the twins into Makoto’s room.

Upon seeing Sousuke, Haru tensed up badly and looked anywhere but at Sousuke.

Something had happened.

Makoto could tell.

“Onii-chan!” Ren and Ran cried happily as they came and sat on Makoto’s bed, “Look what we brought you!”

They had a packet of chocolate mochi, Makoto’s favorite, and several huge bars of Makoto’s favorite chocolate bars. They knew him so well!
“Thank you so much!” Makoto said happily as he accepted their gift, “I hope you two were planning to help me eat this!”

“Of course we were!” Ren laughed, “Now let me tell you how bad Sousuke is at Mario Kart!”

Makoto listened, but he was paying more attention to Haru.

Something was definitely wrong. Had they gotten into a fight?

“Sousuke has agreed to show us around Shibuya a bit,” Makoto’s dad announced after several extensive stories told jointly by Ren and Ran of yesterday’s adventures, “We’ll come back for dinner, Mako.”

“Thanks for coming, you guys!” Makoto said as Ren and Ran gave him a big hug, “See you for dinner! Sousuke, could I talk to you for a bit first?”

Sousuke stayed behind as Makoto’s family went to wait in the hall. He looked confused. Haru looked guilty.

“Okay, what happened?” Makoto asked, once they were alone.

Haru looked away, “It’s nothing.”

But Makoto could tell it was obviously not nothing.

“Sousuke, what happened?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked innocently.

“For weeks you two have been avoiding each other and now Haru gets really tense when you’re around. I’ll ask again, Haru, what happened?”

“I talked to Rin.” Haru said quietly.

“WHAT!?” Makoto yelped, “You told him Sousuke was here!?”

“No. I just talked to him about swimming and about Sousuke on Skype. And Sousuke heard everything.”

Makoto frowned, “Haru, that wasn’t very fair to either of them.”

Haru pointedly looked out the window, his cheeks flushing red.

“That’s not all, is it Haru?”

For a long time Haru was quiet. Makoto looked to Sousuke for help, but he was just as bewildered as Makoto.

“Sousuke’s been really nice to me since you came into the hospital.” Haru finally mumbled.

Makoto sighed, “As much as he likes to pretend he isn’t, Sousuke is a very nice guy, Haru.”

“You would do the same if our situations were reversed,” Sousuke said defensively, “I mean you
didn’t seem capable of functioning and I can see how important Makoto is to you. I couldn’t just let you suffer.”

“But that’s the point, I wouldn’t have done the same for you,” Haru said, his voice suddenly rising in pitch, “I mean, when I made you listen to Rin and I talk about you, I was only thinking about Rin. You’ve said several times that you aren’t ready to face him yet but I didn’t care about your feelings at all. I only cared about Rin. But since Makoto came into the hospital, you’ve done so many nice things for Makoto but you’ve also done a lot of nice things for me. I should have been the one to go meet Makoto’s family and take them around and arrange everything because that’s my job, but you’ve done it all. You’ve also made sure I was alright with Yasutomo last night and sleeping on the floor next to me and everything. I just don’t get it. Why would you do these things for me, especially if you’re mad at me? You and I have never liked each other, so why?”

Sousuke turned a furious shade of red. Makoto reflected that he’d probably never heard Haru say so many words at once, certainly not so passionately.

Haru must be very upset to burst out like that.

“Well, you drive me crazy most of the times and you are a huge jerk,” Sousuke explained awkwardly, “but I…uh…still think of you as a…friend. Seeing you with Makoto and finding things for myself outside of swimming have kind of made me forget how jealous of you I was and that’s helped. And, um, now I don’t like seeing you feel bad.”

Haru looked absolutely stunned.

Makoto had a hard time containing a squeal of delight.

Sousuke looked like he wanted to hide under the bed.

“You were still jealous of me?” Haru whispered.

Sousuke nodded, “Rin left Sano Swim Club for Iwatobi Swim Club and obviously it felt like he was leaving me for you. Because that’s what he was doing. And when he came back, he sought you out, not me and it was the miracle relay he swam with you guys that saved him, not me. I was his rival until you became a better one. I was so jealous of you for so long because it seemed like you were going to live my dream with the person of...my dreams.”

Makoto smiled at how embarrassed Sousuke suddenly looked. He really just might be cheesy enough to satisfy romantic ass Rin.

“But living with you guys and seeing how you are together,” Sousuke continued, “I mean, it’s pretty obvious how much you love each other. Maybe once there might have been something for me to worry about with you and Rin, but now it’s obvious you’re all about Makoto. You’re living your own dream with the person of your dreams so I don’t really have any reason to be jealous of you anymore. And I’ve finally found my own dream now anyways that isn’t about swimming.”

Haru was speechless and Makoto knew he shouldn’t interrupt, no matter how much he wanted to beg them to hug already.

Sousuke felt he needed to explain himself more. It was cute seeing him get so flustered.

“I mean…so...like Makoto and Kisumi are so friendly and open all the time, like dogs or something, but Haru, you and I both are pretty independent in nature and we don’t get along with people as easily, a lot more like cats I guess, so I think we kind of understand each other, in a way, because of that...and…”
“I’m sorry for the Skype call,” Haru interrupted before Sousuke had to stumble his way through anymore.

Sousuke blinked in surprise, then broke out into a big, relieved smile.

“It’s alright, Haru,” he said warmly, “I hadn’t heard his voice in years. Hearing it again was a wake up call that yes, he really was still out there and not just a figment of my imagination. And the things he said and those playlists…it kind of gave me some hope. I know I’m being frustrating and I know I should just suck it up and do it already, but I’ve hurt him a lot and I need to make up for everything. Just…he’s my Makoto and when you and Makoto got in a fight, you ran away to Australia. Just to put it in perspective. I will present myself to him; I just need to figure out the best way how. I’m very nervous about doing it perfectly. And as it’s Rin, I want to do it in a way that will sweep him off his feet.”

Haru smiled, “He’d like to be swept off his feet.”

“Oh you two!” squealed Makoto, unable to contain himself any longer. Both Sousuke and Haru looked at Makoto, startled, but upon seeing the ecstatic look on Makoto’s face, they both turned their heads away and blushed hard.

If Makoto had been able to, he would have jumped up and hugged them both so hard.

Later that night, Sousuke was coming back from a convenience store with drinks for everyone when he ran into Yasutomo in the hall.

“Hey there, Tomo, you leaving?” Sousuke asked.

“Yeah, my mom is insisting I come home for dinner at least, but Kisumi and I are going to go see a movie later. You know, give Makoto some time with his family.”

Sousuke smiled. Truthfully, he’d been smiling all day, what with things with Haru getting cleared up and having such a good time with the Tachibanas.

“You’re in a good mood,” Yasutomo observed coyly.

Sousuke laughed and rubbed his head, “It’s been really pleasant spending time with Makoto’s family. They’re very nice people. I can see why Makoto is who he is with parents like his!”

Yasutomo grinned.

“See, Sousuke, you aren’t really all that broken.”

Sousuke stared at Yasutomo for a long second before grabbing him and pulling him into a tight hug.

“Thanks, Yasutomo. For everything.”

"Sure." Yasutomo breathed.
As Sousuke walked down the hall, he thought about what Yasutomo had said.

Maybe there was some truth in it after all.

Maybe he wasn’t all that broken anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the lovely comments and thanks for reading :) You can find me on tumbler: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/tornadoquakes
Chapter Summary

Sousuke gets some good news so everyone goes to the beach.

Yasutomo and Kisumi were going to Kisumi’s place and Yasutomo was excited. For a month, Kisumi had wanted to study away from his apartment because Haru had been a bit of a nightmare since Makoto came home from the hospital. Yasutomo hadn’t seen Makoto, Haru, or…Sousuke since his last visit in the hospital. But now he would be seeing them again and, to make everything better, Kisumi and Yasutomo had taken their last finals for the spring semester. It was a night for celebrating the impending summer and Yasutomo was hopeful that Sousuke would come out with them.

He hadn’t forgotten Sousuke’s comment about liking someone with purple hair. Maybe Yasutomo was in store for some summer romance?

Before going up to Kisumi’s apartment, they stopped at the mailboxes and grabbed the mail for the apartment. Kisumi rifled through the various letters, stopping on one in particular.

“What’s that?” Yasutomo asked curiously.

“I’m not sure. It’s for Sousuke. Looks like it’s from a magazine.”

Inside Kisumi’s place, the air was sweltering. Outside, the day had been unseasonably warm for so early in June, but inside it was a positive oven. They found Sousuke lying on his back on the floor, reading a book with several fans encasing him in a cool air cocoon. Yasutomo swallowed hard.

Sousuke was only wearing a pair of boxer briefs.

Sousuke’s body was just as perfect as he’d imagined.

Even if physical therapy tape was covering up Sousuke’s right shoulder, his body was perfect.

“Here, Sou, this came for you.” Kisumi said as he slapped the letter down on the kotatsu. Sousuke rolled over onto his stomach, like he was in some freaking underwear ad, grabbed the letter, and opened it. When Sousuke got to the end of the letter, his eyes grew huge and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

“What’s wrong, Sousuke?” Kisumi asked. Sousuke looked up and let his hand drop from his mouth, revealing the most beautiful smile that went straight to Yasutomo’s groin.

Sousuke actually laughed as he sprang up, ran to Kisumi, and wrapped him in a huge, bear hug.

“Sousuke, seriously what the…”
Kisumi wasn’t able to finish his thought because Sousuke began twirling him around, as though Kisumi was a little rag doll and not the very tall, muscular guy he was.

Sousuke let Kisumi go then, for the most sublime, perfect moment, he hugged Yasutomo close to his bare chest. Immediately, Yasutomo was engulfed with Sousuke’s scent – something like sweat, fire, metal, pine trees, and soda. His skin was so warm and he could feel Sousuke’s heart racing in his chest. Right in front of Yasutomo’s nose was a pattern of light moles in the shape of a star on his chest. It was amazing he could perceive so many details because Yasutomo’s entire body was buzzing with adrenaline. Yasutomo never wanted Sousuke to let him go.

Unfortunately for Yasutomo, the hug lasted only a second and soon Sousuke had let him go. Next thing Yasutomo knew, Sousuke was dashing away to his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Now what the hell was in that letter?” Kisumi laughed as he opened the freezer, grabbed two popsicles, and handed one to Kisumi.

A second later, Haru emerged from his room and gave the both of them a withering look.

“Will you two keep it down? Makoto needs his rest.”

From inside their room, Makoto groaned loudly.

“Haru, I’m not even tired! Please let me go do something! I’m so bored, my stomach is fine, and it’s so nice out!”

“Maybe tomorrow, Makoto,” Haru said as he closed the door, “You need your rest. Here, have some more chocolate. You like chocolate.”

“Haaarrrruuuu…” Yasutomo could hear Makoto whine, even through the closed door.

Finally, Makoto did succeed in persuading Haru to let him out and while Haru made a large dinner for everyone (Makoto needed lots of food to keep up his strength), Makoto played videogames with Yasutomo and Kisumi. It made Yasutomo smile to hear Makoto grumble about Haru’s particular, high calorie brand of care. When Haru finished cooking and everyone was settling in to dinner, Sousuke finally emerged from his room. Much to Yasutomo’s dismay, he’d put on clothes.

“You look happy.” Haru remarked as Sousuke came to take a seat at the kotatsu. That was an understatement; Sousuke was positively beaming.

“Something exciting happened today!”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” Makoto asked.

“Well, I, uh,” Sousuke suddenly turned pink, “When I was traveling, in the last six months or so, I started writing a couple short stories. I, um, have been working on them since being back and a few months ago, I started sending them to literary magazines to see if I could get them published. I got a response from Gunzo today. They entered one of my stories in their new writer’s contest and I won.”

“Really!?” Makoto gushed, “Sousuke, that’s so exciting! Congratulations!”

Sousuke smiled both with embarrassment and pride, “Thanks! There's going to be a press conference
and everything! I'm just like Fuka-Eri in *IQ84*.

“So is this the dream you’ve found for yourself?” Haru asked, giving one of his rare smiles to Sousuke and not picking up on the Haruki Murakami reference, “You want to be a writer?”

“Well, that’s half of it.” Sousuke said but quickly stuffed his mouth with a dumpling before he had to say anything else.

“Congratulations Sou!” Kisumi laughed, “Now how are we going to celebrate?”

For a split second, Yasutomo hoped Sousuke would say go out to a gay bar so they could dance all night together.

Sousuke swallowed his dumpling and grinned, “Well, since it’s been so hot out, I would really like to go to the beach tomorrow.”

“Sousuke! That would be so fun!” Makoto cried happily. Then, he tensed up and looked at Haru guiltily, like he was a little kid who’d done something wrong.

“We can go to the ocean.” Haru said calmly.

“Really Haru? You’ve barely let me leave the house for anything but school since I came home from the hospital.”

“The sea air will do you good, Makoto.”

Kisumi leaned over and whispered loud enough so Yasutomo could hear, “I think Haru just wants to go swim in the ocean.”

Haru heard them too and gave them a pouty look, but he couldn’t deny that there was some truth to what they said.

Unlike at Iwatobi, going to the beach wasn’t as simple as walking a few hundred meters from your front door. After a bus ride and a long train ride, however, they finally made it to Shichirigahama and, as it always did, the sight of the ocean expanded Sousuke’s soul until it felt as wide as the horizon. But, as always, when Sousuke looked at a body of water, the phantom pain of his bad shoulder began to throb. However today, it didn’t hurt quite so much as usual. How could it? The day was perfect and, thankfully, there weren’t too many people on the beach because it was still quite early in the season.

Sousuke took a deep breath in, letting the salty air fill up his lungs and flooding his mind with memories of past days spent at beaches. Images of splashing in the waves with Ichirou, building sandcastles with Rin and Gou, of lying on foreign beaches with a good book all floated through Sousuke’s mind, each a pleasant memory shining brightly even in Sousuke’s darkest of days. Beaches were good places for Sousuke, he’d always felt quite connected to them.

“Come on, Sou!” Kisumi called. Everyone else was already walking down to the sand. Haru was far out ahead of everyone else and, as predicted, ready to go in his swimsuit.

Smiling, Sousuke walked down to the beach just as Haru hit the water.
“Oh my god, Sou! What’s that?”

Kisumi was pointing to Sousuke’s exposed shoulder; it had faded since Makoto had first seen it, but the white lines of the ‘traitor’ kanji stood out starkly in the bright sunlight. Instinctively, Sousuke hunched his shoulder up and tried to cover it.

“My misery scars,” Sousuke mumbled. It would have been pointless to deny their existence.

“Dude…” Kisumi said sadly then closed his mouth. He was at a loss of words.

“It’s from a long time ago, when I was at my worst.” Sousuke tried to explain, though he could feel his cheeks grow hot.

“It was a long time ago and Sousuke isn’t that person anymore,” Makoto said confidently as he clapped Sousuke on his left shoulder.

“Right.” Sousuke agreed, “I’m not that person anymore.”

Kisumi looked at him for a while, then broke into a smile.

“Okay then. Miyashi, are you ready to show off those volleyball skills you are always bragging about?”

“Absolutely! I wasn’t ranked the top setter in my prefecture for nothing! Minami, you’re on my team and Yasutomo, you’re on Kisumi’s.”

The four of them went to set up the small, portable net they’d brought and while Sousuke summoned up the courage to let go and reveal his bare, hideous shoulder to the world, Makoto watched the volleyball game in pleasant silence. He looked like he wanted to join, but from the glances he kept throwing out to the water, Sousuke guessed he didn’t want to incur the wrath of Haru by joining in a physical activity and thus bring Haru out of his beloved ocean. Sousuke looked down at Makoto’s abdomen. It had been more than a month since the stitches came out, but the surgery lines were still an angry red. Those scars would last. From the way Makoto was sitting, it was obvious his stomach was still hurting him. Makoto caught Sousuke staring and gave Sousuke a big smile.

“Guess you aren’t the only one with scars now.”

Sousuke nodded. Makoto looked down at his stomach and sighed heavily.

“I sure have gotten fat since I had surgeries. Haru just keeps giving me more chocolate and I really like chocolate.”

Makoto had packed on a few kilos and his muscles weren’t quite as well defined as they used to be. But it wasn’t that bad, really. He still had a body most everyone else would kill for and some regular exercise would get him back into shape quickly.

“Hey, Sousuke…” Makoto said quietly, diverting Sousuke’s attention away form Makoto’s admittedly beautiful abdomen. Sousuke looked up to see a warm smile and a twinkle in those emerald eyes, “Do you want to come swim with me? We won’t go in very far so you won’t have to use your shoulder.”
Sousuke’s eyes widened in alarm. Since his fateful surgeries, he’d not immersed himself fully in water once. He’d been to plenty of beaches, but he hadn’t ever left the safety of the sand.

“I don’t know, Makoto…”

“I’ve always been afraid of the ocean and I wouldn’t trust myself to swim at all, but it would be nice to feel the water, don’t you think?”

Sousuke looked out to the water, the pain in his shoulder increasing as he seriously contemplated swimming. But his body had other, far pleasanter memories of being in water too. Sousuke hadn’t felt the joy of floating in years, hadn’t reveled in the light catching on water droplets as they rolled off his skin. He wouldn’t ever feel the satisfaction of victory again, but it was possible he could still feel the peace that went all the way through him. That feeling was what had caused him to fall in love with water in the first place.

“Okay…” Sousuke finally agreed, “But not too far out. I don’t want you to hurt yourself and I can’t take strokes with my arms.”

So Sousuke took off his aviators and put his beach read down; he turned, for the first time in a very long time, to the sea.

Together, Makoto and Sousuke walked down to the water’s edge. Makoto went straight in so the water lapped against his ankles, but Sousuke hesitated. His heart was suddenly racing. Scared, he looked up at Makoto, who was watching him with an encouraging smile. Cautiously, Sousuke took a step forward so the water touched his big toe.

A thrill went through Sousuke upon contact with the water. No shower, bath, or hot spring had felt as wonderful as a pool and no pool had ever felt as wonderful as the ocean. Closing his eyes, Sousuke took another step forward. Then another.

The wind kicked up, ruffling Sousuke’s hair, caressing the back of his neck, whispering that this was right where he belonged. And the voice saying these things, he imagined that it was Rin’s.

Sousuke opened his eyes again to the vast blue, where the sky and the sea melded into one perfect realm of peace.

Sousuke sighed long with contentment.

A piece he hadn’t know was missing before seemed to fall into place within Sousuke.

“Let’s go in a bit deeper,” Makoto suggested and Sousuke followed him further out.

The water was up to their chests when the merman appeared.

“Makoto, you aren’t going any further than that.” Haru warned.

Makoto looked like he wanted to argue, but seeing the look on Haru’s face changed his mind.

“That’s fine, Haru.”
“Sousuke you could swim out more if you want.” Haru said.

“But my shoulder…”

“You don’t need to take strokes, but I’m sure you could go on your back and kick. I could stay by you if you’re worried.”

Sousuke looked at Haru, trying to work out whether he was teasing him or not, but Haru’s offer was genuine.

“Go on, Sousuke,” Makoto urged, “Haru will keep you safe.”

“Alright then, Haru.”

So Sousuke pushed off the bottom and gave a few kicks before turning around onto his back.

To feel weightless again made Sousuke feel, for the first time, how very heavy the burdens he’d been carrying around with him for so long actually were. Since he’d decided to stay, they’d lessened but they were still there. In that moment, suspended in the tranquil embrace of his favorite element, Sousuke understood how pointless those burdens really were. Just because his shoulder was finished didn’t mean he still couldn’t experience the joy being in the water had always given him. Just because his family had thrown him out didn’t mean he couldn’t form a new family of his friends, a family that accepted him for everything that he was. Just because he’d never stand on the Olympic podium with Rin didn’t mean he hadn’t found things for himself outside of swimming that made him even happier.

And just because an ocean separated him from Rin did not mean he couldn’t cross that ocean and be reunited with his heart once again.

Tentatively, Sousuke raised his arms above his head and waited to see how that felt. As there was no pain, he moved his arms together and clapsed his hands in a streamline, giving a few powerful dolphin kicks to propel himself forward. Then, in an act of pure joy, Sousuke pulled with his hands so he could do a backflip down into the water.

As he floated underwater, snatches of song lyrics from Rin’s playlists floated through his head, making it almost feel like Rin was here with him, whispering how he felt into his ear. Years of separation hadn’t stopped Sousuke from loving Rin, but they had changed that love into something even greater, something more joyful now than painful. For so long, he’d told himself again and again that Rin would never love him, but then he heard the Skype call and, more importantly, had listened to each and every one of Rin’s songs until the words were tattooed onto his heart. If these songs were really how Rin felt, then Rin loved him too. Maybe Rin was just a sap for love songs, but Sousuke thought not. You could almost trace the evolution of Rin’s feelings through the play list and Sousuke had often marveled that Rin’s feelings too had grown into something more.

In the embrace of the ocean and listening to the music of Rin’s love in his head, Sousuke felt one last thing fall away from him. He’d been nursing so much fear that Rin would be too angry with him to hear what Sousuke had to say so Sousuke had stalled. But that was mostly Sousuke’s own fear speaking, not Rin’s heart. The songs Rin had chosen for him told a different story. Hadn’t he made Rin wait long enough? Hadn’t he made himself wait long enough? Even if Rin didn't want anything
sexual or romantic, they were still best friends and Sousuke missed him so freaking much.

When Sousuke kicked himself back up to the surface to breathe and began treading water, the chorus of Ray LaMontagne’s song, You are the Best Thing began to play in his head. This song was off the playlist he’d been secretly making for Rin. It fit how Sousuke felt about Rin better than anything because it was true. Sousuke was everything that he was because of Rin. It was because of Rin he’d finally stopped running and it was because of Rin that he’d finally stopped living in the shadows of his father and the medal podium he’d now never climb. It was because of Rin that he’d finally, finally found friends after so long alone. And it was because of Rin that Sousuke needed to stop hiding.

For an impressively long time, Sousuke was able to splash around, thinking and planning, while Haru floated nearby, keeping a watchful eye on Sousuke. All too soon, the phantom pain in Sousuke’s shoulder became a real ache and Sousuke decided it was time to head back in. He kicked until he reached Makoto, who’d been watching them the entire time, and brought his feet down so he was standing next to Makoto. Haru swam up, wrapping himself gently around Makoto like a jellyfish.

“Haru, Makoto…” Sousuke said. Both of them turned to him.

He had their attention.

“I’m ready to face Rin. I don’t want to hide anymore. I have a few ideas about what I could do, but I would like your help reaching out to him.”

Both of them broke out into smiles which Sousuke reciprocated.

“You want us to help?!” Makoto asked excitedly.

Sousuke laughed, “If you don’t mind. Maybe a joint effort would work best because I’ve not been doing a very good job by myself. If you guys could, uh, talk to him maybe?”

“You’re giving us your permission to talk to Rin about you?” Haru asked.

Sousuke nodded, “Just to open things up. I’ve started something to give him and I want to be the one to explain things to him— it can’t be anyone but me – but it would be great if you guys could start the conversation. If the opportunity presents itself, of course; I don’t want Rin dropping everything and interrupting his training to fly to Japan because we all know he would.”

“Alright.” Haru agreed, “We can open the conversation. When the opportunity presents itself.”

Makoto was smiling too hard to say anything. From the shore, they all heard their names being called and they all turned to see Kisumi, Yasutomo, Miyashi, and Minami splashing out into the water to come join them. Before they arrived, Sousuke turned back to Makoto and Haru.

“Thank you, both of you,” Sousuke said, the warmth of love flooding over him for the wonder couple whom he was happy to call his friends, “I’m ready to see him again.”
Their beach day was one of the happiest Sousuke could remember. The ocean had purified him, washing him clean of every bad thought and feeling he’d been trapped by for so long. But now he felt free. What was left of Sousuke was a dazzling bright hope he held in his heart for the future, for the life he was making for himself, for the life he didn’t feel ashamed to present Rin with. While the others packed, Sousuke took a soda to the water’s edge and waded out to his ankles. Warm orange light washed over him and Sousuke felt it seep through his pores, into his soul.

He was happy.

He was ready.

“I’m coming back to you Rin,” he whispered into the sunset, “it won’t be long now.”

He cracked open the soda and took a nice long drink.

He could feel it in his bones; he would see Rin very soon.
4:23 P.M - “Haru, I don’t think this is a very good idea.”

“Come on, Makoto, I want to see the end of this as much as you do. Rin asked me if he could stay with us for a few days for this swim meet. Sousuke asked us to help and the opportunity just presented itself, so it’s okay right?”

“I know, but I still think we should have asked Sousuke before just springing this on him. Why is Rin coming to Tokyo for this meet, anyways? I thought you said it wasn’t a very big swim meet, just some local teams?”

“Yeah, I don’t know either. It’s more for practice than actually competing.”

“Look, there he is!”

“He’s coming from Iwatobi?”

“I guess.”

“Rin!”

“Rin.”

“Haru! Makoto! Good to see you guys! It’s been so long!”

4:00 P.M – Sousuke was finally off work and so ready for the weekend. The week had been pretty rough because he’d worked overtime for three of those days and he’d been burning the midnight oil at the studio. Although the beach had energized him, Sousuke still was ready for a few days off. He’d probably spend most of the weekend working at the studio, trying to finish what he'd been working on. It was so close to getting finished, Sousuke was getting really excited. It was, of course, part of his plan for Rin and he was trying really hard to get it finished as quickly as possible. But tonight, all Sousuke wanted to do was take a nice long cold shower, fall into bed with a book, and sleep. If he went home right away, he’d go to sleep too early and then wake up tomorrow at the crack of dawn and throw off his entire day. It would be better if he spent a few hours at the studio first, then he could go home and feel alright about passing out. So tired as he was, Sousuke headed
off to the studio.

4:42 P.M – “There’s my bag guys, we are good to go!”

“Rin, you flew from Iwatobi?”

“Yeah Haru, I needed to go home for a few days.”

“Is everything alright, Rin?”

…

“Rin, what happened?”

“Oh its my mom. She, um, got in a car accident on Monday and I was closer than Gou.”

“Oh no, Rin! Is she alright?”

“Not really, Makoto. Her head was injured and she lost the use of her left eye. She has to wear an eye patch now.”

“Oh Rin, I’m so sorry to hear that!”

“Thanks Makoto. She started dating a guy and he’s really nice. He’s been taking really good care of her. It’s just…Haru, I know we have a swim meet in the morning, but would it be cool if we went swimming for a bit before we go to your apartment? I didn’t get to swim at all this past week and I could really use it. Would that be cool?”

“Sure, Rin.”

“I’ll swim too, I haven’t been swimming in way too long.”

“Can you swim alright with your appendix stuff?”

“Makoto I don’t want you swimming.”

“Ah, Haru, I’ve gained so much weight since I had the surgeries and it’s mostly because you keep feeding me tons of chocolate.”

“But I like you a little squishy.”

“Well I don’t like me squishy!”

“Ha! You two haven’t changed at all.”

5:31 P.M – Sousuke surveyed his work. It wasn’t turning out how he wanted at all and it was making him angry. He was just too tired, it was pointless to continue. Sousuke began to put away his
tools. Something about today was just not working out for him. At work, he'd nearly gotten himself into a pretty bad accident and he was just ruining stuff here. That was fine, though, he had all day tomorrow and he was always better on Saturdays. What Sousuke needed right now was to give up on the day and get himself a beer.

5:50 P.M – “Ah Haru, thanks for bringing me to your pool! I felt desiccated!”

“Wow someone learned a new word.”

“Shut up, Haru!”

“Desiccated…”

“Listen, Haru. I wanted to talk with you about something.”

“Sure.”

“So…this whole thing with my mom shook me up pretty bad and, uh, I think it’s time for me to come home. I wanted to come see you to see what you would think about me swimming on your team.”

“You’re coming back to Japan?”

“Yeah. I mean I’ve proven all I needed to prove in Australia and, you know, I’ve been away for a really long time. I would come to Tokyo, but I would really like to be closer to my mom. To, uh, take care of her. I could talk to other swim teams, of course, but it would be something to be on a team with you again. We haven’t been teammates since high school.”

“We could talk to my coach this weekend.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“No. It would be good.”

“Awesome!”

“Look at Makoto, Rin.”

“Yeah, he’s swimming backstroke. What of it?”

“Can’t you tell how slow he’s going?”

“It just looks like he’s going easy.”

“He looks like he’s in pain. I shouldn’t have let him swim yet. He hasn’t recovered enough.”

“Haru, he looks fine. Maybe slower than he used to be, but he doesn’t train anymore does he?”

“He swims with a recreation league for fitness.”

“Haru, he looks fine. Stop worrying.”
“I don’t want him getting hurt anymore. I think we should go. Are you ready?”

“Sure. We’re going to be swimming all day tomorrow anyways.”

“Makoto.”

“Ah, Haru! It feels so nice to swim again!”

“How’s your stomach?”

“It’s a lot tighter than I had expected. It will probably take a while before it feels good again. But the sooner I start working out again, the sooner I’ll feel back to normal.”

“I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“I’ll take it easy, Haru. Don’t worry.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I do like you squishy, though.”

“Haru! Don’t tickle…hahaha!”

“Oh my god, you two, enough already! Can we go?”

6:23 P.M – Sousuke polished off his beer and waved the bartender down for the check. One of his favorite things to do was sit at a bar by himself, have a beer, and watch everything going on around him. Usually, there was some first date to observe or a group of people out for a fun night. He'd spent many pleasant evening, imagining stories for the people all around him. But this bar was a huge let down in the drama department; another beer wouldn’t change the situation. Nothing really seemed to be working out for Sousuke tonight. Maybe if he went home, Kisumi and Yasutomo would be there. They usually were down to do stuff. Sousuke paid his tab and headed out the door. Good thing he lived only a few minutes away.

6:25 P.M – “Hey Rin, I should warn you about something…”

“What’s that Makoto?”

“Uh…”

“What, do you guys have a really crappy roommate or something I should know about?”

“No it’s not that we have a crappy roommate…”

“We have a surprise for you, Rin.”
“A surprise? From Haru? Really?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds fun! What is it?”

“If we told you it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Haru’s right. But we promise it’s good, Rin!”

“Well I could use something good. I’ve had a pretty crappy week. You know my mom’s dating someone? I mean she hasn’t dated anyone since my dad died so it’s good that she’s found someone nice to keep her company, but it’s just really weird. This the train we need?”

“Yeah, we’re just a few minutes away.”

“You sure your roommates don’t mind if I crash with you two?”

“Our roommates are dying to see you!”

“What? Really? What do your roommates know about me, Makoto?”

“Oh! Uh, we talk about how great you are all the time, obviously! Haru’s famous rival!”

“Okay… You alright, Makoto? You’re acting kind of weird.”

“Am I?”

“Makoto’s fine. He just needs some chocolate. Let’s get on the train.”

“After you, Haru.”

6:34 P.M – As Sousuke walked home, he listened to one of the playlists Rin had made him. Stupid as it sounded, music had sort of lost its appeal without Rin. But since Haru had given Sousuke Rin’s playlists, Sousuke had been listening to music non-stop, catching up on all Rin’s favorites that he’d missed. But even this playlist felt unsatisfying to him today. God, what was with him!? Oh well, Sousuke thought as he began walking up the steps to his apartment, there was always tomorrow. It was better to admit the day a defeat and hope for better tomorrow.

6:35 P.M – Rin smiled as he watched Makoto fumble with the keys to their apartment.

“Come on, Makoto,” Haru said irritably, “Why is it taking you so long?”

“I’m sorry, Haru! They just aren’t working for me.”

“Here.” Haru gently pushed Makoto to the side so he could take over.
The shock when they'd come out as a couple had lasted all of two seconds and even now, years later, Rin couldn't remember what it was like when they weren't together. It was sweet, really, and he knew Haru loved Makoto in his own way. While Haru and Makoto worried about the door, Rin leaned against the railing and thought about everything that had happened in the last week.

Loosing one parent had been hard enough but nearly loosing the other, well it had been a huge wake up call. For so long, his entire life had been about pursuing his swimming dreams and he'd left a lot of people behind during his pursuit. It had been probably a year since Rin had seen Haru and Makoto together and it just compounded the feeling his visit back home had left him with.

People were precious and once they were gone, they were gone. Rin's greatest weakness was that he had a tendency to forget how precious people were and, consequently, those people had a tendency of disappearing from his life.

And there was no better example than Yamazaki Sousuke.

Rin frowned, remembering the dinner he'd had with Yamazaki Ichirou earlier that week, where they'd talked all this out. It was the same conversation they'd been having for nearly four years, but it never seemed to be over. Their conclusion, of course, was always the same.

They'd not appreciated Sousuke while they had the chance and so now Sousuke, who'd always been such a broody, sensitive, independent kid, was gone. And the more time that passed, the less likely it seemed that Sousuke would ever come back.

Maybe he was already dead.

Rin had missed his chance.

Footsteps on the stairs interrupted Rin's depressing thoughts and he looked reflexively towards the noise. The top of a dark head appeared on the stairwell, but before he could see who the person was, Haru succeeded in opening their front door.

“Home sweet home!” Makoto said pleasantly.

Haru went inside first, followed by Makoto.

Rin sighed and shouldered his bag. But before he followed the wonder couple in, a tall figure caught his eye and he turned to look back towards the stairs...

6:35 P.M - Walking along the balcony to his apartment, Sousuke took out his ear buds and wrapped them around his MP3 player, tucking Rin's music safely away for another day. He was just putting it in his back pocket when he heard a loud thump in front of him. He looked up…

“SOUSUKE!?”
“Rin!?"

Chapter End Notes

Hello wonderful readers!
This ends on a cliffhanger, but I very much need to take a break from this fic for a bit. Life, you know, plus I want to take a lot of time to write the next two chapters and do them perfectly :)

Anyways, thank you all so much for reading and thank you for all your wonderful comments :) I hope you've been enjoying reading this as much as I've been enjoying writing this :)}
Rin dropped his bag on the ground.

“SOUSUKE!?"

Rin was dreaming. He had to be dreaming.

Sousuke was somewhere far away, not at Haru and Makoto’s. Sousuke could even be dead. Whoever this was in front of him, it had to be some image he'd conjured up because his thoughts had strayed to Sousuke. It wouldn't be the first time. But no dream image of Sousuke had been such a perfect representation, none had lasted so long.

Dream Sousuke looked up and his strong jaw dropped open.

“Rin!?”

Would a dream answer back? None ever had before.

For a full minute, Rin couldn't do anything but gape at this Sousuke. A ghost...could this be a ghost? That would mean the real Sousuke was dead. Only ghost wouldn't be staring back at Rin, his mouth hanging open in shock. A ghost would probably not even notice Rin. And those eyes...they were such a familiar shade of teal. The ten-year-old kid he'd played cops with had those eyes, so did his buddy and roommate from high school. A ghost wouldn't have those eyes.

Rin took a step forward, then another, then another until Rin was standing right in front of this apparition. And those teal eyes followed his every movement and his mouth still agape with shock.

The only way to test if this version was real was to touch him, so Rin lifted a hand. But he hesitated midair. If Rin did touch Sousuke and found his flesh to be solid, then his long lost boy was finally back. But if he wasn't there, then what did that say about Rin? Had he lost too many people that he'd now cracked? That he was imagining Sousuke here of all places?

Rin let his hand fall down, suddenly too afraid to touch this Sousuke.

But there were details that were new to this Sousuke, he was older and bigger than any version Rin had known. And those eyes...there were new stories in those eyes, stories of sorrow and joy. Why would his imagination conjure up a perfectly aged Sousuke?

Rin had to touch him, the possibility of Sousuke being real was more exciting than Rin's dread of lost sanity.

So very slowly, Rin lowered a hand on Sousuke's chest.

Flesh and muscle, warmed by the afternoon sun, met Rin's touch, which in turn sent a shudder through Sousuke. Instantly, a wide smile cracked Rin's face nearly in half.

Sousuke was really here! He was really, really here!

All this time of looking and wondering and here he was!
“Oh Sousuke!” Rin half sobbed, half laughed as he threw his arms around Sousuke's neck and sobbed tears of relief and joy, "Oh Sou!"

What other reaction could be possibly have? Sousuke was alive!

For a good long while, Sousuke stood completely frozen, Rin draped around his neck.

He didn't know how, he didn't know why Rin was alone in front of his door, but what did it matter? He was here.

And he was hugging Sousuke.

He was happy to see Sousuke. He wasn't yelling or screaming or punching him.

He was happy...

Sousuke's limbs unfroze. Rin squeezed his neck tighter and Sousuke decided to brave it.

He lifted his arms and wrapped them around Rin. Rin's reaction was to burrow into Sousuke's neck. By now his body was shaking and Sousuke smiled, knowing that Rin was no doubt crying.

He'd always been such a crybaby.

Sousuke pushed his nose into Rin's hair, which was just as pretty and beautiful as it had always been. He smelled mostly of pool, but there was that underlying Rin smell that sent waves of an old feeling through Sousuke.

One of the reasons Sousuke preferred sleeping with dudes was because he liked the way they smelled more and no one, no one smelled as good as Rin.

Fuck.

Now Sousuke was crying!

Sousuke hugged Rin closer to him, too happy to form a coherent thought.

Sousuke’s heart was hammering fast against his chest, Rin could feel it, even through the mad beating of his own heart.

Rin’s mind couldn’t formulate any other coherent questions, he could only comprehend what his senses were experiencing and every one of them was focused completely on the impossible person in front of him, holding him.

For a long, long time, Rin was content to stay like this in Sousuke's arms, enjoying how solid and familiar they felt. The only thought that fully formed in his head was that if he let go or moved,
Sousuke would vanish again.

“Can it be that you really are my Sousuke?” Rin finally whispered.

Sousuke squeezed him tighter and a strangled noise escaped him.

Rin’s eyes finally snapped open at that sound. He reluctantly extricated himself from Sousuke so he could look into the face that had haunted him for so, so long.

He’d known Sousuke forever but not once in their entire life had he ever seen Yamazaki Sousuke cry.

Until now.

Sousuke was also smiling bigger and brighter than Rin had ever seen.

He’d never seen Sousuke so happy.

Underneath his tears, Sousuke’s eyes were a tangle of emotions that Rin, even with the years separating them, could pick individual strands of feelings out of. Yes, the overwhelming emotion at the moment was unfiltered joy the likes of which was so seldom seen in Sousuke, but Sousuke had always been made of complex layers and Rin could also see guilt, terror, confusion, and a tenderness he’d only ever shown Rin.

With his thumb, Rin gently brushed away a tear. Sousuke closed his eyes and let out a laugh that Rin had to reciprocate. When they’d grown quiet again, Rin gently guided Sousuke’s head down so their foreheads touched and closed his eyes too.

Sousuke was real and he was happy to see Rin. He wasn't blaming him for being a horrible friend and he wasn't accusing him for causing so much pain and being so cowardly before.

His Sousuke was simply happy.

As usual, Yasutomo was with Kisumi and they were heading home, hoping Sousuke was around to go get beers with. It was always a lot of fun when it was the three of them; it was really nice how well Sousuke got along with Yasutomo. But when Kisumi and Yasutomo came up the stairs, Kisumi was surprised to find Sousuke already standing in front of the door.

“Sousuke, what are you doing?”

Sousuke didn’t seem to hear.

“Sousuke? Everything alright?” Kisumi asked again.
This time, Sousuke heard him. He turned around.

There were two things Kisumi saw immediately. The first was that Sousuke – big, tough guy Sousuke who liked to get in bar fights and welded ships for a living – was crying. Seeing Kisumi, he was rubbing his eyes, trying to make it look like he wasn't blubbering like a baby, but Kisumi could plainly see through him. The second was that Sousuke wasn’t alone; a purple head was peeking out over Sousuke’s shoulder, looking at the intruder curiously. It took Kisumi all of three hundredths of a second to recognize Matsuoka Rin.

“Rin!” Kisumi called, waving wildly, “Oh man!”

Except for a very brief conversation at Nationals three years ago, Kisumi hadn’t seen Rin since he transferred from Sano to Iwatobi when they were in grade school. Therefore, it took Rin quite a bit longer to recognize Kisumi. Maybe half a second.

“Shigino Kisumi?”

Kisumi smiled warmly. As with pretty much every other guy, Kisumi had always wished he’d been better friends with Rin but with Rin, he wished harder than with anyone else. He’d always laughed and joked around all the time and everyone, even Kisumi, had gravitated towards Rin’s light and warmth. But no one had dared get too close to Rin because it was Sousuke – formidable, grumpy, and scary even in elementary school – who orbited Rin closest and who Rin shone brightest and hottest for.

“Hi Rin!” Kisumi greeted enthusiastically, “I haven’t seen you in ages!”

Rin frowned. Sousuke and Rin took a step toward Kisumi and Sousuke unconsciously pivoted to let him. Rin was still clutching onto Sousuke’s chest. Separated for so long and they were still as in synch as ever.

“Hi Kisumi,” Rin replied cautiously, “What are you doing at Haru and Makoto’s?”

Kisumi smiled, “I live here!”

Rin scowled. He turned to Sousuke, his face completely bewildered.

“What are you doing at Haru and Makoto’s, Sou?” he asked.

Sousuke looked down at Rin’s hand, still holding onto the front of his shirt.

“I live here too.” he mumbled

Rin felt like the ground had vanished beneath his feet and he was in a free fall.

“You live here?” he managed to choke out.

Sousuke wouldn’t look at him. His smile was gone.

“I do.”

Rin’s heart skipped a beat as the rumble of Sousuke’s deep voice and the meaning of his words
pierced him straight through.

He was living with Haru, Makoto, and apparently Kisumi too.

He spoke with Haru and Makoto often and not once had they so much as hinted that they’d seen Sousuke, let alone lived with him.

Rin let his hand drop away from Sousuke’s shirt and he took a step back it was only then, with the sudden absence of Rin, that Sousuke finally dared to meet Rin’s eyes. Desperate terror was now the dominant emotion because Sousuke could probably see what was just starting to sink in, the feeling that was slamming into Rin as hard as a tsunami

Betrayal.

“Since when?” Rin whispered.

Sousuke didn’t answer.

Rin grabbed the front of Sousuke’s shirt again and shoved him violently against the door frame.

“SINCE WHEN, SOU!?"

“We moved into this apartment in February,” Sousuke exclaimed, his hands clutching at Rin's wrists. Each syllable felt like a knife, “But Makoto found me at the beginning of December and I’ve been living with them since.”

Rin pushed Sousuke against the wall and took several steps back, needing to be out of Sousuke's space while he digested this.

It was June now.

Sousuke had been back for six months.

And not one word had Haru or Makoto said about Sousuke being with them.

Not one single word.

And Sousuke...Sousuke hadn't even...

Rin took another step back, nearly tripping over his bag again.

SIX MONTHS!
His best friends had been lying to him for six months.

Sousuke had been lying to him.

Hell, Sousuke had been lying to him for nearly four years.

This was too much.

Rin needed to do something. Otherwise he felt he would drown in the millions of questions and the rage that was beginning to well up in him. Rin looked down at the ground, his jaw clenching, his fists balled up against his sides.

“Rin.” Sousuke choked out.

Rin couldn’t look at Sousuke. He just couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, Rin.”

Before he said or did something he might regret later, Rin bent down and snatched up his bag before running through the open door of the apartment. He hid his face from Sousuke as he passed him.

He just couldn’t...

Rin came inside, ready to beat the crap out of Haru – the liar – but Makoto was the first one his eyes found and Makoto looked absolutely wretched, like he was about to cry. Haru was standing by his side, holding his hand, but it was hard to focus on Haru when Makoto looked like he was seriously about to cry.

Although Rin wasn’t as close with Makoto as he was with Haru, Rin still considered Makoto the nicest, most caring person Rin had ever known.

And even Makoto had lied to Rin too.

But somehow seeing Makoto look so terribly wretched made Rin feel both a thousand times worse, because even MAKOTO lied, and a thousand times better, because if Saint Makoto had lied for Sousuke, there must have been a very good reason.

Seeing Makoto on the verge of tears caused most of the wrath to seep out of Rin’s body, leaving behind so many confused emotions that Rin couldn’t even begin to untangle.

He was angry. He was worried. He was dying of curiosity.

Rin needed to be moving. Swimming, running, whatever…he just needed to be in motion. That
would help him through this confusion and try to make sense of everything.

“I’m going running,” Rin announced as he threw his bag down on the ground and rummaged in it for his running shoes. Neither Haru nor Makoto said anything as he changed out his shoes, but both pairs of eyes were on him. Thank goodness Rin was already wearing sweat pants and a tank top.

Rin stepped toward the door but Haru called out his name.

“I’ll come with you,” he said flatly, “Let me get my shoes.”

Rin made a noise of protest because he knew Haru would probably only make him angrier.

Haru had lied.

Yet at the same time, Haru was his best friend and since he’d taken him to Australia, Rin had found himself talking through everything with Haru, even if Haru did nothing but listen.

He needed Haru to listen.

He needed Haru to explain because Haru would tell him the truth if he asked directly.

“Fine.” Rin growled.

Thirty seconds later, Haru was ready to go and the two of them headed to the door.

Rin stopped before they went outside because there was Sousuke’s shoulder, sticking out in the door frame as though it were on display.

The sight of that shoulder brought back all the memories of the last time Sousuke had lied to Rin.

_Goddamn_ that shoulder!

How many freaking problems had it caused? How much was it responsible for this fucking mess? How much of it was the fault of Sousuke’s _fucking_ father?

A familiar feeling of despair clutched at his chest, making it hard to breathe for just a second.

How much of this was Rin’s fault?

_Goddamn_ _it_ Sousuke!

Rin stomped across the threshold of the apartment, his eyes drawn irresistibly towards Sousuke.

Rin _was_ furious with Sousuke.
After all, he’d disappeared and he’d hidden and he’d lied and he’d offered Rin no explanation and he’d made Rin worry and miss him. But dammit...Sousuke...

After all these years and with everything that had happened. Probably because of everything that had happened that they’d been through together.

Rin loved Sousuke more than ever.

But Rin was still so confused and angry.

But it was Sousuke.

Sousuke was a kite in a violent windstorm, anchored to the earth by only a thin line. And Rin was the one flying him.

When Rin went inside, Sousuke couldn’t move, he could barely take a breath. His entire consciousness had never been more focused on anything than it was now, on what was happening inside the apartment.

“I’m going running,” Rin declared.

Sousuke’s heart beat once.

“I’ll come with you,” Haru replied, “Let me get my shoes.”

Sousuke’s heart beat again.

“Fine.” Rin growled.

Sousuke let out the breath he’d been holding without realizing it.

Rin wasn’t so angry that he’d decided to leave.

Maybe, just maybe Rin would give him a chance to explain himself.

That’s all he deserved...a chance to explain himself....and maybe....

A minute later, Sousuke heard the unmistakable sound of two pairs of footsteps, coming towards him. Sousuke’s heart hammered against his chest.

The footsteps stopped again, right in front of Sousuke.

Gathering his courage, Sousuke opened one eye, then the next.
Rin was standing right in front of him, watching him. His face contemplative and cautious and concerned and confused, but the white-hot rage was no longer there.

Rin had never seen Sousuke look so scared before, he rarely looked very emotional at all.

Despite everything, Rin couldn’t see Sousuke look like that and not try to do something to help him. It was as much an instinct to help Sousuke when he was in trouble as it was to breathe.

Rin was at war with himself on whether to punch Sousuke in his lying face or to kiss him and comfort him. He settled on a gesture that was somewhere between the two.

Rin put up his fist.

Sousuke flinched, expecting and accepting that Rin was going to punch him. Rin couldn’t help but smirk while he waited the fifteen seconds it took for Sousuke to recognize what Rin was doing.

Cautiously, Sousuke raised his own fist and bumped Rin’s.

“You have a lot of fucking explaining to do, Sou.”

Yasutomo watched helplessly when Kisumi found Sousuke, with this stranger Rin, whom Kisumi apparently knew, hugging outside of their apartment. The first thing Yasutomo noticed was Rin’s hair.

Purple hair.

This guy Rin had purple hair.

The scene unraveled and Yasutomo could do nothing but stay with Kisumi and watch:

Rin left.
Rin came back.
Rin fist bumped Sousuke.
Rin said: “You have a lot of fucking explaining to do, Sou.”
Rin smiled.
Sousuke smiled.
Rin and Haru turned and walked towards the stairs, passing by Kisumi and Yasutomo.
Yasutomo turned towards Sousuke when they were gone, desperately clinging to the possibility that maybe, just maybe this wasn’t the guy Kisumi had alluded to before. But Kisumi had a smug look on his face that did not bode well. So instead Yasutomo watched Sousuke.

Sousuke watched Rin and Haru’s retreating backs.

Sousuke smiled.

Yasutomo could see who it was that had a hold of Sousuke's heart. And it wasn't Yasutomo.

Yasutomo told Kisumi he wasn’t feeling well and had to go.

Yasutomo went home, the train ride passed in a blur.

Yasutomo told his mom he wasn’t feeling well and wouldn’t be eating dinner.

Yasutomo fell down into his bed, pulled the covers completely over himself, and curled up in a ball.

Yasutomo cursed his hair for being purple and inspiring such a humiliating hope that the statuesque god that was Sousuke could possibly love him back. No one would ever love him back.

Yasutomo didn’t sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

Awwww I just couldn't leave it as a cliffhanger, had to get the SouRin boat rocking :)
So now I'll be taking a break from the fic :D The full reunion will probably take another two chapters so plenty more to look forward to...I love all the comments and thanks everyone for reading, hope you all enjoy!!! :D
Chapter Summary

Haru and Rin go for a run and remember their trip to Australia. Everyone goes out to eat. Rin and Sousuke have a chat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haru was good at swimming. He was not good at running.

Rin was good at swimming. Unfortunately, he was also quite good at running. Swimmers weren't supposed to be good on land, so what the hell Rin!?

It took a lot of effort for Haru to keep up with him. When Rin finally slowed down and stopped, Haru was gasping for air and barely able to stand. When he finally recovered enough to pay attention to something besides his burning lungs, he saw that they’d reached a nearby park. Rin was watching Haru, amusement winning out over anger.

Grudgingly, Haru admitted to himself that at least in this one thing, Rin was better than him.

“You okay there, Haru?” Rin asked with a smug smirk.

Haru shot him an angry look.

“I'm fine,” he spat in between gasps.

As Haru's breath came back to him, they fell into a deep silence and Rin's amusement faded away as he thought about why they were here.

Neither of them spoke for an uncomfortably long time; neither of them knew where to start.

Haru seldom minded silences, but this one was becoming unbearable. From the way Rin's shoulders were hunched and the angle of his eyebrows, Haru could see Rin was hurting and the worst part was, he knew he was at least partially responsible for this newest injury.

“I'm sorry for lying,” Haru finally blurted, watching Rin carefully, “I didn't want to hurt you.”

Rin’s face flashed furious.

“Then why did you do it, Haru? Why all this secrecy and lying?”

Haru scowled. This was going to be a tricky conversation because he had only promised to get the conversation started for Sousuke, he didn't want to say something he shouldn't.

“Sousuke was in bad shape and needed help,” Haru explained slowly, thinking about his words closely, "He threatened to leave Japan if we told you were he was and Makoto couldn’t let him leave like that. Don’t blame Makoto either. We did what we needed to do to help Sousuke. I didn’t say
anything because it would have upset you to see what he was like when we found him. Makoto and I thought this way, letting him get ready a bit, would make things better for you in the long run.”

His words were met with stony silence and Haru, who never regretted anything, suddenly doubted the wisdom of his actions. Had he been right to decide that Rin would be happier this way?

He hated feeling confused.

Rin was staring hard at the ground, waiting for Haru to continue. Well at least he was listening; when he and Makoto had heard the reunion from inside the apartment, Haru had been petrified that Rin wouldn't stick around for an explanation. But he had stayed and he was listening, so Haru continued:

“Makoto is Makoto and there is no way he was going to let Sousuke leave. He took really good care of him and it was Makoto’s idea for him to live with us, so Makoto could nurse him back to being a human. Sousuke wasn't my friend until recently, but I didn't want to see him go either because I got the feeling...”

Haru bit his lip and stopped speaking, the words suddenly too hard to say out loud, especially to Rin. He hadn't been able to voice his thoughts on Sousuke at all, even to Makoto who knew him inside and out.

Rin finally looked at Haru, his eyes wide with fear.

"You thought what, Haru?"

Haru gulped. He knew Rin loved Sousuke and he knew Sousuke loved Rin. But what he was going to say would no doubt drive them apart because Rin had worked so hard to get all the darkness out of his life. But really it wasn't Haru who was bringing this darkness and maybe by getting Rin used to the idea, it wouldn't be so hard when Rin and Sousuke would inevitably talk about it. Later.

“I thought he was suicidal,” Haru whispered, unable to meet Rin's eyes because he could imagine all too well what they must look like.

The silence that followed was one of the most profound silences that had ever been between them and Haru felt extremely uncomfortable. He wished he hadn't said it, but he'd promised to get the conversation started.

Some time later, Rin choked out a few words. “Do you think he is now?” he asked.

Haru was quick with his reply, “No.”

Haru finally plucked up his courage to look at Rin because Rin needed to see how sincere he was. Rin's face was frozen in horror and he was watching Haru desperately. But when Haru met his eyes and Rin recognized the truth, the horror of the moment mellowed out.

“Why not?” Rin asked quietly.

Haru smiled, thinking of how happy Sousuke had been when he'd found out about his story being published and how he'd been last weekend at the beach. The two of them had never been very close, but last weekend, while Haru swam near Sousuke and protected him from harm while Sousuke rekindle a long dormant romance with the water, Haru had never felt closer to the big idiot. Haru hadn't known or cared for Sousuke enough when they were in high school to see how much peace floating in water gave Sousuke and it was nice to finally have some understanding between them. Even with the years of physical and emotional pain Sousuke had from swimming, he was still happy to be in the ocean's embrace.
Water washed away everything from people, exposing their true selves, and what Haru had seen in the ocean that day was happiness, not pain.

But this wasn't something Haru could explain to Rin. It didn't matter though; Haru's smile seemed to convince Rin and he relaxed more.

“He’s found things for himself and he has friends since he came to stay with us.” Haru explained, unable to form his thoughts into effective enough words, "This past weekend he told Makoto and I that he was ready for you to know where he was and he asked us for our help talking to you. And then you came to Tokyo so it seemed like now was the time.”

Rin sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, “Are you one of these friends, Haru?”

Quietly, Haru answered that he was. Amazingly enough, Rin actually laughed.

“How did that happen?” Rin asked. Haru blushed, remembering the Skype conversation. He didn't want to bring that up if at all possible. Luckily, Makoto's appendix was easy to explain without the Skype conversation.

“He got Makoto to the hospital when his appendix burst and he took care of Makoto’s family so I could stay with Makoto. He was really nice to me even though I’d never been nice to him. Makoto had us talk out some issues Sousuke had with me so we’re friends now.”

“What things?”

Haru looked at Rin incredulously, but Rin refused to put the pieces together. They'd sworn never to talk about it, but it looked like Rin was going to make him break that vow.

"I don't think I need to remind you what you said in Australia,” Haru said darkly.

For a fraction of a second, Rin looked horrified that Haru had broken the taboo between them, but then his face turned guilty and he had to look away from Haru.

"I thought we said we'd never talk about that again..." Rin mumbled.

The second night in Australia, the night Haru had decided he was going to pursue swimming and care about his times, was a defining moment for Rin and Haru because that was the night they set the course for the rest of their lives, in swimming, in loves to be and to never be, and in friendship.

That day had been very happy and hopeful, leaving them both euphoric with the shining future they could now see together. Rin was so happy for Haru, he hadn’t even complained that the hotel wasn’t able to switch their room for the second night. Getting into bed again, Haru had wondered, why Rin had made such a big deal about them sharing a bed. After all, Haru did it all the time with Makoto. Wasn’t that normal?

But even as he climbed under the blankets, Haru knew the reason why he didn’t mind sharing a bed with Makoto was because of feelings a normal person wouldn’t feel for his best friend. And for the first time he wondered if maybe Rin had made such a fuss because of those same feelings, for Haru.
Nonetheless, they stayed up late that night, setting forth a golden future (with plenty of arguing about which of them would have a more golden future than the other). And it felt wonderful to Haru, excitedly imagining all the things he would get to see with Rin. Rin had spoken with his former coach and was officially coming back to Australia. Haru hadn’t had time to work out his plans completely yet, but listened happily to Rin describing all the places they’d travel together once they made it onto the Japanese National Team. That night, Rin reminded Haru of how he’d been during elementary school, when Rin had disturbed the quiet of his universe so profoundly. It was wonderful to see him like that again and Haru felt nothing but warmth as he watched Rin talk next to him, facing him in bed.

It was the closest Haru had ever felt to Rin.

Eventually, their conversation died down and Haru closed his eyes, sleep laying it's claim on him. That’s when he felt Rin’s hand lightly on his cheek.

His eyes snapped open immediately to find Rin watching him, the strangest expression on his face. Rin was trying to look playful and joking, but he couldn't pull it off effectively.

“You could swim here with me, Haru,” Rin said softly, gently tucking Haru’s hair behind Haru’s ear, smiling nervously.

Haru swallowed hard.

From the look on Rin’s face, Haru could tell this gesture was something Rin had given a lot of thought to.

The worst part of it was that the feeling wasn’t unpleasant. Rin’s hand had felt so warm and nice; his touch had sent a shiver down Haru’s spine. Vague possibilities went through Haru’s mind as Rin caressed his cheek.

But how nice it felt for Rin to touch him made Haru feel incredibly guilty because it wasn't Rin's hands he'd been dreaming about for almost a year now.

“I have to go to Tokyo.” Haru whispered back, squeezing his eyes shut again, waiting for the hand to go away.

He couldn’t bear to see what expression Rin wore now.

After a moment's pause, Rin’s hand had dropped away from Haru’s face and Haru shuddered from the lack.

“Why Tokyo?” Rin asked quietly. He was trying so hard to keep his voice even, but Haru had heard the strain.

For a long time, Haru couldn’t answer because he didn’t want to hurt Rin. And he didn’t want to say the reason out loud. It was too private. It was something he barely described with words to at all.

“It’s fine Haru,” Rin laughed, unconvincingly, “I was only joking about you coming to Australia! But tell me, why do you want to go to Tokyo?”

Haru owed Rin the truth. And even if it broke their hearts, Haru hadn't said it out loud to anyone before.
“Makoto.” Haru had finally mumbled.

Haru could still remember the hideous sound of Rin’s forced laugh, the sound of him turning over in the bed so he didn’t have to look rejection in the face. Maybe if it were anyone other than Haru, Rin might have been able to play his request off as a joke but Haru recognized it for what it was.

A declaration.

And Haru had rejected him by declaring his love for someone else.

He’d had no choice because every atom in his body yearned for Makoto all the time, but Rin...didn't deserve to be hurt by Haru anymore.

For both their sakes, Haru decided he wasn’t going to ever give the proper name to what had just happened. He'd never mention it again.

Haru turned around too, unable to face Rin. The bright, golden, silvery future they'd imagined together dissolved into darkness.

The air had become so heavy and Haru’s heart was still racing.

If only there was something else he could have done.

But he loved Makoto, even more than water.

And it was Rin who was going to suffer again.

What felt like a lifetime later, Rin broke the heavy, heartbroken silence.

“I’ve always wondered what was going on with you two.” he said quietly, "So you like him, like romantically and, um, sexually?”

Haru turned back around so he was looking at Rin’s back, wanting to reach out and comfort him, wishing he could do something other than break his rival’s heart.

But Haru had to be honest.

Because he wanted Makoto so, so much.

“Yes I do.”

Rin laughed again, though this time it sounded more natural, “I guess I should have known. Now I feel guilty whisking another guy’s boyfriend away to a foreign country!”

“Makoto is not my boyfriend.” Haru said quickly. His face suddenly felt hot.

In the middle of the night, when he allowed himself to indulge in thoughts of Makoto, it had never occurred to him to but a name to what he wanted to be for Makoto...

Boyfriend...

“But you want him to be more than just a friend?” Rin continued. His shoulders had lost some of their tension.
“Yes.”

Despite the situation, it made Haru feel incredibly light to say that out loud to someone.

“You want to have sex with him?” Rin asked.

“Yes. A lot.”

Contrary to all expectations, Rin began to roar with a laugh straight from the belly, the kind of laugh that was impossible to fake. Although Rin had been the one to practically confess his love for Haru and had been rejected, Haru was the one who felt humiliated. He wished he hadn’t answered Rin, he wished he’d never let the secret feelings he had for his best friend out.

But he had.

“Why are you laughing?” Haru demanded.

“Because!” Rin chuckled, “You aren’t the robot I thought you were! I really thought you might be asexual or water-sexual or something. And yet here you are, secretly wanting to bone your best friend!”

Haru was too embarrassed to say anything so he let Rin have his laugh.

He’d never talked about such things with anyone before and it didn’t feel good to have Rin react like this.

After at least a minute, Rin finally had it all out. When he was done, he turned around again so he was facing Haru.

He was smiling.

His heart wasn't broken.

“Does Makoto know this is how you feel?” he asked, smirking.

“No.” Haru said quickly.

“How come?”

“I don’t think he likes me like that.”

Rin reached out and Haru feared and half hoped Rin was going to stroke his face again. Instead, Rin punched Haru playfully in the shoulder.

“Come ON!!” he giggled, “How can you even say that!? Have you ever seen the way he looks at you? I’m sure if you talked to him about it, you'd find he's madly, madly in love with you too. You guys are practically married, everyone knows that.”

Rin continued laughing. Haru frowned.

Rin didn’t understand.

Eventually, Rin picked up on the insecurities rolling off Haru and he finally stopped giggling.

“Seriously Haru, you should talk to him,” he said seriously, “I’m sure he wants the same thing. You guys obviously care a lot about each other and I’m sure he feels the same way about you.”
“Makoto has been my best friend for as long as I can remember.” Haru said.

“Yeah, that’s why you have nothing to worry about. He’s got to have an even bigger crush on you than you have on him.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not? He obviously loves you.”

“I know he loves me. He told me.”

“See, Haru!”

Haru sighed, suddenly feeling very sad because that confession had come in the middle of The Fight. How could he ever face Makoto again after that?

“Makoto meant he loved me as a friend,” Haru explained, ”he said he, Nagisa, Rei, and you all loved me and you all wanted me to be happy. So he’s not interested in anything more with me. Things are already changing so much and he’s always been the most important person in my life. I don’t want to risk losing him by asking him to change things more, especially if he doesn’t want what I want. And I said such terrible things to him, I’m scared I’ve already lost him.”

A shudder went through Haru at the thought.

To say the things he’d said to Makoto, Haru was truly a terrible person. He’d never want to be Haru's friend again, much less anything more...

“Haru, Makoto cares about you more than anyone and he’s not going to let one little fight ruin your friendship,” Rin consoled, ”Hell, I’m sure this will bring you two even closer together. He’s been really worried and he does love you. He’s practically your husband already.”

Haru looked at Rin for a split second, then looked down at his hands clutching the blanket.

Haru had a hole in his heart that wouldn’t go away until Makoto fixed it and it was terrible how much Haru wished it was Makoto here instead of Rin. But tonight was a night of truth for Rin and Haru and he had a strong feeling it was a very important night.

“I’m happy for you Haru.” Rin said kindly, "I’m glad you feel that way about someone and there is no one better for you than Makoto.”

Haru frowned in confusion, remembering the feeling of the hand on his face.

“Then why did you ask me to come to Australia?” Haru asked.

Rin grew quiet.

“Well…” he stuttered, “I mean I do have feelings for you, but I never really thought I’d ever do stuff with you…”

Haru furrowed his eyebrow. Rin meant have sex. Seeing Haru’s confusion, he sighed because obviously he was going to need to explain:

“Like I said before, I’ve always admired you a lot and no one challenges me as much as you do. But honestly I never thought you’d be very interested in sex or even anything romantic and that was fine. I just would have liked to have you near me. And beat you swimming of course. Maybe every once in a while, you’d let me tell you how much you mean to me and I’d hug you for a bit. That’s what I
felt would be good for us.”

“That would be enough for you?”

Rin blushed furiously and laughed, “Well, if I had my ideal situation, you wouldn't be the only one with me.”

He looked at Haru, daring Haru to ask who he meant, but Haru remained silent, knowing that Rin was going to tell him either way.

“I’d want some kind of thing with you and…Sousuke,” Rin admitted, his voice strangely excited “You as my great rival and close friend and Sou as…everything else.”

Haru's eyes grew large with amazement.

“Everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Like sex?”

Rin laughed nervously and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Especially sex."

He beamed at Haru and Haru wondered how long Rin had been sitting on this secret. He wasn't like Haru; he couldn't just bottle up his feelings or keep them secret so Haru was confused.

“Don't get me wrong,” Rin continued, his voice becoming low and conniving, "you are really pretty and everything but Sousuke is fucking sexy. He’s just so big and since he came to Samezuke, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about having those nice long legs wrapped around me. And we share a room right. I can hear all the noises he makes at night and it kind of drives me crazy. In a good way. God in the best possible way. You have to admit, he is really, really hot. I had sex with someone at my first high school and it was a really awful experience. I vowed to myself I was never going to have sex with anyone ever again, but I think I’d like having sex with him. I trust him and I know he would be really nice about it.”

Rin began to blush and he suddenly became very interested with a frayed edge of the blanket.

"And Sousuke's my best friend too. He knows me better than anyone and he's such a good guy. You wouldn't think it when you first meet him because he likes people to think he's scary, but really he's so nice and so sweet. I do think about having sex with him a lot, but then I also really like sharing sodas with him and talking about music and just laying around on the floor, not doing anything. I like pretty much everything if I do it with him. It's dumb to say, but he's really such a big pillar for me, I know he'll always be there supporting me no matter what crazy shit I get myself into. He's been there with me for everything and I know he'll always be there for me. And I know he cares a lot about me too, the things he's done to swim with me..."

"Like with his shoulder?" Haru interrupted. Rin narrowed his eyes at Haru suspiciously before nodding.

"Yeah like with his shoulder...How did you know about that Haru?"

Tonight they were sharing, so Haru admitted to overhearing their conversation in the park, when Sousuke had finally revealed how wrecked his shoulder was and how he'd suffered and killed
himself just to have one last opportunity to swim with Rin. After Haru finished, they both fell quiet. Rin, because he was thinking about Sousuke's sacrifice and Haru, because he was forming a feeling into a thought.

"Rin," Haru said quietly, claiming Rin's attention once more, "You said it was clear how Makoto feels about me from how he looks at me and it's the same for Sousuke. It's probably more so because Makoto is nice and smiles at everyone, but Sousuke is only like that around you. And then Sousuke is so protective about you. He really hates me and he seems to enjoy threatening me. He only ever smiles when he's with you. But I guess I don't ever see him on his own unless he's there to threaten me about you."

"He threatened you? When?"

Haru sighed, "Do you remember the SplashFest at the Iwatobi Returns club? He threatened me to stay out of your way because I'd put you through a lot last year. And not that long ago, he told me I needed to keep swimming because I was important to you and I needed to move forward so you could be happy."

"He said that?"

"Yeah. He cares about you a lot and you've been a lot happier since he came to Samezuka."

Unable to disagree, Rin remained silent.

"Rin."

"Yeah?"

"I think Sousuke might be in love with you."

Rin turned onto his back and stared up at the ceiling.

"Do you think you might love him too?" Haru ventured to ask. If it were anyone else, Haru wouldn't have felt right asking. But tonight, Haru had revealed his deepest secret to Rin and the normal rules seemed suspended.

"I'm not sure, Haru. I mean of course I love him, he's the best friend I've ever had, but I can't tell how far those feelings go. How I feel is really complicated because you and him and swimming are a big tangled mess inside me. I don't know if you are right about Sousuke's feelings for me, but I guess it would make some sense. Then again, Sousuke keeps his secrets and it's sometimes impossible to tell how he's really feeling. Maybe he loves me romantically. But maybe he doesn't, it's too hard to tell with him. I do care a lot about him, he does make me happy, and I do think about having sex with him...yeah, maybe I do love him. I just also feel a lot of things for you too and I don't think it would be fair to bring anything up with Sousuke before I've figured out how I feel about you. What you told me tonight about you and Makoto does make it easier, though. I need to think this all through and try to see for myself how Sousuke feels about me before I can do anything."

Rin turned his head to the side so his whole body faced Haru again.

"Ok, Rin." Haru agreed.

Haru felt oddly relieved. So Rin could be with Sousuke and Haru could be with Makoto. In that equation, Rin and Haru would never be together and the feelings between them right then, well maybe that was fine. For Haru, there might be the tiniest part of his heart that would always wonder
what if? but it wasn't something that would keep him up at night. And he really did feel closer to Rin than he ever had before.

It was okay. It was good.

“Hey, Haru?”

“Hmm?”

“Would it be weird if I asked you to hold me?”

Apparently Rin was thinking the same things as Haru.

It was okay. It was good.

Haru studied his face carefully, then nodded, opening his arms wide for Rin.

“Sure.”

Rin smiled and slid over so he was right next to Haru, but not actually touching him. For a long moment, he hesitated before closing the gap between them, wrapping his arms around Haru and gently, cautiously resting his head on Haru’s chest. Once he was settled, Haru folded Rin in his arms. He could almost feel Rin’s smile in his chest.

Rin did feel nice next to him, much nicer than Haru had expected. He felt so nice it hurt.

What if Haru could have them both? Rin and Makoto together, the two people Haru felt the most for. They were both beautiful in their own ways and Haru loved them both, in their own ways. But then he’d also have to imagine that in such a situation, Rin and Makoto would have to be close together and Haru quickly banished the notion from his head.

He didn’t want to share the special, very strong feelings Makoto gave him, not even with Rin. And he didn't want anyone touching Makoto. But him.

“Haru?” Rin mumbled, “I want you to tell me how things go with Makoto and I’ll let you know about Sousuke, but I think everything that needs to be said about anything between us has been said. We don’t need to bring it up anymore.”

“Of course Rin.”

“Ok, good. Maybe we should get some sleep now.”

“Okay.”

That night had been very important because it opened so many doors for both of them. But at the same time, one door was closed forever and neither of them had brought it up again.

Until now.

“I’m not trying to pick a fight, Rin, and I know that things are different now. I’m just saying he had a reason to be jealous of me and that jealousy was important for him until a few weeks ago.”
Rin ran his fingers through his hair, “That was so long ago though. I let go of those feelings for you that night and all I’ve wanted since then is him. Even then, I mostly wanted him and he fucking abandoned me!”

“Sousuke is a really nice guy,” Haru said quietly, “He feels terrible that he lied to you and he’s so excited to see you again. Try not to be too hard on him.”

"I'm not sure I like you two being friends," Rin snapped, "You're my friend, you're supposed to take my side!"

Haru grew angry, "I'm not taking sides, I'm just asking you to give him a chance and try to be understanding! I am sorry it came to lying, but I'm not sorry for helping him. I didn't want his death on our heads!"

“Just tell me why he had to stay away for three whole years!” Rin demanded angrily.

“Sousuke is the only one who can answer that for you.” Haru answered, "And I know he wants to tell you so just give him a chance.”

Rin sighed and squatted down, running his fingers through his hair some more. With Haru's final words, the fight had finally left Rin. There was a lot going through his head, Haru could tell, but the fight was gone.

“We should get back,” Rin announced after several long minutes of silence, “I'm getting hungry.”

One of Makoto’s hand was on Sousuke, gently rubbing circles on his back. Sousuke clung on to Makoto’s other hand, barely registering the strokes Makoto made with his thumb.

He was grateful Makoto was there because everything hurt and thrummed with excitement. It was a bizarre sensation; Sousuke had never experienced feeling so very present and far away at once.

When Rin and Haru had taken off, Sousuke had retreated into his room and, unable to cope with gravity any longer, collapsed on the ground. Of course Makoto had been worried and followed him in; he was still kneeling next to Sousuke, doing everything in his power to calm Sousuke down.

Sousuke was so glad Makoto was his friend.

The front door opened and Makoto pulled his hands away.

“Come on, Sousuke,” Makoto whispered, “They’re back.”

Sousuke turned his head so he was looking up at Makoto.

How was Sousuke expected to get up?

As if hearing his thoughts, Makoto put his hands under Sousuke’s arms and lifted him gently. Sousuke’s brain remembered it could send signals to his leg. With Makoto’s help, Sousuke found himself on his feet.
“Let’s go out there,” Makoto urged, gently nudging Sousuke forward, “The sooner you two talk, the better.”

Makoto was right, but walking across his bedroom was like walking to the gallows.

Rin was waiting and it was time to finally face his doom.

In the living room, Haru, Kisumi, and Rin were seated silently at the kotatsu. When they heard the door open, everyone looked up. Rin’s eyes immediately found Sousuke’s; he had to look away.

“We’re hungry,” Kisumi announced pleasantly, “So let’s go get some food!”

“That sounds good!” Makoto said cheerfully, though Sousuke could tell it was a little forced.

Suddenly they were all a whirl of activity and before Sousuke’s mind could catch up, he found himself trudging behind everyone else as they made their way down the street to a nearby restaurant they went to frequently.

Makoto suddenly stopped and put out a hand to stop Rin.

“Rin,” he said, “I am so, so, so, so, so, so, so sorry for lying to you! I feel just absolutely terrible and you are my friend and I hated lying to you.”

Rin smiled at Makoto and patted him on the shoulder.

“It’s fine, Makoto. Really. We’re good.”

Rin looked back at Sousuke briefly and Sousuke really wished he could understand what the look meant. Was it really fine?

It must mean that it was fine for Makoto, but Sousuke was a different story.

They continued walking and Sousuke thought it was safest to stare down at his shoes.

When they arrived and were seated at the restaurant, a waitress handed them all menus. Sousuke’s menu lay uselessly in front of him because he was having a hard time concentrating on anything but the turmoil of his heart.

For so long, he’d thought about this day and wondered what would happen. But now that it was here, he really wasn’t sure what was going on. Rin was happy and angry to see him, hurt and delighted. Sousuke’s heart was constricting in crippling fear while at the same time expanding as wide as the universe. Rin could leave and refuse to see Sousuke ever again. Sousuke deserved that. But Rin could also stay and listen to the words tattooed all over Sousuke’s heart.

Anything and nothing seemed possible.

In the course of just an hour, Sousuke had become a binary being and he was terrified of disturbing the precarious balance. He knew the outcome he hoped for and it seemed as though even his breath could tip the scales towards doom.
Over the past month or so, Sousuke may or may not have read every Jane Austen book, trying to get ideas on how to approach Rin. Now, as he sat in the restaurant basking in the presence of his beloved and unable to comprehend the menu, Sousuke felt he understood something of how Mr. Darcy had felt before his second proposal to Elizabeth Bennett. Rin had given him some hope. But Sousuke had behaved so badly, there was no way Rin would accept him. If only Sousuke could have finished the letter he’d been toiling over, like Captain Fredrick Wentworth had taught him in *Persuasion*. He had wanted to explain everything before seeing Rin again, throw himself on Rin’s mercy through beautiful, articulate words. It would have been easier than explaining it in person.

Still…Sousuke had picked up the shattered pieces of himself and put himself back together again and Rin had been the prime mover of his recovery. He’d worked too hard and come too far to let this opportunity slip away because he knew it probably wouldn’t happen again.

He would just have to suck it up and chance disappointment or salvation from this binary state because it was impossible to stay like this for much longer.

But now he had to find the right words…

A hand on Sousuke’s forearm interrupted Sousuke’s thoughts and Sousuke looked up from that damned incomprehensible menu. The hand belonged to Kisumi and he was staring at Sousuke with a bemused smile. All around the table, eyes were locked on Sousuke expectantly.

“What would you like to eat, sir?” a voice said above him. Sousuke turned to look up and saw the waitress hovering above him, eyeing Sousuke suspiciously.

How long had she been trying to take his order?

Frantically, Sousuke turned back to his menu, the flush of his cheeks spreading to the tips of his ears and down his back. Why didn’t these words make sense to Sousuke! He read as much as he possibly could, words had become his best friends. So why did words as simple as familiar food names not make sense!?

“They have *tonkatsu*,” Rin said, instantly arresting Sousuke mid panic, “Is that still your favorite?”

A ray of light pierced the frozen expanse of Sousuke’s mind, melting everything with its warmth.

Rin remembered his favorite food.

Rin remembered!

Maybe Sousuke had been wrong to despair! If he was in fact truly bereft of hope, Rin would not still be here, would not remember how much Sousuke loved *tonkatsu*!

Rin must want to hear what Sousuke had to say!
A smile radiated out of his rejoicing heart.

“Yeah, I’ll have *tonkatsu.*”

The waitress collected the menus and disappeared, but Sousuke continued to smile. He dared not look at Rin – he didn’t want to see if he’d misinterpreted and he certainly didn’t want to break down in tears. Sousuke detested crying in front of people, or at all really. Kisumi took it upon himself to fill the silence with noise, so he began saying something. Sousuke didn’t listen. He looked down at the table, his mind was too busy furiously trying to figure out how to accurately translate his heart into words.

Food came, food was eaten, empty plates vanished and all through it, Sousuke’s smile lingered.

Damn Sousuke.

Damn him and damn that fucking smile.

Rin found it hard to focus on his food and the conversation because that smile was just so… distracting.

Rin was supposed to be mad at stupid Sousuke. He had every right to be furious and hurt. For most of the night, he’d been succeeding at being furious and hurt.

But Sousuke was Sousuke and he'd always been so adorable whenever he got flustered, which happened surprisingly often. When he couldn’t decide what to order was no exception. He was blushing and adorable and it made Rin’s heart melt. After everything, Sousuke was still Sousuke.

“They have *tonkatsu,*” Rin offered, "Is that still your favorite?"

Rin’s words had an immediate effect. Sousuke smiled.

“Yeah, I’ll have *tonkatsu.*” Sousuke mumbled, blushing.

Sousuke’s smile was small and not meant to be shared, but that was precisely why Rin couldn’t take his eyes off it during their meal. As so many times in their shared past, Rin knew he was the cause of that smile and it gave him that old wash of warmth. Even when they were little, it had always been Rin's goal to make Sousuke smile because that smile...

All over *tonkatsu* too. Why should it fluster Sousuke so much that Rin remembered? He'd never forgotten.
Since Sousuke had disappeared, when the hole Sousuke had left in Rin when he’d vanished became too much, Rin had gotten in the habit of finding Japanese restaurants and ordering *tonkatsu* and a coke, eating it to feel like his pillar of a friend was still there with him.

Of course he hadn’t forgotten about *tonkatsu*. It would have been like forgetting about Sousuke and Rin could never, *ever* have done that.

God Sousuke.

It was so hard to be mad at someone when suggesting their favorite food made them so fucking happy.

Kisumi, Haru, and Makoto continued on the conversation and Rin only half listened. Sousuke and his fucking smile required Rin's complete attention. So during their meal, Rin stared at Sousuke, willing him to look up so Rin could see that smile straight on. It had been so long and Rin fucking *deserved* to see that smile!

But Sousuke was in his adorable, flustered mode and so he had eyes only for the table. Couldn't he feel Rin staring at him, begging him silently to look up?

Food came, food was eaten, empty plates vanished and all through it, Rin watched Sousuke, an unconscious smile tugging up his own mouth.

Damn that Sousuke!

He was half forgiven already and all he’d had to do was smile!

Sousuke hung back from everyone else as they walked home, making sure there was a lot of space for his thoughts to finish forming themselves. It seemed impossible that Rin really was here, but every time Sousuke looked up to see his dream vanish into the darkening gloom of evening, Rin’s purple hair lingered, a bright, beautiful streak of purple that seemed to Sousuke as bright as the sun.

With Haru and Makoto leading, they finally made it back to the apartment. Haru, Makoto, and Kisumi filed inside, but when it came time for Rin to cross the threshold to Sousuke's home, he paused.

Then he shut the apartment door so he and Sousuke were left outside, alone.

Only then did Sousuke look up and inhaled sharply when he realized he was completely alone with Rin for the first time today.

And Rin was looking at him in a way he hadn't in a long, long time.

Sousuke’s heart leapt into his throat and beat staccato against his chest.
“Sou,” Rin said quietly though his eloquent eyebrows betrayed the tumultuous feelings he was keeping in check. “Before we go inside, I need you to answer one question. You owe me that.”

Sousuke tried to swallow his sudden dread.

“Anything Rin.” he managed to choke out.

Those beautiful eyebrows knit together in contemplation and Rin's face fell into a scowl.

Sousuke held his breath as he waited for Rin to speak.

“I understand why you wanted to leave,” Rin started, "I know about the surgeries and I think I understand why your dad kicked you out. But why didn't you come to Australia? I told you I would wait for you. I never stopped waiting for you.”

A blush crept up Rin's ears and he looked down, away from Sousuke.

Had Sousuke not known Rin his entire life, he would have missed how hard Rin was working to keep himself together.

Sousuke sighed and leaned against the railing, hating himself for how much he'd hurt Rin.

But Rin was listening and maybe, just maybe, what Sousuke had to say would lessen that hurt...Sousuke wasn't going to get another attempt....

Now was the time to lay his soul bare.

“Rin, I wanted to go to you,” Sousuke said, his voice low to distract from how badly it quavered, "more than anything I wanted to go to you and be there with you, cheering you on while you achieved more than you've ever dreamed of. But I couldn't go to Australia, back then it would have made us both miserable if I went."

Rin shot him an angry look, "How can you know that?" he demanded. Sousuke smiled. No matter how much time passed, Rin had always been the same little kid with the quick temper.

"For starters, I was in bad shape because I was gay and I didn't want to be."

Rin looked up, shocked, and Sousuke suddenly felt himself panic.

"I am gay by the way," Sousuke explained quickly, his words feeling terribly foreign and incredibly exhilarating and so jaggedly true all at once, "If you were wondering."

At first Rin was completely shocked, but then he accepted Sousuke's big, terrible secret with a smirk. Like Sousuke had just challenged him to a throw down like when they were young.

"Yeah I am too in case you didn't know," Rin said smugly, "Always have been really."
Sousuke smiled, suddenly feeling a huge wave of relief.

For a moment, they studied each other silently and Sousuke allowed their relationship to reorient itself around these newly admitted truths. Rin had to have known he was gay, he’d been to find Sousuke and found Sousuke's father instead. No doubt dear old dad had yelled terribly at Rin and blamed him for his son's affliction. But Sousuke had never told him... And of course Sousuke knew Rin was gay...Rin had told him about his sole sexual encounter in high school and it had broken Sousuke's heart to see how much Rin had loved Haru. Still, Rin had treated the sexual encounter as an isolated incident and Haru, well he hadn't admitted anything about Haru. The truth had been hanging unsaid between them for a long time and now it was out, laid bared before them.

And the truth was already changing their relationship to each other. Of course it was. It felt like now, new possibilities existed...

Sousuke bowed his head, grateful that Rin had let him tell this secret, and continued: "When I left Japan, I was determined to be straight because that was the reason for all my problems and I wanted to fix it. That was the first reason I stayed away."

The brief smile Sousuke had been wearing faltered and faded. He looked up again to find Rin frowning.

Sousuke hated that he had to tell him this part, he hated even remembering his mindset in those early days. But he owed Rin the complete truth.

“How did you try to be straight?” Rin asked.

Sousuke shrugged and looked down to the ground, “I slept with lots and lots of women. I hated it but I made myself do it, thinking that if I slept with enough women, eventually I would start liking it. But the more sex I had with women, the more I hated myself and the more miserable I became. Then one night, a woman invited me to have a threesome with her and her husband and I accepted. It was the first time I’d ever been with a guy and it made a huge difference. It just felt so much more natural. I freaked out and tried sleeping with women again, trying so hard to convince myself that it was just a fluke. But then there was this one bar tender in Buenos Aries who sort of seduced me and I slept with him twice, more than I’d ever slept with anyone else. And after him I knew for sure I couldn’t be fixed; that I like sleeping with guys so much more than sleeping with girls and that wouldn’t change. I still struggle because a part of me still wishes I could have been who my father wanted and I still get pretty depressed when I sleep with people, but that’s for other reasons besides genitalia. I am gay and it took a hell of a long time to accept that. And I couldn’t have been around you while I was trying to not be gay...you would have hated seeing me like that. I couldn’t have put that shit on you.”

Saying these things, saying them out loud, saying them to Rin...God, it felt better than anything! Rin wasn’t running or screaming yet, he was still listening. Sousuke’s confidence was growing as the terrible weight that had nearly crushed him was finally lifted. Rin didn't know his darkest deeds yet, but he knew their cause. And he was still here listening.

Sousuke looked back up at Rin, met his eyes square on for the first time that night.

“Why?” Rin’s voice cracked with emotion.
Sousuke frowned, trying to understand what Rin was asking but without any success. "Why what?" he finally asked.

"After you figured out you were gay and everything, why didn't you come to Australia?" Rin demanded, his voice shaking with the feelings that hadn't yet started pouring out from his eyes.

Sousuke smiled sadly.

“Because I know how you feel about your father,” he answered.

Rin blushed fiercely. God after all this time Sousuke still knew him so well....

“While my shoulder was healing from the surgeries,” Sousuke continued, "I was also mending the tears swimming left in my heart. You’d rekindled my old dream and the second time I realized I was physically incapable of reaching that dream, it left me even darker, deader than before. I bought a ticket to Australia, but I didn’t have anything I particularly wanted to do other than see you and support you. I returned the ticket because I knew that wasn’t enough. I wanted to be there with you, but I knew that if I went to you as I was, you couldn’t be happy with me. I felt that you would see me as someone who gave up on myself for your sake, just like your father. Really that was what I wanted to do, just be there for you and support you."

A fire Rin had never seen glowed in Sousuke's beautiful eyes, a fire he'd never seen before. The fire of his secret soul.

"But you've always driven me to be better, to dream harder, and to not give up on myself because you expect more from me. You make me want to be so much better than I am and at the darkest times, it's always been you that's saved me! Going to Australia a year ago would have made me happy, but I couldn’t present myself to you until I’d found something for myself, until I had dreams of my own, until I was better! I needed to be away from swimming, away from everyone so I could really listen to myself and attack life with everything I had until life gave me something new. I stayed away because I wanted to make you proud and I wanted to be whole, not in fragments for you to fit together. I wanted to offer you more than that because you deserved more. You deserve everything!"

Sousuke fell silent, he was slightly breathless.
For a painfully long time, Rin couldn't say anything so he just stood there, taking Sousuke in and frantically putting pieces together.

Before Rin left Japan, Rin had decided he was in love with Sousuke but he hadn't been brave enough to tell Sousuke. He'd held his tongue and encouraged Sousuke to come to Australia because he wanted to be alone with him, away from all the crap of the past. If they could have just escaped everything together and been away from everything else, Rin had hoped to figure out what Sousuke wanted and tell Sousuke what he wanted. Rin's plan had been to admit his feelings somewhere really beautiful, like on a beach at sunset, then maybe, just maybe Sousuke would have finally explained how he felt. Sousuke could read Rin like a book, put it had never been a mutual exchange. Sousuke cared about Rin enormously, Rin had always known that, but after his soul-baring night with Haru, Rin hadn't been able to figure out if Sousuke's feelings were in any way romantic. Sousuke was Sousuke and he was with Rin how he'd always been with Rin. Maybe if they hadn't been together forever, it would have been easier to decide. Sometimes it's hardest to see clearly the things that are closest to you.

Maybe if Sousuke had been someone else, it wouldn't have been so damn hard. But Sousuke was Sousuke and what Sousuke was was a naturally solitary person. Though he'd always been more open with Rin than with anyone else, Rin always knew there were parts of Sousuke that he wasn’t willing to share. He’d always needed to have himself for himself. That’s what had attracted Sousuke to the individual sport of swimming in the first place and that was the reason why he hadn’t wanted to swim a relay with Rin so many years ago at Sano. Sousuke had always had a great big heart, but he was careful with it, even with Rin.

Especially with Rin.

Rin knew that as well as he knew the lines in Sousuke’s face and the exact shade of his eyes. Part of the reason Rin had left Sano in elementary school was because he’d become frustrated that Sousuke wouldn’t share that final bit of himself, go deeper with Rin. When they were reunited as teenagers, Sousuke had shown Rin much more of himself than ever before. Yet even then, Rin couldn’t see all of Sousuke. At that point, Rin hadn’t cared anymore; he was happy to know the majority of Sousuke without stressing much over the shadowy corners his eyes couldn’t penetrate and even when they were apart, Rin had always, always felt Sousuke's solid support. But in the end it was those doubt-filled shadows of Sousuke's heart that crept up on Rin and made him loose courage. So he'd left things unsaid he bitterly regretted later.

Rin had asked Sousuke to come to Australia, not specifying what he eventually wanted from Sousuke. And Sousuke had agreed to think about it but because he wanted to swim with Rin...not just be with Rin. The weeks before Sousuke left, Rin had been trying so hard to figure out if Sousuke would be happy with just him. But then the goodbye letter came and it was over. Those final bits of Sousuke seemed to have been made clear and Rin's fears were confirmed. Sousuke had only wanted to swim with Rin in Australia.

What Rin understood was that Sousuke didn't want more. The strong support Sousuke gave Rin crumbled and fell away and it was over...

But here he was again and the words he'd just said.....
Sousuke didn't want to be like Rin's father?

That was the reason he'd stayed away? He didn't want Rin to feel like he had no dreams of his own? He didn't want Rin to think he was throwing his life away by...giving it to Rin?

Giving himself to Rin?

It wasn't that Sousuke didn't care for Rin that he'd stayed away, it was because he cared about Rin that he'd stayed away!

That meant...that meant!....

A feeling of solidity swept over Rin, a feeling that was only ever inspired by Sousuke. The overwhelming feeling of its return was nearly too much. But there was more...so much more...

Sousuke meant what he said, Rin could see it in his face, and that meant that Sousuke did love him! For so long, Rin had despised and been so, so lonely without the best friend he'd ever had by his side. But this friend was here, was back because he'd chosen to come back. For Rin, he'd stayed away and he'd now chosen to come back! So they could...so they could...

“And you’ve found something?” Rin sputtered out, barely able to contain the mounting excitement he was feeling, like he was strapped into a rocket ship and was just taking off on the first mission somewhere new. He was off into the deep unknown and all that was ahead of him was wonderful, wonderful possibility!

Sousuke grinned wider and he was looking at Rin so closely. The shadows that had always surrounded Sousuke began to recede and Rin could see Sousuke, see what those shadows had been concealing all along....all this time....

Sousuke nodded, smiled, replied; “I have. I've built a life for myself and I'm pursuing my new dream. So I asked Haru and Makoto to help me talk to you because I was ready. I feel like I'm a whole person again so I won't be holding you back. And I want to be there for you because I want...”

Sousuke's voice trailed off and he looked away, suddenly the same, shy kid who had introduced himself to Rin when they were six on the playground. But Rin knew what he meant! Rin understood! Finally, Rin understood!

The confusing jumble of bitter anger, furious relief, and painful betrayal that had wreaked havoc inside Rin since finding Sousuke seeped out of him into the summer night, fluttering out with the cool breeze and disappearing in the dying rays of the day.

Rin had room only for the terror and fathomless joy of this one, sublime moment that he felt changing his life already.

Perhaps his wrath would return in the morning, but Rin thought not because he finally understood.
Even as kids, Sousuke would never cry in front of Rin because seeing Sousuke cry would make Rin cry and Sousuke hadn't wanted to make Rin cry. He'd wrecked his shoulder, over working himself because he wanted to be with Rin on the international metal podium, be there as his equal. He'd never stopped encouraging Rin and letting Rin go do what he needed to do.

Rin understood!

Sousuke....

Rin took a cautious step forward. His heart was beating a mile a minute.

The sound of Rin’s footstep sent a shudder through Sousuke’s massive, beautiful body.

Rin took another step forward.

He was now close enough that he could hear the ragged breaths Sousuke was trying so desperately to keep even. He smiled as the scent of Sousuke engulfed him. Every muscle in that massive body was tensed as though he were an animal ready to flee for it’s life, but Sousuke forced himself to stay still so he could see what Rin would do with his offer.

Could Sousuke hear Rin’s heart hammering furiously against his chest? Did he notice that Rin was holding his breath? Rin hoped so; he wanted Sousuke to realize that Rin understood what a momentous thing this was, that it was affecting him too. That he finally understood...

Rin took one more step forward so he was in between Sousuke’s legs. He was so close now Rin could see the stubble on his chin and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Sousuke was staring at the ground, avoiding Rin's eyes, but his whole body was trembling. Neither of them breathed more than necessary because it felt like even a breath could shatter this moment, when a whole future manifested around them.

Oh Sousuke!

Rin was so close! He was closer than he'd ever been before and Sosuuke could smell him.

Rin hadn't run away, he’d listened, he...he...!

Sousuke had spent so much time, learning the finer points of taking people 'in a manly fashion' and
really, this moment called for some of that manly taking. If it were anyone but Rin, he would have
him up against a wall, using every inch of his massive body to express his desire. But Rin, light of
his life for ever and ever, was so close and looking at Sousuke! Sousuke couldn't move, he couldn't
breathe. This couldn't be real!

To protect himself in case this wasn't real, Sousuke squeezed his eyes shut. He was just imagining
the look in Rin's eye, he was just imagining Rin...

But he could still feel how close Rin was to him and that feeling wasn't going away. Sousuke
squeezed his eyelids tighter.

Oh what monstrous, beautiful agony it was, to be so close to his soulmate, to practically confess how
much Rin was loved, to pour everything out there.

Before Sousuke could do any such thing, the lightest touch of soft lips brushed his, instantly sending
megawatts and megawatts of electricity coursing through his body. The touch lasted only the space
of a second, but it had done things to Sousuke. He opened his eyes to find Rin's delightful smirk, his
eyebrows speaking of amusement and triumph and joy.

Rin had kissed him!

After so, so long wanting and waiting, Rin had actually kissed Sousuke!

The feel of Rin's lips lingered, shockwaves still rippling from the point of contact where Sousuke's lips burned, wanting and needing more...

Unconsciously Sousuke brought a hand up to his lips and touched where Rin's lips had just been.
"You kissed me," Sousuke muttered breathlessly and watching, watching Rin.

Rin laughed, a crystal clear laugh that pierced Sousuke's heart.

"Of course I did!" Rin cried, putting his hands on Sousuke's shoulders, "And unless you stop me I'm
going to do it again! Are you going to stop me?"

He was still acting like the question was a joke, but Sousuke could tell it wasn't meant as one. He
was asking, for real.

"No, I won't stop you," he said breathlessly.

Rin smiled wickedly, then moved his hands up to Sousuke's neck, dragging his face closer so he
could kiss Sousuke again. Fire erupted all over Sousuke as their mouths met and the kiss, longer,
sweeter, more tender than the other, was slow and sweet but still over way too fast.

Having closed his eyes without realising it, he opened them now when he felt the absence.
"You know you can kiss me back," Rin said a bit breathlessly, "I won't stop you. I want you to actually."

"You want me to?" Sousuke asked, his voice shaky. Rin laughed.

"Of course I do! I wouldn't be telling you otherwise!"

Hesitantly, Sousuke brought a hand up to Rin's face and embraced his cheek. He hoped his palms weren't sweaty.

The sarcasm was nowhere to be seen in those eyebrows, only a smile.

Sousuke dragged his thumb across Rin's bottom lip and Rin closed his eyes and opened his mouth slightly, inviting Sousuke in.

"This is what you want from me?" Sousuke asked in a whisper.

Rin opened his eyes again and smiled.

"I told you before you left that I'd be waiting for you and I still am. Yes, this is what I want from you."

Sousuke didn't need further prompting. He grabbed Rin around the waist and destroyed the final bit of space that had stood between them. With more passion than finesse, he smashed their faces together and every pent up, suppressed, overwhelming, confusing, tender passion he'd ever felt for Rin poured out of him.

He'd been waiting a life time for this kiss.

No one had ever kissed Rin like this before.

No one but Sousuke was capable of kissing him like this.

In that moment, Rin forgave Sousuke completely for disappearing and he thanked the universe for whatever twist of the fate had given him Sousuke. And as he received everything Sousuke had to offer, all the pain and misery and joy and fear and longing and....love....., the feeling settled deep within his bones that there wasn't anyone in the world he was going to kiss again except for Yamazaki Sousuke.

Because he loved Sousuke like he'd never loved anyone before.

And now, now they were finally back together.

Chapter End Notes

What a tricksey chapter this was to write! Please let me know what you think, I love all
the comments :) The next chapter is going to get...graphic...and as I find sex scenes hard to write, it will probably be a while before the next update again (plus you know...life :( )Thanks so much for reading and I hope you enjoy :)

Chapter Summary

Things are sad....then they get pretty freaking silly. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sousuke was never going to kiss anyone but Rin again.

Of that, he was one thousand percent certain the moment their lips touched for the very first time.

And the longer they kissed, the deeper this conviction buried itself into his bones.

This was it.

Rin was it.

A million questions needed answering, but while their tongues danced around each other, exploring places that had previously been forbidden, none of those questions disturbed Sousuke's sublime enjoyment of this moment.

Because this was it.

“Oh man, sorry guys!” a voice interrupted from somewhere and Rin broke away from Sousuke. His lips, his taste, the feel of him was instantly missed. Angry about the interruption, Sousuke looked around to find a very smug looking Kisumi standing in the open door, smirking harder than that pink haired devil had ever smirked before.

“What do you want!?” Sousuke snapped, taking absolutely no pains to disguise how annoyed he was by Kisumi’s presence.

“Oh I just wondered where you two had gone,” Kisumi said airily with the most insidious smile on his face, “Clearly you two found something interesting to do. Guess I’ll just go back inside.”

He turned around to do just that, but before he shut the door behind him, he turned around and stuck out his tongue, winking at the pair of them.

Fucking Kisumi.

Sousuke had punched a lot of guys in the face before, but he knew punching Kisumi right now in his stupid face would feel more satisfying than any of those previous fights.
“Sou,” Rin called, drawing Sousuke’s attention away from the closed door. Sousuke looked back
down at Rin’s beautiful face, flushed from their activities together, and Kisumi was instantly
forgotten.

Who had time to think about cotton candy trouble makers when Rin was looking up at them, smiling
with all the warmth of his soul?

“Yeah, Rin?”

“Could we go inside too?” Rin suddenly flushed a brighter red, even in the muted light of the
darkening night Sousuke could see, “Maybe into your room?”

For a bewildering moment, Sousuke tried to make sense of Rin’s request. As far as Sousuke was
concerned, they were in heaven right where they were – why would they want to leave? But then
Rin quirked a suggestive eyebrow up at Sousuke and Sousuke blushed harder than Rin had as the
pieces finally fell into place.

Rin wanted to have sex.

With him.

Right now.

FUCK!

It was a miracle Sousuke’s heart didn’t rip apart his chest with the ferocity of its beating.

“Yeah if you want to,” he muttered, hoping he didn’t sound too eager, too scared, too completely
flooried that this, THIS was happening.

Rin stood up on his tip-toes and planted a kiss on Sousuke’s cheek.

“More than anything, Sousuke,” he whispered in Sousuke’s ear, sending pleasant shivers throughout
his body.

Sousuke nodded and nervously reached out his hand. Rin took it and together they went inside the
apartment.

Luckily, Kisumi had retreated to the safety of his bedroom after his little display and Haru and
Makoto were nowhere to be seen.

They were, once more, alone.
Rin made for Sousuke’s room.

“Wait…” Sousuke peeped.

Rin’s hand was reaching for Sousuke’s doorknob.

“Would you mind waiting while I get some stuff ready in my room?”

Rin smiled, letting his hand drop, “Sure thing.”

He looked to Sousuke expectantly, but Sousuke was rooted to the spot. In the deepest recesses of his body, Sousuke had wanted to have sex with Rin since Sousuke understood fully what a penis could be used for, probably even before then. But now, with Rin standing only a few meters away from Sousuke’s bed, Sousuke was loosing his nerve. This whole day hadn’t felt real but now, hovering just on the edge of his fondest dream, reality hit him hard.

“Hey Sousuke?”

“Yeah?” Sousuke wished his voice hadn’t cracked so badly, but it did.

“If you don’t mind, I think that belongs inside.”

Rin nodded his head down at his duffel bag inches from Sousuke’s feet.

“So you really want to stay with me?” Sousuke mumbled, looking down at his feet.

“I do.” Rin reassured him.

God, Sousuke hated how needy he must sound but he tried not to let it bother him too much. The lines between his waking world and the dream world where his deepest desires thrived had never been so blurred as tonight; he needed Rin’s confirmation that he hadn’t slipped in that other world, the one that had been Rin’s home for so long. And still…still Sousuke was having a hard time believing.

Hesitantly, Sousuke picked up the bag and with his head lowered to the ground, crossed to his bedroom. As he passed by Rin, Rin extended his hand so their fingers brushed. Static electricity crackled between them at that contact. Rin grinned with satisfaction, no doubt enjoying the ‘spark’ between them.

Sousuke looked at him wide eyed for a moment, his reaction completely different. For so long he’d dreamt of kissing Rin and touching him. Holding him. Today very well could have been nothing more than a dream. But the sensation of static electricity…that was not something that occupied Rin’s slumbering mind.

This had to be real. This was definitely happening.

Into the darkened room Sousuke went, a smile cracking the marble façade he’d worn for protection all day. Not even his nerves could diminish that smile as Sousuke put Rin’s bag down by his closet,
Fifteen minutes later, Sousuke was crouched in the middle of his room, working very hard on not hyperventilating.

All around him, his candle collection cast a warm light on the room. Water was waiting, ready on Sousuke’s nightstand so that neither of them had to leave the room later unless they needed the toilet. The softest, most seductive music Sousuke could think of was playing, though it was so low you couldn’t hear it unless you were absolutely still. Everything was set to seduce Rin and give him a sexual experience he’d always remember.

Everything was ready except for Sousuke.

Sousuke looked around his room, biting his lip anxiously.

There hadn’t been time to get the four dozen roses he’d imagined spread across the bed and he had been waiting for a sale at this one store to buy the silky sheets he’d wanted to lie Rin down on. Only half of the desired candles were here, they didn’t seem enough. These plans were expressions of hope rather than his confidence that Rin would be in this room one day so he’d taken his time, fussied over every detail with tender care because he’d hadn’t really expected the candles and the sheets would entertain more than Sousuke’s own fantasies. Thus, the room was incomplete. And the absolute worst part of all, Sousuke hadn’t had time to shower after work and the shop. He probably smelled terrible.

Rin deserved better than this, better than this pathetic attempt at seduction.

Better than Sousuke.

No matter where Sousuke looked, he saw nothing but inadequacies.

Rin was the most absurdly romantic person Sousuke had ever known and Sousuke had wanted to sweep him off his feet for their hypothetical first time. To be honest, Sousuke had been planning and dreaming of what it would be like since he was probably fifteen. But Sousuke should have known that when faced with the reality of it, he would be out of his depth. After Sousuke had accepted he was gay, he slept with more guys than he’d felt the need for because he wanted to be really good if he ever got the opportunity to sleep with Rin. But that was probably the problem, he’d been thinking about having sex with Rin for so long, imagined all the ways it would begin and all the ways Rin would react, that the idea had ceased to have much basis in reality. Now, with Rin waiting for him on the other side of the door, Sousuke was so jittery, he felt it would be impossible for him to perform. Besides, all those sexual encounters were quick, shameful, in-out-orgasm-done affairs that happened in bar bathrooms and behind dumpsters and in the back of cars. He’d only had sex in three beds (one belonging to the bartender in Buenos Aries) and even then, he hadn’t stayed the night or been excessively romantic in anyway.

Why had he ever thought he could pull off something like this?

He wanted desperately to be Rin’s prince, but the more he looked around, the more obvious it seemed that he was nothing but a pathetic fool.

Sousuke was getting up from the ground in order to start blowing out the stupid candles when he heard a knock on his door.
“Sou, you all right?” Rin called on the other side. Sousuke was at the door in a heartbeat though he dare not open it.

“Yeah,” he said gruffly, placing a hand on the door where he thought Rin might be.

“Can I come in?” Rin said, quieter this time. Sousuke swallowed his acidic anxiety.

“It looks dumb in here, it’s not good enough.”

On the other side of the door, Rin chuckled.

“Obviously I don’t care about what your room looks like. I want to be with you, not your room.”

Sousuke let out an involuntary gasp, his fingers curling against the wood of the door. There was much that Sousuke was feeling.

“Sou…I’ve been waiting to be with you forever and it might be a long time before I see you again. Could you please open the door?”

Sousuke took a deep breath and slowly turned the doorknob.

Rin felt the doorknob move beneath his fingers and he stepped back. Sousuke cracked open the door a bit so he could look outside, then he opened it wider to allow Rin in.

Sousuke gave Rin a moment to look around, take everything in while Sousuke watched his reaction nervously.

For some reason, Rin had expected Sousuke’s room to look like their old dorm room at Samezuka Academy, tidy and bare but for the essentials. In the twinkling light of at least 50 candles, Rin felt more like he’d stepped into a witch’s library. It looked chaotic and there were all sorts of things full of secret purpose. Books were everywhere, concentrated mostly in a massive, stuffed bookcase at the foot of his bed. Splashes of green from little planted pots interrupted the stacks of books and in front of the window was a potted tree with broad, deep green leaves. Museum prints of artwork covering nearly every other square inch, the white walls were barely visible. The pictures…they were mostly of dark and dramatic, dreamy things. Rin knew next to nothing about art, but he’d seen an exhibit on Pablo Picasso once and he felt at least one of the artists adorning Sousuke’s wall had to be Picasso. Some of the paintings were so detailed, the bowls of fruits and flowers in them looked like photographs. Others were riots of shapes and colors without any particular rhyme or reason. Yet still there was something beautiful about them. Though their subjects and styles differed so greatly, each of the prints were dark and dramatic and very beautiful and Rin saw Sousuke in each and every one of them.

To match the paintings, Sousuke’s furniture was all dark wood, heavy, and subtly, elegantly ornate. Rin had never seen such dramatic furniture in Japan and he wondered where on earth Sousuke had found it all. Only the bed frame was made of metal and Rin had to take a few steps forward to examine the magnificent headboard, formed of dark metal that twisted into a completely gorgeous pattern. Like a beach, ravaged by a storm. There was no footboard, but Sousuke was so tall, he’d always found it hard to fit into most beds. Rin’s own artistic tastes favored clothes instead of art and furniture and his rooms had always been very minimalistic. But Sousuke’s room wasn’t just a room, it was his sanctuary, a museum of his travels and the person he’d become. Sousuke clearly felt it a
sacred place and he’d invited Rin inside. It took Rin only a few minutes’ exploration to become completely besotted with Sousuke’s space. It was such a perfect expression of its owner: dark, dramatic, artistic, full of emotion, and, of course, absolutely beautiful. Rin longed to explore every nook and cranny, understand more about this person Sousuke had become, but then Sousuke, standing in the middle of the room and watching Rin’s reaction, drew Rin’s attention. He was trembling with either nerves or excitement or a combination of the two.

The room was perfect and amazing, but it could wait.

“Thanks for letting me in,” Rin said as he took a step towards Sousuke. Sousuke flinched and he looked terribly nervous, like a puppy whose owner had just come home to discover Sousuke had peed the carpet or something. The trembling in his hands worsened and he stared down at the bare, wood floor instead of at Rin.

Rin had only seen him like this once before and that was when they'd accidentally broke a vase at Rin’s house that also happened to be the favorite of Rin’s mom. He’d been so worried about confessing to Rin’s parents (his dad had died a month later) the usually stoic Sousuke had cried. That had been the first and last time Rin had seen Sousuke cry and it had disturbed him so much, Rin had started crying too.

It hurt to see Sousuke looking so nervous and upset now because Rin was doing this to Sousuke.

This moment was years in the making and fantasizing about it had severely hindered Rin’s love life. How could it not, when Sousuke had such a beautiful body, such a massive cock, such lovely pools of teal and tenderness for eyes.

No matter what, Rin was determined that their first time together was going to be really special for both of them. So Rin needed to do something to calm Sousuke down. Luckily, he’d known Sousuke pretty much his entire life so he had the full arsenal of Sousuke’s secrets at his disposal.

Rin walked over to Sousuke and kissed his cheek, twining his fingers on the hem of Sousuke’s shirt. Sousuke eyed him cautiously, though he couldn’t stop himself from smiling like he had when they were kids and Rin had given him ten bottles of cola for his tenth birthday. How could big, tough Sousuke also be the most adorable human being ever?

Rin got down on his knees in front of Sousuke, fully aware that he was being watched. Kneeling at groin level, Rin ran his thumbs over the top of Sousuke’s jeans, causing Sousuke to shudder with pleasure and inhale sharply. Rin looked up at Sousuke and raised a suggestive eyebrow. It was a good thing this gesture looked just as seductive as it did devilish because Sousuke was completely unprepared for what Rin did next.

In one quick movement, Rin lifted up Sousuke’s shirt and blew a massive raspberry against Sousuke’s sensitive stomach. Immediately, Sousuke dissolved into hysterics.
Sousuke shrieked with laughter as he bent over and squeezed his eyes shut, the good kind of tears already streaming down the cheeks. Smiling like a demon, Rin continued to tickle Sousuke everywhere he knew to be ticklish….which was basically everywhere.

Fun fact about Sousuke, the reason he was generally pretty standoffish about being touched was because of how hyper ticklish he was. Rin had won more than his fair share of arguments when they were little just by tickling Sousuke. He’d changed in the years they were apart, but Sousuke was just as helpless to this assault as he had been as a kid.

Chuckling at Sousuke’s continued, wild laughter, Rin gently guided Sousuke to the bed and pushed him down, tickling him the whole way until he was able to climb on top of Sousuke. Then, he stopped his attack so he could enjoy the sight of Sousuke’s smile, wide open and free for the first time tonight. Rin gave Sousuke a chance to catch his breath.

Once he’d recovered sufficiently, Sousuke opened his eyes and had a brief moment before Rin attacked his mouth with his lips. It took Sousuke only two tenths of a second to respond with equal, if not more, enthusiasm.

Rin’s trick had worked; Sousuke’s hands weren’t trembling anymore.

Their tongues tangled together, their noses found how they could fit together, and their breaths came as synchronized, desperate pants, full of desire the deeper their kisses became. Sousuke’s great hands found Rin’s hips and pulled them down, so they ground together. Rin ran his fingers through Sousuke’s thick, dark hair. As an experiment, he grabbed a handful and pulled. Much to Rin’s delight, Sousuke moaned with pleasure.

Sousuke broke free of their kiss and pushed back on Rin’s hips, positioning him so he was straddling Sousuke’s thighs instead of his hips. This allowed Sousuke to sit up.

Rin liked this, sitting on top of Sousuke, feeling Sousuke’s hands run up and down his sides. Without consciously deciding to do so, Rin stuck out his hips and threw his head back a bit.

Sousuke chuckled into Rin’s neck as he started kissing him again; he must have enjoyed Rin’s little diva pose.

Sousuke’s fingers eventually found the hem of Rin’s shirt and slowly the fabric began to lift up. Sousuke stopped kissing Rin’s neck long enough so he could peel off the shirt.

They both paused for a second, suddenly a little bit shy now that Rin was topless. This hesitation was, of course, completely absurd because they’d grown up swimming together. Their sport left absolutely nothing up to the imagination, especially because it wasn’t weird at all to be naked in showers together. That was just swimmers.

But this was different.
In the candlelight, Sousuke’s eyes sparkled in a way Rin had never seen before, his hair was messed up from Rin’s fingers. And he was watching Rin, waiting to see what Rin would do.

Cautiously, Rin hooked his fingers underneath Sousuke’s shirt and began to pull up.

They were in this together and Rin was curious to see how Sousuke’s perfect swimming body had changed over the years.

Beneath him, Sousuke stiffened slightly as Rin began taking off his shirt and if Rin wasn’t hyper aware of Sousuke’s every move, he wouldn’t have noticed.

But Rin did.

Sousuke must not want him to see what was underneath.

That was odd. Sousuke had never been shy before and Rin had a pretty good memory about how Sousuke’s body looked without clothes on. The thin fabric of Sousuke’s shirt was all that separated Rin from the muscles he’d watched perfectly develop over the course of their lifetime. So why the hesitation? Sousuke had gotten taller (as if he needed to) but he looked proportionally the same as he did in high school. The only other thing that Rin knew of happening to Sousuke physically was the surgeries and…

The surgeries…

Quicker than he’d been intending to, Rin finished taking off Sousuke’s shirt and his eyes hungrily shot towards Sousuke’s right shoulder.

Shit!

Rin heard himself make a noise that was something between a sob and a gasp of horror when he saw the myriad of scars marring that damned shoulder. His hands instantly covered his mouth and he could easily imagine how stunned his face looked.

Swimming destroyed shoulders and Rin had seen more than his fair share of surgery scars. A guy who’d graduated a year ago had had five surgeries before he’d finally admitted defeat and his shoulder was crossed all over with the straight, white scars left by scalpels.

That’s not how Sousuke’s shoulder looked.

Rin knew he’d had three different surgeries and he could see the straight, white reminders of those procedures. But with those precise, surgical lines were at least a dozen more white and angry red lines, all jagged and crooked and far too imprecise to be the work of a professional. Some of them looked like they'd been cut in the same place, several times. It took Rin only a second to recognize
that some of those lines looked like kanji and as soon as he comprehend the horrible meaning of those lines, Rin wanted to throw up.

‘Traitor’

Sousuke had the kanji for ‘traitor’ carved into his own flesh.

Rin looked to Sousuke’s face for answers. Sousuke wouldn’t meet his eyes, confirming for Rin his darkest suspicions.

Sousuke had done this to himself.

Of course Rin began to cry.

Hesitantly, Rin lifted an anguished finger and traced the brush strokes of the kanji, hoping that he could erase it. But when he was through, ‘traitor’ still remained. Rin’s hands flew back to his mouth, clapping over it to stop himself from screaming and he closed his eyes to sob.

A word Haru had said earlier echoed through his head…

‘Suicidal’

Was Haru right?

His crying became outright sobs at the thought. He’d always imagined Sousuke as being in some starkly beautiful landscape, brooding and thinking of Rin in his solitude. It had always been a bit of a depressing thought to think of Sousuke sad like that, but there was no denying the romance of the image.

But there was nothing romantic about this reality.

It was too horrible to even imagine the depths of despair and anger and self-hatred Sousuke must have hit to drag a razor blade across his skin, over and over again so the lines would stay. And the meaning of those lines was the absolute worst part of all.
‘Traitor’…

Rin understood whom that shoulder had betrayed.

Sousuke had done this to himself because he couldn’t swim with Rin.

Rin had insisted Sousuke could overcome his injury and he’d told Sousuke he’d be waiting for him in Australia. Rin had wanted Sousuke there regardless of whether he swam or not, but he’d never been so upfront about it and had hidden behind the pretext of swimming so Sousuke wouldn’t know what Rin really wanted. Stupid. And now look what Rin's omission had done. Over three years of worrying and missing and hurting and all the while, Sousuke had marked his shoulder as a traitor. Sure Rin wanted Sousuke to swim still, because they’d shared a dream together and it was a beautiful dream, but when Sousuke had told him about the surgeries, Rin had accepted that it really didn’t matter if Sousuke swam with him or not, Rin just really wanted him there. But he’d never told Sousuke that. When Sousuke’s goodbye note came, Rin realized how much damage his omission had done but by then, it was too late. Rin had always felt so incredibly guilty and responsible for Sousuke’s disappearance because he’d made the person most precious to him feel as though he only wanted to share a lane with him.

But even then it hadn’t been fucking true, he'd wanted to share his sodas, his jokes, his bed, his whole fucking life with Sousuke and Sousuke had disappeared not knowing how much Rin fucking loved him! He'd disappeared thinking Rin only wanted to swim with him but Rin wanted fucking everything with him! Seeing the anger and the hatred Rin’s mistake had caused made that guilt exponentially heavier.

It was a wonder he didn’t collapse under its weight.

He’d abandoned Sousuke once for Haru, put pressure on Sousuke to swim, and pretended he didn't love his best friend that he’d finally succeeded in breaking his fucking Sousuke.

What kind of monster was Rin?

Poor Sousuke!

It was all Rin’s fault!

No wonder Sousuke had been running away from Rin all these years! It was amazing that Sousuke wasn’t running away now before Rin could hurt him worse.

So upset was Rin that he didn’t notice Sousuke had pushed him off his lap until Rin felt the absence of Sosuke’s touch. Wiping away his tears, he found Sousuke curled up in a ball facing the wall, his back protecting him from Rin.

Instantly Rin reached out a hand, desperate to preserve the fragile bond they’d barely just begun to reestablish. But when Rin touched Sousuke, Sousuke curled up in a tighter ball.
Crippled by guilt and despair, Rin could do nothing but try to find words adequate enough to express how horrible he felt for doing this to Sousuke. But before he could, Sousuke spoke.

“It was a long time ago,” Sousuke’s voice was choked up and uneven, “I’m sorry I did it but these scars are three years old. I’ve worked hard on myself and I’m not that person anymore. I accept and forgive myself for what I’ve done and now these scars remind me how far out of the muck I’ve dragged this sorry self of mine.”

He peeked over the offending shoulder at Rin with tear-filled eyes.

Rin did not like seeing Sousuke cry.

“I’m done hiding things from you, Rin,” he said quietly, “Hiding nearly destroyed me and I’ll never do it again.”

Rin could read the plea of Sousuke’s heart in the honesty of his eyes; it was a plea of forgiveness and understanding.

As though Sousuke was the one who needed forgiveness!

Rin flew to Sousuke’s side, wrapping his hands around the damned shoulder so he could cling to the source of so much pain and kiss it better from behind. His kisses were too sloppy so Rin stopped and instead put his forehead against Sousuke’s shoulder blade. Then, he wept.

“Please forgive me!” Rin sobbed, “I put so much pressure on you before and I had no right to! Swimming and my own selfishness blinded me and I couldn’t see what I was putting you through. I should have just been honest with you that I didn’t really care if you could swim or not, I just wanted to be with you! I should have told you that what I really, really wanted was to be with you, no matter what the circumstances! And look what I drove you to! I’m so sorry, Sou! Please, please forgive me!”

Sousuke grabbed Rin’s hand, curled around the damned shoulder.

"I betrayed you!" Rin wailed, "Please, please forgive me!"

Sousuke squeezed Rin's hand hard.

“This wasn’t your fault,” Sousuke growled fiercely, “And it wasn’t really my shoulder’s fault either. I was the one who over-trained, I was the one who didn’t take care of myself when I should have, I was the one who drug that razor over myself, I was the one who made myself bleed, and I betrayed myself. If I’d taken care of myself and not been so insistent on punishing my body, I could have kept swimming. The only person to blame for my actions is me, so there is nothing to forgive.”

Rin interlaced his fingers with Sousuke’s, kissing Sousuke’s back again.

“But all you’ve ever wanted was to be with me,” Rin said quietly, “and I shouldn't have pushed you away and abandoned you. I should have told you I wanted you with me, regardless of whether or not you swam. I respect that you want to take responsibility for your actions, but please don’t let me off the hook so easily. Please forgive me.”
For a painfully long time, Sousuke didn’t say anything. Rin kissed his shoulder again and again, begging for absolution.

“Of course I forgive you, Rin. I forgive you for everything, always, even though I feel I am the only one who can possibly be blamed. I forgive you.”

It took some time, but Rin eventually calmed down enough to whisper ‘thank you’.

Sousuke relaxed too; with the hand holding Rin’s, he rubbed his thumb over Rin’s fingertips.

Rin stopped crying. He was forgiven.

The silence between them lasted an eternity, but it was needed for them to both catch up with their feelings.

While he lay pressed against Sousuke’s back, a thousand thoughts jostled around in Rin’s mind, each begging for his attention first. The most pressing of those thoughts was that terrible, little word Haru had planted, the word Rin hadn’t even thought to fear until today.

“Sou, I want to ask you something,” he pulled his fingers from Sousuke’s hand so he could run them over the scars, “I want to know because I care about you. I won’t pass judgment.”

“You can ask me anything, Rin,” Sousuke replied, “I’m done hiding things from you.”

“Did you ever…” Rin began, but stopped.

What a hard thing to ask someone you love.

“Did I what?” Sousuke coaxed.

Rin swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes shut; he had to hear Sousuke’s answer, but he was almost too terrified to ask the question.

“Did you ever go further than this?”

Instead of saying the words out loud, Rin pressed his finger lightly against ‘traitor’. He could tell where it was because it stood out more from the skin than the other lines.

“No.” Sousuke said after a long hesitation. Sousuke’s hand found Rin’s again and he squeezed Rin’s hand as if to reassure Rin. It was a relief to hear Sousuke give a negative answer, but this was a two-part question.

“Did you want to?” Rin pressed.

Sousuke’s hesitation was longer; the length of time it took him to think of a way to answer made Rin’s heart sink and a bitter, acid taste rise up in his throat.

“Never seriously,” Sousuke answered carefully, “At my lowest, I glimpsed over the edge of that chasm a few times and I'd be lying if I didn’t find it appealing to jump over the edge into oblivion. I was so full of rage at myself and in so much pain that cutting myself seemed like an outlet or a way to give a physical form to what was tearing me apart inside, I don’t really know which. The first time I did it, I was still at home, the day after our last phone call, when I went to the doctor’s and they told me I couldn’t swim again. And two hours later, my dad kicked me out.”
Rin hadn’t asked about Sousuke cutting himself and frankly it hurt to hear, but he listened, squeezing Sousuke’s hand to show that Sousuke had his attention. The words came spilling out of Sousuke and Rin could feel that these were deep, dark things that Sousuke hadn’t shared with anyone but had been needing to talk about for a long time.

From his hollow voice, Rin understood how alone and full of despair Sousuke had been. He continued to spill his darkest, most painful secrets for Rin.

“The second time I cut myself was a week after that, when I was finally well and truly on my own. The third and fourth time happened a month after that, after the ship I’d worked on to leave Japan had arrived in Hawaii and I had a room of my own at the hotel I worked at. But that was it. Ever since then, I haven’t been able to get the memory of me, huddled over bathroom sinks, watching the blood drip down my shoulder onto the white porcelain out of my head. It makes me ill to think about it and I promise you I could never put myself through that again. I won’t try to make excuses because there are no excuses for what I did to myself.”

Here, Sousuke turned around so he was facing Rin, his right shoulder and the kanji rotating out of view.

“That was a long time ago and I’m not that person anymore.” he said earnestly, taking Rin’s hands, “I know it’s ugly but I see these scars as a symbols of how far I’ve come and a reminder that I can’t betray myself anymore, try to fit into people’s image of me. And it wasn’t that you wanted me to swim and I couldn’t. Please, please don't think that. As I dug the razor into my skin, it was my father’s words that was going through my head. I don’t ever want to repeat the things he said because they don’t matter now, but if you heard the stuff he said you wouldn’t blame yourself at all for how hard I took my final failure as a swimmer. Being ranked nationally then failing so spectacularly did not sit well with him. I’m most ashamed of myself for believing the things my father said. About everything.”

Rin furrowed his eyebrows. His father had never gone to any swim meets so Rin had always assumed he didn’t care. Since Sousuke was at boarding school when he was at his swimming peak, Ichirou must not have heard the conversations Sousuke and Mr. Yamazaki had had about swimming. Of the many conversations Ichirou and Rin had had about Sousuke over the years, they’d never discussed Mr. Yamazaki’s feelings towards Sousuke’s failed swimming career. It had always been about Sousuke’s sexuality.

"If anything," Sousuke said, his voice low, "You were the one who saved me. At my darkest, I really, really wanted it to be over for me and I was willing to end it. But then I would always remember how you were the day your father died and I couldn't...I couldn't do that to you again. I kept living because I couldn't let you cry like that again."

Sousuke rolled over to face Rin again.

"Honestly, it was you who saved me from myself so thanks. I really feel as though I owe you my life. And honestly I haven't had such terrible thoughts in a long, long time. I've been thinking more about how I could make you proud and happy for me, not how I could make you cry. So please don't worry about it. Like I said, I'm different now."

Sousuke looked down at his hand. Rin’s heart was completely full and he strongly felt the need to touch Sousuke. He raised a hand up to Sousuke's cheek and caressed it gently, wiping away the remnants of Sousuke's tears with his thumb. Then, he brought his hand down and took Sousuke's hand in his.

For a long time they fell into a mutual silence, each looking at their clasped hands. That time was
necessary for them to gather themselves up again after such a momentous outpouring of emotion.

It had been completely necessary but it left them both drained.

Eventually, Sousuke broke the silence with a laugh.

“What a mood-killer!” he joked, “I’d hoped that the first night we spent together like this would be magical and romantic but of course I just had to ruin it with all this depressing crap from the past. I’m sorry!”

Rin gave him a weak smile but didn’t say anything. There was some truth to what Sousuke said; at the moment, he would be more interested in cuddling Sousuke in his arms and giving him lots of healing kisses than having Sousuke’s humungous penis up his ass.

When Rin didn’t answer, Sousuke’s smile fell.

“But thank you for listening, Rin,” he whispered, “I’ve not talked about this stuff in so much detail before and telling you my big, dark secret feels so good. I was more afraid of you seeing my shoulder than anything else, I think. But now you know the darkest stuff and I hope you’re interested in seeing the best stuff.”

Rin smiled for real this time and Sousuke returned it. Not for the first time, Rin was struck by just how beautiful Sousuke was when he smiled.

Rin scooted towards Sousuke and gave him a long, sweet kiss. As it had every time tonight, Rin’s heart began to race when their lips met.

Rin immediately rethought his assessment of his current sexual mood.

He trailed kisses to Sousuke’s ear, hoping to change Sousuke’s mind too.

“I can’t wait to see the best stuff, Sou,” he whispered.

Sousuke unfurled his arms so he could wrap Rin in them, pulling Rin up against his big, bare chest.

How was it possible for one person to generate so much heat? And smell so good? Because of how much time Rin spent around swimmers, it was always so nice when someone lacked that underlying chlorine smell and Sousuke, well Sousuke had always smelled better than anyone else. Rin waited, hoping for Sousuke to make some kind of a move. But it seemed Sousuke was content to cuddle.

Rin felt terribly selfish because Sousuke probably needed this, but their time was limited and Rin wasn’t going to leave Sousuke again without more.

They’d both been waiting for this night for so long. He knew he’d regret not following through if they missed this opportunity. Rin still had to go back to Australia in two days and his event schedule was pretty brutal.

But what could Rin do that was guaranteed to get Sousuke in the mood?

And then it hit him
There was one thing guaranteed to get Yamazaki Sousuke turned on! And it also had the added benefit of being something that would make Sousuke feel safe and protected, what he needed more than anything.

Rin laughed.

“What?” Sousuke asked as Rin pulled away from Sousuke and sat up.

“I need your belt, Sou.” Rin said, offering absolutely no explanation. He was too busy getting his own belt off.

Rin smiled devilishly as Sousuke obeyed, lifting those slender, thin hips up so he could slide his belt out of the loops. His look of utter confusion was super adorable.

Oh what a treat Sousuke was in for!

Sousuke hesitantly handed over his belt and, without warning, Rin jumped on top of him and grabbed one of his hands. Sousuke barely had time to register what was happening before Rin had tied Sousuke’s wrist up with the belt to the metal headboard.

“Rin!?” Sousuke yelped as he futilely tried to struggle, “What are you doing!?”

Rin grabbed Sousuke’s other wrist.

“Something you’ll like!” Rin teased as he leaned down and gave Sousuke’s forehead a patronizing kiss. Sousuke huffed indignantly but became still, allowing Rin to tie up his other wrist.

Rin beamed down at Sousuke, bound and very much at Rin’s mercy.

“Do you have any sunglasses, Sou?” Rin asked.

“Yeah, over there on the desk but why…hey!”

Rin had jumped off Sousuke and found the sunglasses. Now he went to the door and opened it up.

“Where are you going!??” Sousuke practically shouted, “What’s going on?”

Rin tilted the sunglasses down and winked at him.

“I’ll be right back and I absolutely promise you’ll love this.”

With that, Rin dashed out into the living area, slamming the door behind him.

Through the closed door, Rin could hear Sousuke’s angry protests but for the moment, Rin ignored them. He had a much more important mission in the kitchen. Putting on Sousuke’s aviators – because of course Sousuke had the perfect pair of sunglasses for what Rin had planned- he went to the fridge and opened it up, looking around for something that would work. While he rooted around in the fridge, Haru emerged from his room.
“Rin, what’s going on?” Haru asked, looking suspiciously at Rin’s bare chest and sunglasses.

Just then, Sousuke let out a string of profanities and Haru turned his attention to the closed door, then back to Rin. Rin grinned as innocently as he possibly could before diving back into the fridge.

“Rin…..” Haru said, as though Rin was a little boy caught with a ring of chocolate around his mouth from a contraband and very much gone piece of chocolate cake.

Rin found a banana and waved it victoriously in Haru’s face.

“RIN!” Sousuke screamed through the door.

Makoto timidly poked his head out of the door.

“Haru is it robbers?”

Obviously Haru had been to scout out trouble for Makoto.

“No it’s just Rin.”

“Haru could you do me a huge favor?” Rin asked.

“What?” Haru asked flatly.

“When I open Sousuke’s door, will you say pretty loudly ‘I won’t let you get away with this, MacGrubber’?”

“Why?”

“Just do it, please?”

“Who is MacGrubber?”

“RIN!!!” Sousuke yelled.

“Oh Haru just do it so you can come back to bed,” Makoto whined, “It’s getting cold without you in it.”

Rin grinned as wide as possible. If there was one person Haru would listen to, it was Makoto.

“Fine. What was the line again?”

“’I won’t let you get away with this, MacGrubber!’”

“Okay, you ready?”

Rin put his hand on the door and gave Makoto a massive smile.

“It’s probably in your best interest if you guys stay out of the living room for the next 15 minutes. Ready Haru?”

“You are such a weirdo…fine, let’s get this over with already.”

Rin opened the door a crack so Sousuke could hear what was going on. Then Rin looked expectantly at Haru.
“Ah. You aren’t going to get away from this MiGrover.”

Haru smiled smugly at Rin and Rin scrunched his nose up in displeasure at Haru’s very poor performance.

“I’M NOT GOING TO LET YOU HAVE O’NEIL!” Rin screeched, “NOT WHILE I STILL HAVE BULLETS!”

Rin pointed his banana gun at Haru and proceeded to do his best gunfire sound effects which, unfortunately, weren’t very good despite an embarrassing amount of practice. Haru rolled his eyes as much as was humanly possible before retreating back into his own little love nest.

When he was gone and Rin made some even worse dying noises, Rin kicked open Sousuke’s door, blowing out a few candles with the force of the wind. Rin jumped through the room, clearing it for hostiles with his banana gun.

“O’Neil! I found you!” Rin cried dropping the banana on the ground. He ran over to Sousuke who was wearing the absolute biggest, goofiest smile Rin had ever seen on him since they were probably nine years old. Which was probably the last time Agents MacGrubber and O’Neil had worked a case together.

Did Rin know Sousuke or did Rin know Sousuke!? 

“MacGrubber!” Sousuke whispered, “I knew you’d come for me!”

Rin jumped on top of Sousuke and kissed him fiercely.

“No time for that now,” Sousuke growled once Rin had pulled away, “Saba Breath will be back to finish you off! Leave me, save yourself!”

For good measure, Sousuke squirmed against his restraints.

Not too hard, Rin slapped him against the cheek. Sousuke smiled even wider.

“I won’t ever leave you, O’Neil! We’re partners!”

Before Sousuke/O’Neil could argue, Rin got to work on the belts. He undid one, but Sousuke flailed around to make it harder to get the second.

“Saba Breath is coming!” O’Neil shouted, “It’s fine! I’ve made my peace with the Devil. He’s expecting me. Save yourself!”

“NEVER!” MacGrubber/Rin shouted as he untied the second belt.

Finally free, Sousuke sat up and kissed Rin as hard as he could.

Rin forced him away, shaking Sousuke’s shoulders: “We have to get out of here! Saba Breath is going to blow this nuclear hydro-electric dam and orphanage SKY HIGH! Let’s go!”

Rin jumped off Sousuke and ran toward the door with Sousuke just behind him. Rin grabbed his discarded banana off the floor and brandished it like he was a cowboy. They’d never been terribly concerned with genre accuracy when they’d played the imaginary, cop partners as kids, and as adults
genre accuracy didn't matter at all. Rin made for the door, but Sousuke grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“MacGrubber, are you sure it’s safe out there? Saba Breath, The Fluffy Puppy, and the Smoothie Menace could all be setting a trap for us!”

Sousuke gave him quick, reassuring peck, “Not if they know what’s good for them.”

With that, MacGrubber tore open the door and did a rolling somersault out into the living room, crouching down with his banana, ready to fire at anyone who dare show their face. Sousuke wasn’t quite as graceful so he just crawled after Rin, smiling an idiotically huge smile.

When O’Neil joined MacGrubber, he was rewarded with another kiss.

“I’ve already disabled the nuclear reactor,” MacGrubber informed O’Neil, “but we still have to worry about those zombie piranhas the Smoothie Menace was cooking up. Who knows for what dastardly purpose? Follow me!”

“Okay!” Sousuke agreed.

Rin did another roll to the kotatsu and crouched down behind it. Sousuke surprised Rin by doing his own somersault, but as he was so big, he overshot Rin and kicked him a bit in the process.

“Sorry MacGrubber!” Sousuke yelped as he crawled back to Rin.

Rin shook his head, smiled, and offered Sousuke his fist to bump.

“No need to apologize, O’Neil. We’re going to get out of this thing one way or another so of course we’re going to get a bit banged up. Occupational hazard.”

Rin, kissed Sousuke on the cheek, to reassure Sousuke that it was alright.

Just then, Kisumi emerged from his room and for one very long, awkward second, they all just stared at each other stupidly. Rin saw Sousuke’s smile fade a fraction and he felt a surge of unreasonable anger at Kisumi.

MacGrubber had worked too hard to rescue O’Neil from the clutches of Saba Breath for the Smoothie Menace to ruin it now!

Rin pointed his banana at the evildoer and proceeded to make the most ridiculous gun noises he possibly could.

“PWEH! PWEH! PWEH! PWEH!” went the banana gun.

MacGrubber nudged O’Neil with his elbow and O’Neil quickly joined in.

“PWEH! PWEH! PWEH! PWEH!”

“Nice shooting, O’Neil!” Rin cheered, “You killed basically the entire zombie piranha army!”

“What the hell are you two doing!?” Kisumi shrieked.

Rin ducked down further, Sousuke following him.
“Damn!” Rin cursed, “The Smoothie Menace has us surrounded with his legion of zombie piranahs! Where did all those reinforcements come from? There’s only one thing left to do, O’Neil…”

“What MacGrubber?”

Rin lifted up his gun and gave Sousuke a mischievous smile, “Let’s make this banana split.”

Sousuke’s already gleeful eyes grew massive with excitement. He nodded.

Rin popped his head up over the kotatsu.

“Hey The Smoothie Menace!” he shouted, “Remember my brother you killed, say hello to him IN HELL!”

Then, Rin lobbed the banana at Kisumi. He was very pleased to hear Sousuke inhale sharply, completely caught up in the game.

Oh yeah…this was definitely a good idea!

The banana hit Kisumi right in the head!

Direct hit!

“Let’s get out of here!” Rin screeched as he yanked Sousuke up by the wrist. Sousuke got up but promptly tripped; Rin couldn’t tell if it was a genuine accident or if O’Neil had done it on purpose. Previous experience suggested Sousuke had done it on purpose.

“Go on without me, MacGrubber!” O’Neil said gruffly, “I’ll never make it with this broken leg!”

“OH YES YOU WILL!” MacGrubber shouted as he hauled Sousuke up by the arm and draped Sousuke’s arm across his shoulders, “I’LL NEVER LEAVE YOU, O’NEIL!”

“WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK YOU TWO!” Kisumi shouted.

Rin stuck his tongue out at Kisumi and dragged Sousuke to his door.

“The dam is breaking!” Rin announced, dramatically out of breath, “We’re going to have to jump!”

“It’s a long way down. I don’t think I’ll make it because of my leg.”

“YES. YOU. WILL. O’NEIL!”

“MacGrubber…” Sousuke whispered, coughing pathetically so there was no mistaking how injured he was.

“Yeah, O’Neil?”

“If I don’t make it…” Sousuke coughed again, “I just want to say it’s been an honor being your partner.”
Rin grabbed Sousuke’s face and kissed him fiercely, “Don’t talk like that O’Neil. I won’t ever leave you behind…”

A banana whizzed over their heads, landing with a splat against Sousuke’s window.

“The Smoothie Menace is coming!” O’Neil cried, wrapping his arms tightly around Sousuke, “We… have…to…jump…NOW!!!!!”

And O’Neil and MacGrubber did jump, landing with a giant thud on Sousuke’s floor.

“WHY THE HELL AM I THE SMOOTHIE MENACE!?” Kisumi demanded, but Rin slammed the door shut with his foot, blocking out the sound.

Alone again, Rin crawled up to Sousuke’s side and shook his shoulders.

“O’Neil?” he called out, making his voice go all shaky.

“O’NEIL!?”

Still Sousuke didn’t respond, though he was smiling and his tongue was lolled out a bit too much to be believable.

“NOOOOOO!!!! O’NEIL!!!!!”

Chapter End Notes

Is this the end of O’Neil!? (It’s not) Will his partner MacGrubber save him!? (Of course!) Find out next time....!!!!(Except I just told you...so enjoy the actual sexy times next time ;)

I had to divide this chapter into two because it was getting insanely long but the next chapter will pick right up! I really love my mental image of Sousuke’s room so yeah, that section I really wanted to explain for everyone. And Rin and Sousuke as Detectives O’Neil and MacGrubber have been my absolute favorite thing to write about thus far so I hope you all enjoy reading about these two huge ass dorks :) As always, thanks for reading!
“Guess, I'll just have to do CPR.” Rin announced loudly as he tore off the aviators and threw them up on the desk. He hopped playfully on Sousuke’s chest and the supposedly unconscious and possibly dead police officer looked up at Rin, smiling.

Despite the very great effort Sousuke was making to look like he was dead, Rin could see the bubbles of laughter hovering just below the surface. Sousuke rarely let his guard down enough with most people to smile, let alone laugh. But Rin wasn't most people and Rin's favorite game had always been to get the big idiot to quake with laughter.

Unfair it may have been, but quick as lightning, Rin scooted down so he was on Sousuke's thighs and therefore had full access to Sousuke's ticklish torso. Before Sousuke realized what was coming, Rin began tickling him mercilessly.

While Sousuke flailed helplessly beneath him, he laughed his deep, rich, from the belly laugh that resonated all through Rin. Looking at Sousuke, his mouth opened wide, his eyes closed tight, and his face fully free and happy as it so very rarely was, Rin was struck by a wave of nostalgia.

Sousuke was still the same little boy he'd always been. Rin had grown up watching Sousuke's face contorted in giggling and their past was full of fleeting smiles. When they were roommates at Samezuka, Sousuke had tried to hide this face behind a big, tall wall of broody angst, but Rin had a natural knack of coaxing that face out from behind Sousuke's defenses. And it was this face, this face that Sousuke only ever showed Rin, that Rin had missed most whenever oceans separated them from each other.

The power of that face stopped Rin's hands and unconsciously, he left them on Rin's bared stomach, completely transfixed by the happy face he'd been missing for so, so long. Because of everything they’d been through, everything Sousuke had revealed of himself, everything Sousuke had suffered, endured, and conquered for Rin…Rin felt like he finally fully understood what a precious, precious thing this face really was.

Sousuke took a moment to catch his breath and, still smiling widely, he peeled open his eyes and looked up at Rin. The way he looked now, in the glow of the candles, looking up at Rin with so much feeling and joy, it stabbed Rin straight through the heart but in a very good way. Rin forgot to breath for a second.

This felt new, but really it wasn't. It was something very old that Rin was seeing anew.

Had Sousuke ever looked at him quite like this before? Had Rin ever been blind to Sousuke? Maybe distance had finally, finally given Rin some perspective on their relationship.
Because, for the first time ever, Rin could name the way Sousuke was looking at him, with complete and total adoration. That was the only way Rin could think to describe that look but it was so much more.

It was still the same look that Sousuke had worn when first they’d met in kindergarten. But no, it wasn’t really the same. There was so much more to it than there had been before. How could it be the same? Years of heartache and hardship had tempered it and now, now there was a tinge of hope that felt new. New ingredients to a favorite dish that made something so wonderfully familiar and comforting, new and exciting and terrifying. This look, it was how Sousuke always looked at Rin, but it was so much more meaningful and precious and heartwarming and miraculous than that.

How could Rin never have seen it properly until now?

But now he saw it.

Now he understood.

Sousuke loved Rin...

God, he'd always loved Rin...

How could Rin be so blind? So dense to have missed something so obvious? Even when he'd been trying to see?

Rin crawled off Sousuke and lay down next to him, though he made sure their bodies didn’t touch.

Suddenly he felt very shy of Sousuke. Well, not shy exactly. But humbled. Only Sousuke was capable of making Rin feel humbled. And Rin could tickle Sousuke and make him laugh all he wanted, but in the end there was this look of love that Rin totally didn't deserve. And now Rin was seeing this look here, in Sousuke's room. And there was intent in those beloved eyes, and desire. Rin had to look away because it was all a lot to take in. He'd dreamt of what it would be like if he was ever lucky enough to find himself in this situation but nothing had prepared him really for the moment of truth, for what they were planning to do.

Together.

No way was he capable of having casual sex with Sousuke. Even before they'd begun, Rin knew this was going to be unlike any other experience he'd encountered before because this was Sousuke, not just anyone. How could it not be full of meaning and feeling?
What if it wasn't good? What would happen then?

Rin had never felt more overwhelmed.

Under the soft candlelight, they lay like that for a few minutes and Rin tried desperately to think of something he could say, some way to convey all the things he was feeling.

Words utterly failed Rin so they sat in silence. Well, not complete silence; Rin’s heart was thundering against his chest so hard, Sousuke had to be hearing it.

Did Sousuke know how hard Rin's heart beat for him?

The silence dragged on and Rin began to think that he'd ruined everything.

Sousuke studied Rin's profile carefully, trying to ascertain if he'd done something wrong or not.

No.

Not something wrong.

Although he hadn't seen him in years, Sousuke could still read Rin's body language as though they’d never been parted. No, it wasn't anger, but Rin was definitely going through some stuff. The way he was sort of hunching into himself reminded Sousuke of when they were young and Sousuke said he didn't want to swim in the relay. And of the time he'd told Rin about his shoulder and Rin had clung to him, crying. And also of the whole ride to the airport, to send Rin off to Australia. Rin had asked that only Sousuke go with him and it had been the last time they'd seen each other. Rin had barely been able to look at him, let alone touch him, and over the course of an hour all Rin had managed to say was 'I'll see you around, Sou'. But he hadn't needed to say or do anything else because the way he was holding his body had said enough.

Had Sousuke been braver back then, it would have been the perfect time to pour his heart out because Rin had been so sentimental that maybe he'd accept Sousuke. But then Rin was through security and the moment passed and that was that.

All those times had been very important moments. Just as now, Rin had been feeling a lot of things.

Watching him, reading the angles of his body, Sousuke connected the dots. Those times were all times that had been highly emotional for Rin and they were all times that Sousuke had been the focus.

A dawning light began to shatter the darkness of Sousuke's heart as he watched his beloved Rin, feel things because of him. Rin did feel things for him. Strong things. Things he didn't feel for anyone else, not even Haru. Because the way he held his shoulders, he'd only ever done that for Sousuke.
And he'd kissed Sousuke. He'd let Sousuke kiss him back. He'd tickled and coaxed and comforted and listened, all to help Sousuke to this point and here he was, feeling things.

Because of Sousuke.

If Rin didn't want Sousuke, they wouldn't be here now. He wouldn't be hunched into himself like this and barely able to look at Sousuke.

God!

Rin wanted Sousuke!

Sousuke fought down the urge to go over the course of their lives together and pick out all the times he could remember Rin being like this. How long had Rin wanted Sousuke? The question was intoxicating to ask, but it had to wait for another time.

Rin was here now and Sousuke had been waiting a lifetime for this moment.

He wasn't going to let the moment pass without a fight.

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Rin was ruining things. Why the hell couldn't he just turn to Sousuke and continue doing what they'd been doing? Why was he making it so difficult?

Rin was on the verge of tears.

But then...Sousuke extended a finger and brushed it against Rin’s, surprisingly Rin and instantly sending every last nerve in his body into a mad frenzy.

From the way Rin’s body responded, you’d think Rin had never been touched before in his life. He'd already made out with Sousuke tonight and touched him quite a bit, why was he having this reaction now?

Because it was Sousuke reaching for him, it was Sousuke initiating it. That was usually Rin's job but this reversal was so, so much.

Rin closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. Such exquisite fire was almost too much to bear.

Sousuke didn’t try to hold his hand. Instead, he lightly trailed his fingers up Rin’s arm, going slow so his fingers could discover the rise of tendons, the texture of Rin’s skin...every last detail. His touch was feather light, but his fingers sparked fire as they moved along the surface of Rin. They left behind molten rivers that went down to Rin’s bones and pooled behind his navel.

Rin tried very hard to keep his breathing even, but it was impossible with such soft, tantalizing touches and the seductive light, glowing on the other side of Rin’s eyelids.

When Sousuke’s hand reached Rin’s shoulder, it fell away, immediately causing Rin to whimper in protest. Rin blushed, embarrassed such a needy noise had come out of him.

But God...he didn't know how badly he'd been needing Sousuke to reach out to him!
Sousuke chuckled and moved closer to Rin’s reclined body. Beneath Rin, the floor felt cold and hard, a vivid contrast to the fire coursing through Rin’s body, burning away Rin’s bones until he was felt no more than a bag of jelly incapable of movement.

Though he could not see it, Rin felt Sousuke’s body towering over Rin’s as Sousuke lay on his side, no part of him touching Rin. He couldn’t be more than a few millimeters away and having him so close without touching him was maddening.

Touch me, Rin begged in his head.

Sousuke was so close, in fact, that Rin could feel heat emanating from Sousuke’s core and his breath gently caressing Rin’s skin. Hearing every new breath made Rin shudder and each new wave was more agonized than the last. Music sung in French was playing faintly in the background, but Rin was having a hard time listening to anything but Sousuke’s breathing and his own thudding heart. Although his eyes were still closed, he still sensed the warm, soft light from the candles through the thin veil of his eyelids. They smelled of vanilla, but the smell of Sousuke – a scent Rin had forgotten but now remembered he loved more than anything in the world – overpowered the candles.

Doing what he did, the scent of chlorine was never far from Rin’s nostrils, but there wasn’t a trace of it on Sousuke anymore. Instead, Rin smelled fire and metal and wood smoke with just a hint of tonkatsu. But more than anything else there was dried sweat – the concentrated essence of Sousuke - that nearly choked Rin up as it conjured up long buried memories. There was Rin laughing as Sousuke caught him in his arms, winning some game they’d been playing in a field of sunflowers. There was Rin tackling Sousuke in frustration after Sousuke blocked another one of Rin’s shots on the football field. There was Rin pressed hard against a green sweater Sousuke wore long, long ago, crying as though it were the end of Rin’s world because, in a sense it had been. That sweater Sousuke wore the day Rin’s father had drowned and even though he was a child and hadn’t really understood what had happened, Sousuke had been there for Rin. There was Rin clutching to Sousuke’s Samezuka warm-up jacket at regionals, when Rin first learned of Sousuke’s shoulder and what Sousuke had done just so he could swim with Rin again. And then there was the last memory, Rin wearing one of Sousuke’s shirts to bed on the night he’d received Sousuke’s goodbye letter. Rin had stolen the shirt from Sousuke and had kept it in a ziploc bag so it wouldn’t lose it’s smell, but even after all his precautions, the shirt had only really held the memory of Sousuke's scent. And then that wonderful, intoxicating, comforting smell seemed gone forever...

Aware that right here, right now he was making maybe his most important with Sousuke yet, Rin breathed in deeply. His lips parted slightly and he breathed in Sousuke.

It was fucking embarrassing how intoxicating Rin found Sousuke's smell.

The lay close but not touching for what could have been a minute or an hour or a millennium. It was the worst and best thing Rin had experienced with Sousuke and he wanted it both to end immediately and last for eternity.

And then…
And then came a touch on Rin’s clavicle and the spell was broken. Rin’s body instantly remembered its bones and rejoined solid matter. If anything, Rin’s body became a bit too rigid at this touch; his nipples became hard and his penis twitched violently in his pants.

A finger traced the outline of Rin’s clavicle slowly. When the feather light touch reached the hollow beneath Rin’s throat, Rin could do nothing to suppress a moan, full of longing. Inside his pants, Rin stirred and at his sides, Rin balled his hands into fists. He wished he had something to clench.

The finger at the base of Rin’s throat began a leisurely trip upwards. Goosebumps erupted all over Rin’s skin. At the summit of Rin’s Adam’s apple, Rin’s lips parted and he sighed deeply. Rin’s back arched up, moving his chest closer to Sousuke’s hand, begging Sousuke for more but doing nothing more than beg.

Rin liked Sousuke being the one in control.

Another finger made contact with Rin’s skin and together, the pair of travellers beat a path from Rin’s throat and along the line of Rin’s jaw until they reached that spot, by Rin’s ear where Rin’s jawbone joined his skull and the rise of his cheekbones began. There, Sousuke gently yet firmly turned Rin’s face to the side so Rin, still with eyes closed, was facing Sousuke.

Next, Sousuke’s forehead leaned against Rin’s and his fingers found their way into Rin’s hair, where they, along with the rest of Sousuke’s hands, tangled themselves, tenderly stroking through the strands as though they were spun of gold. Sousuke had always liked Rin’s hair, even when they were little he’d liked to run his fingers through it and play with it. Such a familiar action done more intimately than ever before encouraged Rin to turn towards Sousuke so his whole body was facing Sousuke’s, inviting him in. To extend the invitation, Rin’s blind hand found Sousuke’s waist. Upon contact, a jolt went through Sousuke’s body and Rin’s lips quirked up in a tiny smile.

No more tickling tonight.

Settled like this, it was a few moments before Sousuke closed the gap between their mouths. His kiss was cautious and exploratory, chaste and all too fleeting. Thankfully, it was followed by another kiss, this one was longer, bolder, and a bit demanding. As Sousuke kissed Rin, a soft sound, sort of like a purr of pleasure, bubbled up from Rin’s throat. He both hated how desperate it must sound to Sousuke and was happy because it encouraged Sousuke to kiss Rin deeper, more thoroughly than before.

When their tongues touched, Rin needed more. With the hand on Sousuke’s hip, he pulled Sousuke until he was able to tip Sousuke off balance. With less grace than Rin would have preferred, he managed to awkwardly pull Sousuke on top of him.
Confused, Sousuke began to pull away so as to right himself again, but Rin held on to him tightly, refusing to let him budge an inch.

It was then that Sousuke extricated his mouth from Rin’s and Rin opened his eyes to look up in Sousuke’s beautiful face. His half-hooded eyes were unfathomable. Of course Sousuke, stuck somewhere between confusion, joy, and arousal, looked adorable and Rin couldn’t help but smile up at him.

Though the weight of Sousuke pressed Rin down against the floor, Rin still was having a hard time believing Sousuke…his Sousuke…was really here. He was back from the dead, no longer the ghost that haunted Rin’s dreams. How long was it going to take for him to believe that his Sou was really, truly back?

As had always been the case, seeing Rin smile inspired a similar smile to light up Sousuke’s face.

“You saved my life, MacGrubber,” Sousuke whispered, “Thanks.”

Rin frowned. He’d quite forgotten their game of Agents MacGrubber and O’Neil, partners since childhood, inspired by old cop shows, tasked with fighting crime and the evildoers of Rin’s imagination. Some other time it would be fun to carry out a full fantasy involving their childhood alter-egos, but now…not now…

“Sousuke…” Rin said, breaking once and for all the notion that he wanted Sousuke to be anyone but himself for such an important moment, “Sousuke, now can we…?”

Sousuke’s eyebrows crinkled in concern, comprehending perfectly what Rin was asking. Nevertheless, he nodded nervously in agreement.

“We’re doing this?” Rin asked.

“Yes…” he said roughly, “If you want.”

Rin threw his head back a bit and chuckled. He wasn't nervous anymore.

He was fucking ready.

Because Rin loved Sousuke. And Sousuke loved Rin.

“I do,” Rin said, running his hands up Sousuke’s back until they reached just below Sousuke’s shoulder blades. Using Sousuke to pull himself up, he planted a kiss below Sousuke’s ear.

“I want you very much, Sousuke,” he whispered into that ear, “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone else. I want to feel you deep inside me.”

Sousuke let out a tiny gasp of surprise. Excited by Sousuke’s reaction, Rin continued:

“I want to see your face, feel your body when you come. I want you to make me come. I want to wake up next to you tomorrow morning and go on a date with you tomorrow night and learn all about the person you’ve become. I want to spend every second I can with you. God I want it all. I want you so much Yamazaki Sousuke, my mountain of a man.”
From where he was, Rin had an excellent view of Sousuke’s finely sculpted back. As Rin whispered those extremely cheesy but 1000000% sincere words, a delightful flush went all down Sousuke, visible even in the candlelight.

“You mean it?” Sousuke whispered back, his voice cracking.

Rin laughed and kissed Sousuke again for reassurance. Sousuke was damaged and he’d always had a hard time trusting anything good anyone said to him. But that was Sousuke and Sousuke was who Rin loved. Rin would reassure Sousuke as many times as it took until Sousuke believed he was wanted.

“Yeah I do. Please fuck me now, Sou.”

In a flash, Sousuke’s weight vanished from on top of Rin and he was standing above him. His hand was extended down to help Rin up off the ground. Smiling for what was soon to come, Rin took his hand and allowed himself to be hoisted up. Sousuke’s hands immediately found Rin’s hips. Forcefully, he dragged Rin towards him until their hips smashed together.

Sousuke wasn’t immune to what they’d been doing; he was just as hard as Rin behind the fabric of their pants. This was more than they’d ever felt of each other before. Thankfully, it didn’t feel weird or awkward – a fear that had kept Rin from acting before he went to Australia. No, them pressed together, like this…it felt natural. Like they belonged together.

Sousuke’s mouth found Rin’s and they began kissing. Tenderly at first, but then their lips began to move harder than they had so far. Years of anticipation and longing expressed through a desperate tangle of tongues and a grapple of bodies.

Rin was finding it hard to breathe but he refused to extricate himself from Sousuke.

Sousuke’s hands went lower until he was able to hook his thumbs inside Rin’s waistband, running them around until they came to Rin’s buttons. For a brief moment, Sousuke fumbled around a bit while he continued to kiss Rin, but the buttons proved too much for him. Rin put his hands on Sousuke's and, without pushing Sousuke away, undid the buttons for him. Sousuke took back control after that and tugged down Rin’s pants so Rin was in nothing but his shark-patterned boxer briefs. Only after Rin had stepped out of his pants did Sousuke break away from kissing Rin and he did that only so he could look at Rin properly.

It was a pretty well known truth that swimmer bodies were paragons or beauty and Rin’s muscular, lean body was no exception. But right now, he didn’t want to be an object in a museum…he wanted Sousuke on top of him and inside of him. Sousuke could tell him how pretty he was later.

Rin reached out and undid the buttons of Sousuke’s jeans.

Unlike Rin, who wore everything as loose as possible, Sousuke preferred his pants a bit tighter so it took a bit more effort to pull them down. But it wasn’t that much of a struggle, especially considering that Sousuke, once he comprehended what Rin was doing, helped him speed up the process.

Before too long, Sousuke was in a pair of black, boxer briefs that hugged him like a dream. Rin put his fingers in their waistband, but before he pulled them down he took a moment to look at the massive bulge inside Sousuke’s underwear.
Rin had forgotten how *big* Sousuke was…and he couldn't be more than half erect!

Just to see what would happen, Rin unhooked his fingers from Sousuke’s waistband and rubbed his palm across Sousuke’s manhood. A violent shudder went through Sousuke and he had to reach out his hands and grab Rin’s shoulders, to steady himself. Beneath his hand, Sousuke’s already impressive girth grew harder and bigger. Smirking, Rin rubbed his palm again and this time, Sousuke groaned loudly, his hands clenching Rin’s shoulders harder. When Rin let go, Sousuke’s dick tented up the crotch of his underwear.

Satisfied with the results, Rin slid his fingers back around Sousuke’s waistband and pulled them down, working hard so Sousuke’s dick didn’t get stuck in his underwear. With the job complete, Rin looked down at Sousuke’s enormous penis, erect and a bit weepy after making the acquaintance of Rin’s hand.

Rin wanted to get down on his knees and introduce Sousuke’s penis, leaking precum, to the inside of Rin’s mouth, but Sousuke had other ideas. It only took Sousuke a second to free Rin of his underwear. Rin watched as Sousuke looked down at Rin’s fully exposed and mostly hard penis. Not nearly as impressive as Sousuke's, obviously, but nothing to be ashamed of.

Rin tore his gaze away from their naked groins at the same time Sousuke did and their eyes locked.

Suddenly it hit Rin…he was standing completely naked with the best friend he’d ever had, about to get fucked by him. A strange feeling came over Rin, one that made Rin not necessarily shy but just a bit hesitant.

He’d known Sousuke his entire life but he’d never seen him like this before.

They’d seen each other naked plenty of times – their sport had made it impossible to be embarrassed by nudity and their shared room at Samezuka had ensured there was no mystery about either of their bodies – but this was different. They were so close to each other and they’d never seen each other…aroused. And to be so close to crossing that final line between friendship and the realm beyond, well it was kind of terrifying, even with Rin’s heart so full.

But he could see this feeling mirrored in Sousuke’s eyes and recognizing it in Sousuke soothed Rin.

They were in this together and crossing this final boundary together wasn’t so terrifying.

To reassure Sousuke that he understood why Sousuke was hesitating, Rin smiled and the fear etched in Sousuke’s face faded as he too smiled.

Sousuke reached out and cradled the back of Rin’s head with one hand, bringing him in closer so they could kiss. Unlike before, this kiss was slow and sweet, like Sousuke was savoring Rin. At least that’s how Rin kissed Sousuke, savoring Sousuke because he was his Sousuke and he was back and they were doing *this* together.

Sousuke’s free hand found Rin’s waist the same time that Rin’s hands found Sousuke’s biceps and as one, they moved closer together.

Their penises touched for the very first time, but it wasn’t as weird as it would have been a second ago, if they hadn’t acknowledged the novelty of the situation they were in together. In fact, it felt perfectly natural and as Rin’s kiss delved further into Sousuke, he pressed their groins together.
harder.

In response, Sousuke dared to let the hand on Rin’s hip move down, down, down until he was cupping Rin’s ass and squeezing Rin’s cheeks.

Rin stretched up his arms, so he could put them around Sousuke’s neck, all the while continuing to kiss Sousuke slowly, tenderly, and oh so sweetly...

It was actually kind of impressive that Rin was capable of kissing like this, he'd never done so before.

The hand behind Rin’s head joined the one on Rin’s ass and together, they caressed the curvature of Rin’s rather impressive posterior until they stopped at the point where ass became thigh. Rin was confused about what Sousuke was doing for a fraction of a second before Sousuke pulled up with his hands, lifting Rin off the ground while also encouraging Rin to bend his legs up and around Sousuke. Rin couldn't help but smile gleefully against Sousuke's mouth which in turn made Sousuke smile against Rin's.

It was embarrassing to admit, but Rin had always really liked how much smaller he was than Sousuke. Having someone so big and solid by his side had always made Rin feel so supported, so safe. He always forgot that when they were apart, but the feeling became stronger every time they were back together. Probably because every time Rin was reunited with Sousuke, he was bigger. He’d fantasized about those big arms and legs wrapped around him, but he’d never thought to fantasize about being carried.

Too bad because this was freaking hot and Rin could have been fantasizing about this all along. It was pretty amazing that Sousuke could carry him so easily, as though Rin weighed nothing more than a feather.

Rin was so distracted by kissing and feeling the press of those big hard muscles against his body that he hadn’t noticed Sousuke was carrying him toward the bed until Rin’s back met the sheets. Then Sousuke was on top of Rin again, his hands tangling in Rin's hair, his thigh pressing up against Rin's groin to create some friction for Rin, his mouth trailing along Rin's chin, then his neck, one of his hands moving to Rin's chest, a thumb brushing against Rin's nipple, making his shiver with pleasure....

“You’re really hot Rin,” Sousuke growled, “Fuck, you are so hot.”

Sousuke bit Rin gently on his shoulder and Rin groaned with pleasure, arching his back more to get closer to Sousuke.

And then Sousuke...stopped.

After a a few moments waiting for their activities to resume, Rin lifted his head to look down at Sousuke, to see if anything was the matter. Sousuke had lain his head down against Rin's chest and for a moment Rin felt that maybe Sousuke had fallen asleep. In high school, he'd taken every possible nap in every possible situation he could, but if he was seriously taking a nap now of all times...

"Rin,” Sousuke muttered.
Good. He hadn't fallen asleep.

"Hmmm?" Rin hummed as a question. Sousuke didn't say anything else, but Rin relaxed.

If Sousuke didn't want to have sex tonight, that was fine. Really. Just being with Sousuke like this was leaving Rin a bit mind blown and his world completely shaken so if it didn't progress any further, he still would probably need time to recover from this.

A minute later, Sousuke moved his hand into Rin's stomach and with his long, strong index finger traced a pattern on Rin's stomach. It tickled a little, but Rin had never been the ticklish one.

Sousuke's hand stopped and lay flat on Rin's stomach. Then, he traced the pattern again after a few seconds. Again Sousuke traced the pattern and it was only then that Rin realized Sousuke was tracing kanji across Rin's skin. When they were little and were learning characters, they'd played that game all the time, tracing kanji symbols across each others’ backs and guessing what they were supposed to be. Sousuke was notoriously terrible at the game because he was so ridiculously ticklish, but that had always made the game so much more entertaining because it usually just devolved into Rin tickling Sousuke mercilessly.

God, how gay they'd been for each other from the very beginning!

The kanji Sousuke was writing was too complicated for Rin to make out.

"I don't know Sou, do another." Rin laughed quietly.

Sousuke's hand flopped down to the side of Rin.

"Could you get up on your knees?" Sousuke asked, barely more than a whisper.

Slowly Rin and Sousuke extricated themselves from each other, blushing and neither of them trying to meet the other one's eyes. Rin got up on his knees and Sousuke hesitantly grabbed onto his hips and began pulling Rin, clearly trying to get Rin to turn around. Rin let himself be led, understanding that this was how Sousuke wanted to have sex. It would have been nice if he could have wrapped his arms around Sousuke's neck and looked up into his face as they did this, but if this is how Sousuke wanted it, Rin wasn't going to complain. Once Rin was fully turned around, Sousuke moved away from a second to grab some things off his bedside table - condoms and a little bottle of lube actually - and then his hands were all over Rin, pulling him against his big body while his mouth began to kiss Rin's neck. Rin reached back with one hand so his fingers could tangle into Sousuke's hair while his other hand went over the wrist of the hand Sousuke had on his torso, encouraging him to touch and rub and explore.

Yeah...Rin definitely wasn't going to complain about this.

Sousuke's hand roamed further down and Rin made noises of pleasure that sounded an awful lot like purrs.

While that hand and Sousuke's mouth were keeping Rin distracted, Sousuke's other hand vanished off of Rin's body. It's absence was only noted when it returned not long after on Rin's ass, covered in cold, wet lube that made Rin shiver. Rin's eyes had been closed as he enjoyed Sousuke all over him, but now they shot open in surprise. His whole body went rigid for a fraction of a second as he waited for Sousuke to continue.
For just a moment, Sousuke's hand hesitated because of Rin, but not for long. He didn't tease, he didn't take detours, once he started up again, his long fingers found their way straight to Rin's hole. When they had reached their destination, he pressed the pad of his finger against Rin without actually moving inside. Here, he stopped kissing Rin's neck so he could rest his chin on Rin's shoulder.

"You ready?" he whispered straight into Rin's ear, sending more shivers down Rin's spine. Was Sousuke leaning more on Rin? Or was Rin getting a bit weak in the knees from so much Sousuke?

"Yes..." Rin moaned as he brought the hand that had been holding Sousuke's wrist to off, so he could grab hold of Sousuke's beautiful head board for support.

Sousuke's cold, lubed up finger pressed inside Rin and Rin gasped with pleasure. As Sousuke went in deeper, Rin threw his head back and balled his fists up harder, grabbing more of Sousuke's hair.

Fuck he loved being fingered! Sometime, Sousuke was going to make him come just using his fingers. But finger fucking could wait for a less momentous occasion.

Sousuke's finger came out and went back in, deeper this time. A few times he did this, going slowly to make sure Rin was okay with what was happening. When Rin began rocking back on his finger, wanting more, then Sousuke added a second finger. Inside of Rin, he scissored his fingers, hitting Rin square in the prostate.

Rin's navel instantly became a pool of lava once more and Rin moaned with pleasure. He liked sex both ways, but nothing quite compared to feeling his prostate stimulated and that was mostly done through being the receiving end. Sousuke took his fingers out and, when he came back in, had added a third one, hitting Rin right in the sweet spot again. The muscles around Sousuke’s fingers relaxed.

“Sou, I’m ready,” Rin panted just before Sousuke thrust in with his three fingers again, “You better stop with the fingers or I’m going to come before you get your dick inside me!”

Sousuke’s fingers went back in, put not so deep this time, just to keep Rin loose.

The hand on Rin's hip vanished and Rin heard more movement and noise happening at the other end of things, but Rin was too focused on Sousuke’s fingers moving slowly in and out of him to notice. He didn’t notice, that is, until Sousuke’s hand wrapped around Rin's penis, sliding a condom down it. For an easy clean up. Then fingers came out of him for the final time, replaced by a pressure on his hole that had quite a bit more girth to it. Sousuke grabbed Rin's hip again and Rin pressed his body harder against Sousuke's. He could feel how hard Sousuke was, how fucking huge Sousuke was.

Sousuke kissed Rin against Rin's ear.

“You sure you’re ready, Rin?”

Rin nodded his head vigorously and leaned his head back against Rin's shoulder.

He was breathing pretty heavily already
The pressure on Rin’s hole increased until Sousuke finally pushed himself inside, hissing as he entered Rin. Rin gasped, as he always did when he was being penetrated. No matter how many times hebottomed, a penis inside him always felt a bit surprising at first.

Sousuke took Rin’s gasp the wrong way. He froze.

“Am I hurting you, Rin?” he asked frantically. Sousuke had always been quite a bit bigger than Rin and they’d had more than one tearful incidents where Sousuke had been too rough with Rin.

“Fuck no!” cried Rin, “Keep going!”

As gently as he could, Sousuke continued to thrust in all the way until Sousuke was inside Rin as far as he could go, his penis pressing against Rin’s prostate. But like this, all set up for fucking, he paused.

Rin had known Sousuke long enough to recognize that Sousuke was scared. All the pauses and reassurances, they had all been because Sousuke was scared. Rin had figured out he loved Sousuke after they had graduated from Samezuka together. But even though he’d never acknowledged it and had done everything in his power to hide it, today's epiphany suggested that Sousuke had loved Rin for much, much longer. If Rin was reading things right, this was what Sousuke…sweet, stubbornly sensitive Sousuke…had wanted for practically their entire lives. Why else would he be so terrified?

Sharing this moment with Sousuke sent a wave of warmth through Rin that had absolutely nothing to do with penises or prostates or the fact that Sousuke’s penis was teasing Rin’s prostate so delectably.

What happened from here on out Rin couldn’t call sex or fucking or anything like that. Cheesy as it was, the only proper name he could call what they were doing was making love because that’s exactly what this warmth going through him, causing him to smile and nearly cry, was.

His Sousuke was back and finally they were here.

Defining their complicated and often difficult feelings for each other in the most simple, physical way possible. Laying it all out on the line.

Making love.

They were doing it.

They were really doing it.

Rin's hand unclenched from Sousuke's hair and he put it over one of Sousuke's.

“Sousuke,” Rin said softly. A flash of panic tightened Sousuke’s body and inside Rin, he subconsciously pulled out a fraction of an inch, bracing himself for rejection. Sousuke wasn’t the type to open himself up to people and Rin would probably guess that carried over to more intimate situations. From the palatable fear radiating off Sousuke, Rin felt that this was the most he’d ever put himself out there for anyone.

Rin smiled to the wall and he wished Sousuke could see it.

“Sousuke thanks for letting me in,” Rin continued, “I never stopped hoping we’d find ourselves here,
even when it seemed I should have given up hope. With you, I’m very happy I listened to my heart and not my head because now we’re together. Gladly, I would have suffered a fate a thousand times worse than our reality, I would have given anything, done anything, just so I could have an the opportunity to do this with you. So again, thanks.”

Sousuke didn't say anything, but he did take a second to digest what Rin said, then moved his head so he could kiss the back of Rin's head. It felt like Sousuke was thanking him, which made Rin's blush deepen.

Sousuke didn't need to thank him...

Then, with the natural strength and vigor such a body as Sousuke’s had at its disposal, Sousuke began to thrust.

He started slowly, not going in all the way so that his sizeable dick didn’t stimulate Rin’s prostate too much. Rin wanted their first time to last as long as possible and from the impressively controlled thrusts, it seemed Sousuke had the same idea.

So he went slowly, never going deep enough to full on hit the prostrate, but going in far enough to keep Sousuke's pleasure building.

God! This was really fucking impressive! Like Sousuke was holding his hand and gently leading him up stairs!

Gradually, the thrusting went deeper and Sousuke’ breathing became grunting as his pleasure began to build. Still, Sousuke knew how to interpret every twitch of Rin’s body, instinctively backing off or increasing his speed so as to keep Rin on the edge without sending him over, so their experience could last. Clearly this wasn’t Sousuke’s first rodeo and Rin couldn’t help but marvel at Sousuke’s level of expertise in wielding his cock.

And this was just the first time! Imagine all the crazy shit they could do with Sousuke's black-belt level of control and stamina!

But not even Sousuke could last forever. A point came where Sousuke’s practiced technique gave way to instinct. Like he was a wild thing suddenly…unfettered. He leaned harder against a sturdy wall of Sousuke, threw his head back on Sousuke's shoulder, and gripped the head board with both hands. More to make him a steadier surface to thrust against.

Sousuke’s dick and Rin’s prostate seemed to be magnets, they were drawn together automatically and every thrust hit right at the spot that sent Rin shuddering and shaking and seeing stars. Rin closed his eyes and threw his head back, moaning louder and louder as the intensity and pace of Sousuke’s thrusting increased.

Blood was fully flowing through Rin and his penis was fully at attention, begging for friction. But Rin couldn't touch himself, his hands needed to hold onto the head board or else Rin was going to fall forward!

"Fuck!" Rin panted, "Sou....please! Touch me!"
The pressure became unbearable and Rin was vaguely aware that he was saying something, screaming something in fact, but he didn’t know what. Sousuke too was producing sound, but the only thing in the whole world that mattered now was the rush of blood flushing his cock and making it unbearably, excruciatingly hard.

And then...and then Sousuke fulfilled Sousuke's request, his hand went around the shaft of Rin’s hard penis and the thumb brushed over the head. That tiny bit of friction made something very familiar begin to happen, something that had happened thousands of times since Rin was eleven but had never happened so intensely before. Ripples of white-hot heat pooled out from behind Rin’s navel and went down all the way to his toes, causing them to curl up. Rin’s whole body was on the tip and just one more thrust, one more pump of Sousuke's hand....

Sensing Rin’s body tightening in anticipation, Sousuke thrust harder, quicker...

“SOUSUKE!” Rin moaned loudly as that last thrust made contact, causing Rin to throw his head back and erupt with more force than he’d ever thought possible. He was high, higher than he’d ever been and he was with Sousuke.

“FUCK!” Sousuke shouted. His whole body constricted and curled around Rin. Waves of pleasure rocked their bodies and it was truly miraculous that they didn't both collapse on top of each other.

For what must have been the same amount of time between Rin and Haru’s 100 free times, Rin and Sousuke floated together in ecstasy. Together they rode out the last of the spasms of bliss and together they floated back down to their bodies, both ravaged now from the violence of their ardor.

For Rin, it was absolute perfection.

Fuck!

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The second Sousuke's mind solidified into a coherent thought again, his muddled thoughts screamed out that one word... fuck!

He was leaning too hard against Rin, he needed to get the fuck off.

Because they'd just fucked.

Oh why had Sousuke insisted!
Now Rin, his beautiful, wonderful best friend whom he loved with all his heart, now Rin was going to leave just like everyone else Sousuke had ever fucked and how the fuck was Sousuke supposed to recover from Rin leaving after something so divinely wonderful as what they'd just done?

Even as his whole body sang with the joy of having fucked a fine specimen, the darkness was closing in around the edges, waiting to take Sousuke.

Why had Sousuke insisted on doing it like that? The thought that he'd become a one trick pony if he only had sex one way had never even entered his mind, and now he was realizing just how unromantic that one trick actually was.

He could have been watching Rin's face as he came and the sight would have been out of this world, but truthfully how good could he possibly be at going horizontal to watch Rin if he'd only ever done it vertical?

Fuck!

All those years of preparation with inferior guys had left him completely unprepared for being with Rin...

Sousuke slid out of Rin and flopped to the side, curling up into a tight ball as he waited for the sound of the door slamming shut behind Rin as he inevitably left.

Makoto had been wrong....having sex with someone you cared about was terribly, because when they left it left you more empty than anything else in the world....

Fuck, was Sousuke getting teary eyed? Now Rin was definitely going to leave! And Sousuke was incapable of going after Rin and begging him not to leave because he'd poured everything into Rin....

Fuck...

When Rin came back down to Earth, he was laying on Sousuke's bed and his limbs felt like they were made of jelly. Just where had young Sousuke learned to have sex like that? That hadn't ever been one of Rin's favorite positions, but it bloody well was now. With a herculean effort, Rin looked to the side where Sousuke's beautiful, toned back greeted him. For a minute, Rin summoned up the will power to move his limbs and when he finally did, he rolled over on his side and flopped his arms around Sousuke. Sousuke, the big goof, tensed up like a hedgehog when Rin made him the little spoon, but that only made Rin laugh. He scooted himself up so he was snuggling Sousuke properly and began kissing the back of Sousuke's neck as a token of his gratitude for a job superbly done.

No one had ever made love to him and the difference was like night and day.

After a minute of sleepy, sex haze giggles and kisses against Sousuke's neck, sleep began to lay its hooks in Rin and drag him down into blissful unconsciousness. But just as his heavy eye lids began to droop down, Sousuke rolled over in Rin's arms so he was on his back. That woke Rin up a bit and he repositioned himself so his head was lying against Sousuke's chest. Looking up drunkenly from his afterglow, Rin found Sousuke watching him, his face very carefully composed so nothing he was thinking could be seen.

Rin smiled at him, then turned his head down and gave Sousuke's chest a kiss, then looked back up
at Sousuke, all smiles.

"So." Rin said coyly, his smile turning more into a smirk.

Sousuke swallowed.

"So." he answered back.

Rin moved his arms so they were draped across Rin and moved his head so his chin was on top of his hands. This was the best angle to look at Sousuke.

"Obviously you aren't allowed to have sex with anyone but me anymore," Rin said, his voice teasing although he was 100% serious, "And no way am I going to want to have sex with anyone else but you from now on."

Rin's mind began to race with all the sexual possibilities being in an exclusive, sexual relationship would open up. There had been loads of stuff he'd wanted to try, but he'd not stayed with anyone long enough to develop the trust to get into the kinker things. That wasn't going to be a problem with Sousuke. Sousuke was back and Rin trusted him completely.

"You want that?" Sousuke asked. Rin could hear a quaver in his voice. Rin's face became suddenly very serious.

"Well you will be my boyfriend, right?" Rin asked, "I want to be yours and sleeping only with each other kind of is a big part of being boyfriends, don't you think?"

Sousuke didn't say anything, but let his head fall back against the mattress. Rin scooted up so their heads could be level and lay on his side, facing Sousuke. Staring straight up at the ceiling, Sousuke was clearly going through things and having a hard time keeping himself together. Rin hated seeing Sousuke upset because it always made him super upset too.

In order to help his best friend and brand new lover deal with things, Rin lifted his hand and rest it on the cheek furthest from him, stroked his strong jaw with his thumb a few times, then coaxed Sousuke's head to face Rin.

The marble facade Sousuke had erected was now cracked apart, revealing the terrified, unbelieving, bewildered, and confused knot of emotions rampaging within Sousuke. Rin smiled at him sweetly and let his hand rest back on Sousuke's chest.

Although Rin was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to fall asleep like this, there was something he desperately needed to tell Sousuke. While the perfect opportunity was here for the taking.

"I should have said this a long time ago," Rin began, "but I was scared of how you would react and then you vanished."

He sighed heavily, steeling himself for what he was about to say. Why was it suddenly so hard, when his heart had been screaming this truth at Rin for years now? It should be easier!

Sousuke's heart was racing as he watched his beloved Rin wrestle with whatever it was he wanted to say. Sousuke's heart was beating wildly and he was holding his breath.

It was too much to hope for, it couldn't be true! But...but...the boyfriend thing...and he hadn't left...and maybe...oh please let it be...
Rin swallowed again and looked Sousuke straight in the eyes, his mouth curling up into a beautiful, beautiful smile.

"I love you Sousuke."

The world stood still.

Had he heard right?

Love?

Rin made this little self satisfied noise, then leaned in and kissed Sousuke, who was too stunned to properly register anything. Rin pulled away and Sousuke was still frozen solid.

Love?

Rin looked down and put a hand on Sousuke's hyper sensitive penis. Did he want more? Sousuke tried to make himself thaw enough to grab Rin, hold Rin, touch Rin, somehow see if Rin was telling the truth...

No, Rin was peeling off the used condom Sousuke had completely forgotten about, then he turned around and grabbed a tissue from off the bedside table, wrapping the sticky, spent condoms up. Then Rin was out of bed and blowing out candles. Sousuke watched him, still completely frozen.

One by one, the candles went out until there was nothing but the streetlight. Then, Rin turned around and smiled so warmly at Sousuke, it stabbed him through the heart.

"Oh dear," Rin laughed as he crossed across the room and climbed back into bed, "I didn't mean to break you! Well, whatever. I'll say it some more until you believe me. I'm in love with you, Yamazaki Sousuke, I have been since high school and I want to be with you. If that's cool with you."
Not waiting for an answer, Rin grabbed the tangle of blankets at the bottom of the bed and began tucking them in. When he was finished, he nestled down against Rin and laid his head against Sousuke's shoulder. The right shoulder.

The warmth of Rin's body finally defrosted Sousuke from his state of suspended animation. With his left hand, he grabbed Rin's chin and forced him to meet his eyes, which sparkled in the dark. And there was that delicious smirk. Before he fully knew what he was doing, Sousuke's mouth was smashed against Rin's again.

Rin was melting from Sousuke's kiss. He was so, so tired and he was dissolving... Weird as it sounded, Rin felt like he would like to dissolve straight into Sousuke. It would be so warm and wonderful and perfect...

Sousuke broke away, his hand cupping Rin's face ferociously.

"I love you too," Sousuke said quietly, his voice more out of control than Rin had ever heard it and his eyes boring holes into Rin, "For fuck's sake, I've been in love with you forever."

Rin gave him a dopey smile, then tilted his head up so he could kiss the tip of Sousuke's nose.

"Glad that's cleared up," he laughed sleepily, "So let's go to sleep now and wake up together to the first day of being boyfriends! I'm about to pass the fuck out, Sou, so you should cuddle me close now while you have me conscious."

Sousuke did as he was told and hugged his arms around Rin, letting Rin's head fall back down against Sousuke's shoulder. Happier than he'd been in ages, Rin settled himself up against Sousuke, listening to his heart steady itself and feeling the rise and fall of that big, broad chest.

"I should have told you before," Sousuke said quietly, "a lot of crap could have been avoided if I'd just told you before."

Rin laughed as his eyes fluttered shut.

"No, man," he argued, "be real. If anyone was going to make the first move, it was going to be me. I failed you, kid, and for that I'm sorry. But here we are, so in the end it doesn't matter too much, right?"

"Guess not." Sousuke muttered. Then he kissed Rin one final time on the forehead and that was the last thing Rin remembered of his first night with Sousuke.

Rin had taken about forty-three seconds to fall asleep, the same speed Sousuke would guess Rin could swim a 100 free in, judging by his continued rivalry with Haru and Haru's time. Rin was breathing deeply and Sousuke was so entranced by the weight of Rin against him, all doubts he'd been having forgot to be thought about.

Sousuke smiled and closed his eyes, Rin's breathing sounding like the most beautiful music in the world.

Okay, maybe Makoto had been right.

Sex was a thousand times better with someone you actually cared about.

And fuck…Sousuke really, really loved Rin.
Hello lovely readers! Turns out sex scenes are hard for me to write :S enjoy and there will be more soon! I'm very excited to explore their dynamic as a couple now that their relationship is consumated :) let me know what you think :D Happy Holidays!
The Morning After

Chapter Summary

The morning after their first night together, Sousuke and Rin get to know each other better and are, of course, completely in love.

Fluff chapter :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning brought a stream of warm, summer sunshine into Sousuke’s bedroom, but when Sousuke opened his eyes, none of summer’s warmth reached him. He could see the wall in front of him and he could see the empty bed next to him, but what he couldn’t see was Rin.

Sousuke crunched up into a tighter ball and fought hard to keep himself from weeping bitterly.

He must have dreamt his night with Rin, what other explanation could there be? It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d been with Rin in the night, but last night his subconscious, starved for the affection of Sousuke’s deepest desire, had really outdone itself. Sousuke’s imagination had dredged up Rin’s delectable scent to torture his nostrils with, had somehow found a way to leave a taste in Sousuke’s mouth that reminded Sousuke of Rin, though he’d never had the pleasure of knowing what Rin’s mouth and Rin’s body tasted like. And he felt bone-tired, the type of tired that only happened when he had an orgasm after months of build up. And he’d had some release just yesterday morning! The dream had been so incredibly real, so precisely what Sousuke’s heart craved, so vivid with detail...

If only it had been real...

Sousuke crumpled a fist into the empty space, where he’d dreamt Rin’s body had been and steeled himself for the waves of vicious disappointment that would probably keep Sousuke in bed all day.

A rustle of movement interrupted the quiet of the early morning and an old fear, one of being robbed in his sleep, caused Sousuke to raise himself out of his disappointment and despair and sit upright, ready to face the intruder.

At the foot of Sousuke’s bed was his stuffed bookshelf and crouched in front of it, examining the
bookshelf’s treasures was Rin. He was completely naked and, even better, completely real.

So last night hadn’t been a dream…

The harsh loneliness that Sousuke had woken up with evaporated in the early morning sunlight illuminating Rin. Waves of warmth and joy that only Rin had ever brought him replaced the darkness. Last night had happened…everything they’d done and said and confessed and revealed to each other had happened…

A massive weight Sousuke hadn’t even been aware of carrying fell away; he was so light he felt he could float.

Rin had said he loved him…

Rin had seen Sousuke’s shoulder and forgiven him for being abandoned and still had said he loved Sousuke…

At that moment, Rin turned around and smiled at Sousuke when he saw that Sousuke was finally awake.

“Good morning, Sousuke.”

Sousuke blamed the sun streaming into his room, but his cheeks felt incredibly hot all of a sudden. What did it matter, really? Rin was here and he’d spent the night with Sousuke! After so long wishing and wanting, it had really, really happened!

Like ice on a river, Sousuke’s whole face cracked open into a radiant smile, melted away by Rin’s sunshine. The long winter that had held Sousuke’s heart in the frigid grips of desolate winter for so long thawed at the sight of that smile and the tender, fragile, hopeful buds of a springtime love popped their heads up to bask in the sun. Sousuke felt fresh and new and oh, happier than he could ever remember feeling before.

“Good morning, Rin,” Sousuke greeted the sunshine of his soul, the one who had arrived and had brought rebirth…all in just a night!

Rin crawled up on the edge of Sousuke’s bed, beaming and not at all concerned or abashed that he
was completely naked. Rin’s attitude made Sousuke’s own nakedness a lot more comfortable. To make room for Rin, Sousuke scooted more towards the middle and lifted his knees up to make something of a tent. As he did so, the thin sheet that had served as their only blanket last night, slipped off Sousuke, exposing him completely to Rin. Rin’s smile broadened and he scooted up more so he could hug Sousuke’s upper legs, just below the knees. On top of Sousuke’s knees, Rin rested his head. The whole time he got settled, he was watching Sousuke and grinning. Needing to touch him, Sousuke lifted a hand and put it on top of Rin’s head so he could play with his silky, pretty hair. The other hand, he put on Rin’s thigh next to him.

Rin was really, really there…

And it was because of Sousuke that he was smiling…

He’d said he loved Sousuke!

Sousuke felt like burying his face in his hands and squealing in a very undignified way, but then he wouldn’t get to see that beautiful, beautiful face.

“So…” Rin began, his eyebrow quirking up in that particular, sexy, seductive way he had.

“So.” Sousuke replied. His face was beginning to hurt from smiling so hard.

“Last night was pretty incredible,” Rin announced, squeezing Sousuke’s knees, “Like really, really good. The best night ever, really.”

Sousuke nodded in agreement.

That was really quite the understatement.

Their first night together felt like the most important night of Sousuke’s entire life so far. What other amazing nights would he get to have with Rin?

Rin leaned down and kissed the top of Sousuke’s knee cap then turned back to look at Sousuke.

“Just so we’re clear…” Rin said, “You’ll be my boyfriend now?”

“Of course.”

“And I’ll be your boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect.”

It really was perfect.

But count on Sousuke to ruin anything. It was at that moment of elation when they officially declared themselves lovers that Sousuke’s brain chose to remember Rin lived in Australia.

Thousands of miles away.
He wasn’t sure when Rin was going back to Australia, but whenever that time came, it would come too soon.

Rin lifted his head and looked around Sousuke’s room, apparently oblivious that their nascent romance would soon experience the harsh realities of separation.

“Your room is really fascinating and beautiful!” Rin declared, waving around a hand across the entire room, “Just like its owner! I never knew you were so interested in art and books!”

Sousuke swallowed down the question of Rin’s departure to talk about something at least less painful.

“Yeah, for three years my life was pretty much visiting museums and reading books whenever I wasn’t working or at a bar or something like that.”

Rin laughed a crystal clear laugh that was like an arrow going straight to Sousuke’s chest.

“And most of your books are in English!” he said, “I’m really impressed! You always hated English when we were in school, even at Samezuka! You were always surprisingly good in art class, but English…you hated English!”

Sousuke chuckled because Rin had listened to Sousuke complain about English classes for years and years, “Believe it or not, bookstores abroad often had more English books than Japanese books. And English was basically all I spoke for three years because it was much more common than Japanese. I guess I just adapted. Reading is one of my favorite things to do now though I’m pretty far behind on Japanese books.”

Rin put his head back down on Sousuke’s knee but his smile had faded.

“You’re so different now…” he said with just a touch of sadness, “I feel there is a lot I don’t know about you anymore.”

Sousuke stroked Rin’s head again, trying to quell the spark of panic that Rin’s frown inspired.

“Not ‘anymore’…” Sousuke corrected him.

Rin’s face flashed confusion, so Sousuke explained:

“A better word is ‘yet’. It’s true, I’m not the same person I was before I left Japan because I’ve grown and had to rely completely on myself. I am different. But so are you. We’re new versions of the same people we used to be and there is a lot we don’t know about each other yet. But I want to see what these new versions of ourselves are like. So ‘yet’, not ‘anymore’.”

Rin’s smile came back to light up his face.

“You’re right, Sou. There is a lot I don’t yet know about you. Like how the heck did you become such good friends with Haru, Makoto, and Kisumi?”

So Sousuke told Rin about how Makoto had literally run into him in front of a train station and had taken care of him through a terrible fever. He told Rin how sweet, angelic Makoto had found Kisumi and brought them all together. He told Rin about how he and Haru had mutually disliked each other until Makoto’s appendix surgery and how Makoto had helped them work past the old misunderstandings and issues that had prevented them from being friends. He told Rin about the fun
times he’d had hanging out with the wonder couple and their friends and about the excellent nights he’d spent with Kisumi and Yasutomo.

“Yasutomo?” Rin asked, breaking his attentive silence for the first time, “Was that the guy who was with Kisumi last night but left?”

Sousuke nodded.

“Yeah, he’s really cool and he’s a really important friend. He’s really good at cutting through my bullshit and getting to the heart of the issue and he does it without making me feel bad. You know, I’ve always gotten pretty stuck in my head and he has this way of helping me see things outside of myself. Most importantly, he’s really easy to talk to and conversations with him get to the point quickly. He’s a really good guy.”

Sousuke took up a piece of Rin’s hair and wrapped it around his finger.

“A big reason I had to stay away from you for so long,” Sousuke continued, quieter this time, “was because I had a ton of issues about accepting that I was gay. You’ll have to bear with me because I still think I have some issues with the whole concept, but for the most part I’m good with it. It’s who I am. And my friends have helped me figure things out a lot.”

“I don’t really think of Makoto and Haru as gay guys, more like they are Mako- and Haru- sexuals, only interested in each other. Really I wonder if Makoto would be interested in guys at all if it weren’t for Haru because I don’t think he’s 100% immune to a pretty girl, but he couldn’t ever love anyone as much as he loves Haru. But Yasutomo is like the first real gay guy I’ve actually been friends with. Like he showed me that being gay doesn’t mean you have to be some fruity, flamboyant ass hole only interested in sex and he showed me that being in a relationship with another guy is, plain and simple, a relationship between two people. Period. Makoto and Haru showed me how much a guy can love another guy because those two freaking adore each other. What they have is magical, really. And Yasutomo showed me how a guy can get hurt by another guy, because when I met him he was going through some bad shit with his ex. I thought being gay was some kind of a disease that you couldn’t get rid of and that people hated you for, but Makoto, Haru, and Yasutomo showed me that gay guys could fall in love and have their hearts broken and have normal goals and ambitions and friendships, just like anyone else. It really doesn’t matter what gender you prefer because everyone goes through the same shit. And those guys, especially Yasutomo, helped me see that I wasn’t some terrible outcast of humanity, some special exception that was destined to roam the earth forever without a home or a scrap of love; he showed me I wasn’t so alone and broken and incapable of feeling good as everyone else. I was a person, same as everyone. So he's important.”

Rin smiled widely, kissed Sousuke’s knee again, and squeezed his legs harder.

“Then I look forward to being friends with him too.”

For a second, Sousuke felt dazed from telling Rin so much of the private monologue that had gradually been taking shape since he’d come to live with Haru and Makoto, but then he looked at that beautiful face and knew that he could tell Rin anything, that he should tell Rin everything.

“I really like all these guys,” Sousuke gushed as he played with Rin’s ear and rubbed Rin’s thigh, “Except for you, I’ve always been kind of weary about making friends but I have them and new goals. I was doing great and now that you, my love, are back in my life, well yesterday I wouldn’t have thought I was capable of being so happy. But I am. I'm really, really ecstatically happy.”

Apparently Rin couldn’t listen to Sousuke be so effusive with his feelings without doing something to make those feelings even stronger. He let go of Sousuke’s knees and scooted up towards Sousuke
so they could kiss, long and sweetly. Then, he leaned his head down against Sousuke’s chest and hugged him tightly. Sousuke laughed and folded Rin safely in his arms. It had been shockingly nice when Rin cuddled him last night, but Sousuke liked holding Rin just as much.

“Haru had said you’d found a new dream for yourself,” Rin said against his chest, “one that didn’t involve swimming. What is it?”

“Two dreams really. One I haven’t shared with anyone else, you can be the first to know but I have to show you. The other you can see for yourself right now, if you go over to my desk and look in the bottom drawer. There’s, uh, some stuff in there that belongs to you. You can have them now, if you want.”

Rin sat up and looked at Sousuke curiously before getting up to look through the drawer in question.

As Sousuke watched him cross the room, he couldn’t help but admire how nice Rin looked. Since Samezuka, he’d packed on a bit more muscle but he still had that lean elegance to him. And that ass…so perfectly round and smooth and just begging Sousuke to feel it, bury his face in it. Sousuke looked away quickly because there was a swim meet to get to and he didn’t want to make Rin late for it.

“Is this what you were talking about?” Rin asked a minute later, holding up a copy of a magazine. It was dense and said something about being a literary review. This was not what Rin would have expected of the old Sousuke, but this new one, surrounded by books, well this seemed to fit perfectly.

“Yup, that’s it,” Sousuke answered, “Open to the table of contents and look at the authors’ names.”

Rin flipped open the magazine and soon found what he was looking for. When he found the title ‘The Hallowed Spring’ followed by Yamazaki Sousuke and bold letters announcing that Sousuke had won some competition, Rin’s eyes grew wide.

“You got a story published!” Rin cried excitedly, looking up at Sousuke in his bed.

Sousuke smiled and nodded.

“Yeah. While I was abroad, I started writing little things and when I settled down in Tokyo, I started working on them more seriously. I got some money from it too!”

Rin flipped to the page where the story began.

“Can I have this?” Rin asked as he flipped through, seeing how long the story was. Rin was a decent reader, but he wanted time to thoroughly pour over Sousuke’s story.

“Sure,” Sousuke agreed instantly, “But Rin, there’s more in that drawer for you.”

Rin looked up at Sousuke. He seemed a bit uneasy and he was blushing. Rin’s eyebrows furrowed with concern. Since he’d woken up, Sousuke – who had always been so guarded and unwilling to share – had spoken more freely and earnestly about his feelings, his wonderfully happy feelings, than Rin had ever heard him speak before. Rin had hung on every word, loved every thing Sousuke had said. Rin hoped this new openness wasn’t so fleeting as to be gone already.
He looked back in the drawer where two more copies of the magazine were tucked away. Underneath them was an old shoebox, held together by duct tape. As there was nothing else in the drawer, Rin pulled the box out. This must be it.

“Open it.” Sousuke said quietly.

Carefully, so as not to break the lid, Rin opened the box to find hundreds of envelopes stacked neatly inside and bound together with anything that could be tied – ribbons, shoelaces, rubber bands, it was all there. Gingerly Rin extracted one of the letters and looked it over.

The envelope had Rin’s name on it and the address said ‘Wherever it is you might be’.

Thankfully the envelope wasn’t sealed so Rin had the envelope’s contents – several pieces of old graph paper folded tightly together – out in a second. Rin unfolded it and found the beginning of the letter. It was dated a month before Sousuke had disappeared, nearly four years ago now. Quickly Rin went over their timeline together in their head and placed the date five weeks and two days before their last conversation together, the one that had rocked Rin’s world so thoroughly and changed everything.

With trembling hands, Rin began to read:

Dearest Rin,

Why is it so hard for me to say what you make me feel? Why can’t I just do it? Why would you have told me you’d be waiting for me to swim with you again then asked me to come to Australia when I was ready, if you didn’t at least feel something for me? Why can’t I just tell you how I fall asleep thinking of what it would be like for you to be next to me? Why can’t I give you even the smallest idea of the things I dream of doing with you, both while I’m awake and while I’m asleep? I can answer all these questions with one simple answer…I am afraid. I’m so afraid of what you’ll say if I reveal anything, afraid that you don’t think of me that way, afraid, afraid, afraid!

I hate being afraid.

But I hate the thought of loosing you more.

You are the best friend I’ve ever had and while I know I’m not as important to you as Nanase and I never will be, I think I still matter to you. However little those feelings are, they mean the world to me and I don’t want to risk them because of my disgusting desires.

But more than what you’ll say and how you’ll react, I am petrified that my father will find out that
my feelings for you are more than friendly. I think he already suspects. It’s probably dangerous writing these things down but if I don’t, I think they will just build up inside me and tear me apart. So I’ll risk it.

This is getting to be unbearable and still, I just can’t tell you how I feel.

Please Rin, just give me some sign, some hint whether I have a hope or not. If you don’t want me, that’s fine and I can get over it. Just please, please don’t leave me! Whatever happens don’t leave me again! It was horrible not talking to you before when you left for Australia but everything I feel for you is so much stronger now! Just please, please don’t shun me! Don’t tell me to go!

If only I could say this to you in real life but like I said I am a coward. I’m miserable over you but the alternative would be death because how could you ever be interested in me when you have so many better people...like Nanase. You can swim forever with him. Even if these surgeries work, it may be that I’ve lost too much time, I’m too out of shape to be on your level anymore. We can’t be on the international stage together, as we dreamed. You don’t know about the surgeries yet because I want to surprise you if they are successful. But it might just make you sad because the doctor says my mobility will be limited, that the chances I can go back to being the swimmer I once was is pretty slim. You taught me to hope again that we could swim together but I’m beginning to worry it’s not enough. And no matter what happens with my shoulder, you already have Nanase. Being with me wouldn’t be enough for you, I know this.

I can accept if you love him, even though you loving him makes me hate him more. What I really hate is that he seems someone worthy of you. I am not. But please, if you do get together with him, don’t leave me completely behind. I’d put up with Nanase if it meant I could somehow be with you.

I wish I could talk to you about this all in person but you are in Australia and my opportunity seems to have passed me by. You’re too precious to me to lose so I will just have to bear my feelings and desires in silence. Even if they are making me miserable with longing. But you are worth it. Anything difficult I feel is worth it because you are Rin. I just wish I was brave enough to tell you this...

I love you.

Yours Forever and Always,

Sousuke

While Rin read, Sousuke had climbed out of bed and kneeled down beside Rin, watching Rin’s reaction anxiously. When Rin had finished reading the relic of a bygone day, he looked up at
Sousuke with tears in his eyes.

“Sou, with Haru…it wasn’t really like that…” he stammered before giving up and throwing his arms around Sousuke’s neck, letting the letter float to the ground.

“I know,” Sousuke replied, hugging Rin close, “It was a long time ago and I didn’t really understand how he and Makoto worked until I was living with them. I’m not sure which one you read, but know that I get it now and that I’m not that pathetic, wildly jealous person anymore.”

Rin tore himself away and dried his eyes.

“You can be a little bit jealous,” Rin said sulkily. Then, he picked up the dropped letter and delicately folded it, putting it back in its envelope when he was finished. When he went to put the letter back in the box, Sousuke’s massive hand stopped him.

He plucked the letter out of Rin’s hand and examined it closely.

“This was an old one,” he explained as he placed the artifact back in the box, “This must have been one of the ones my dad found. He kicked me out because I’d been stupid enough to write out my forbidden feelings, even when I knew he was not above going through my things if he suspected something. Looking back on it, I think I wanted him to find them,” he laughed humorously, “What I was feeling was so overwhelming, I wanted everyone to know but I didn’t want to tell anyone. Pathetic really.”

His smile faded as he put the lid back on the box. Then he picked it up and shoved it towards Rin.

“I wrote to you often and, if you want these letters, they are yours. It has sort of been my ritual, writing you a letter every week. I guess I wrote the last one this Wednesday. You sort of were the imaginary friend that kept me going through the worst times and began helping me turn towards better ones. I felt I could write about anything if it was meant for you. What’s great is writing to you kind of encouraged me to write stories so even as my imaginary friend, you were helping me move on with my life. What’s in this box is everything. Like I said, I’m done hiding.”

Rin grabbed the box from Sousuke’s hands and clutched it to his heart, treating it like the treasure it really was. Even in that letter, written when Sousuke had been somewhat hopeful for the future and was still supported by his family, there had been so much raw, angry emotions, so much self-loathing. Rin knew that these letters would delve into even darker parts of the story until trickles of light would begin to seep in. This was their story and with this box, Sousuke was giving Rin the complete version. Rin crawled over to his bag so he could put the magazine and the box away. When he went back to Australia, he would have plenty of reading material to occupy the time.

Just then, a knock came at the door, causing both Rin and Sousuke to jump.

“Rin, it’s Makoto,” came Makoto’s muffled voice, “I’m going to go to the pool now with Haru and we wanted to know are you still coming?”

Rin looked at Sousuke questioningly. There was something important Rin needed to do at the swim meet but he really didn’t want to leave Sousuke, not when they had such precious little time together and still had so very much to talk about.
“Will you come with me?” he asked Sousuke in a whisper. The thought of leaving him even for a second was enough to keep him here, out of the pool.

“Yeah, of course I’ll come to your meet,” Sousuke replied with a warm smile, “I wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity like that.”

Rin smiled with relief.

All morning he’d been wondering if the sight of a swim pool and speedos and times he no longer could post in events he no longer could swim would be too much. But it seemed that Sousuke really was over swimming. At least over it enough that he could go watch Rin swim.

“Yeah, we’ll be ready in a few minutes!” Rin called out.

“Alright!” Makoto said, “We leave in five minutes!”

Rin turned to Sousuke, smiling widely.

“Hmmm…can I wear one of your shirts?”

Kisumi was sitting at the kotatsu, watching Makoto and Haru get ready for a long day at the swim pool. He’d had plans to go on a little day trip with Yasutomo, to celebrate again that they were on vacation, but when he’d called Yasutomo, Yasutomo had cancelled, saying he still wasn’t feeling well. He’d sounded terrible; Kisumi really hoped that everything was alright. If this persisted, he’d have to go see him.

Sousuke’s door opened and out he came with his arm around Rin. Kisumi had been waiting for this opportunity to yell at Sousuke and Rin for last night – Kisumi did not appreciate being made a part of whatever weird sex games they’d been playing. But when he saw the pair of them together, he didn’t have the heart to carry out his plan.

They were both fucking glowing.

Last night it had been really weird seeing Rin and Sousuke – guys he’d known literally forever – kissing and being, well not being little kids anymore, but today, it wasn’t so weird. Quite the opposite in fact. The way they caught peeks at each other, the way they smiled out of the corners of their mouths, even how they made sure parts of their bodies were touching at all time, well it all looked so natural. And he’d never, ever seen Sousuke look so happy.

So instead of yelling, Sousuke watched as they went into the bathroom together and, through the door they left wide open, Kisumi watched them brush their teeth. Haru and Makoto were prone to overly saccharine moments of disgusting couple-y cuteness, but seeing Sousuke brushing his teeth, hugging Rin from behind and planting toothpaste filled kisses on Rin’s neck while Rin squirmed and tried to pay Sousuke back in kind, well that beat anything he’d seen Makoto and Haru doing.

Seriously, how had they achieved this level of ridiculousness in only a night?

But if Kisumi thought about it, they were acting a lot like they had in elementary school, sword fighting with broom handles and constantly chasing and racing each other in everything. The only difference was now they used their mouths and their bodies but it was weird how much they still
looked like those dumb, carefree kids whose special games Kisumi had never been invited to take part in, even though he had often been their mediator during their frequent fights.

After the drama of last night, elementary school made a whole lot more sense to Kisumi.

Finished brushing their teeth, they went back into Sousuke’s room to finish getting ready for the swim meet. When the door closed, Haru and Makoto both looked up at it.

“Haru, Makoto, I bet you a dinner that Sousuke is going to ask if Rin can move in before the end of today,” Kisumi announced.

Haru looked at him with great agitation, “You think so?” he asked.

Kisumi smiled and nodded, “Come on, of course they will. Rin is coming to Tokyo so of course they’re going to want to be together. Those dipshits are madly in love in case you couldn’t tell. Like really in love. Like Makoto and Haru kind of love.”

Haru flushed at the mention of his relationship with Makoto, obviously pleased to be a part of a paragon relationship. But Haru was Haru and he still scowled.

“Isn’t it really soon? Makoto and I didn’t move in together for a really long time after we got together.”

Kisumi laughed, “Well we’ve been living with you guys for ages and not once have you ever involved us in any kinky sex things like they did last night. The same rules don’t apply.”

Haru scowled, “You say that as if you want Makoto and I to involve you in what we get up to in our room. And the answer is absolutely not in a million billion years, Shigino Kisumi. Makoto is mine!”

Makoto laughed and pecked Haru on the cheek, instantly mollifying him.

“That’s not what he’s saying Haru. When Rin told us he was coming to Tokyo at the end of the summer, I had the feeling that they’d want to live together. I’m all for it. Rin’s great and it would be nice to pay even less rent.”

“Absolutely!” Kisumi agreed, “Rin is pretty cool, I’ve always wanted to be better friends with him. And have you seen how freaking happy they looked together? I don’t have the heart to keep them apart.”

Kisumi turned to Haru, who had resumed scowling.

“Five people is a lot,” he said, “but I guess Rin is a pretty big neat freak. He’ll help keep this place clean because you two slobs don’t know how.”

“Oh Haru!” Makoto cried sadly, “I try my best!”

Haru turned around to kiss Makoto on the cheek, turning his frown upside down.

“I know, Makoto. I guess it would be fine with me. He’s asking to swim on my swim team. But only Makoto and I are allowed in our bedroom. I want at least that space for us. And we will have to figure out a better chore schedule because five people is a lot.”
Sousuke’s door opened and Kisumi, Haru, and Makoto all turned to look at Rin and Sousuke as one. They couldn’t have acted like they were talking about Sousuke and Rin more obviously. Kisumi half expected Sousuke to ask if Rin could move in right then and there.

“Uh, everything alright guys?” Sousuke asked.

“Oh yeah!” Makoto jumped in, a bit too eagerly, “Let’s get going to the swim meet or you two won’t have enough time to warm up properly! And I would feel terrible if you didn’t warm up properly! That’s what we were talking about! Just that!”

Kisumi rolled his eyes.

Makoto had always been a terrible liar.

“Ok let’s go.” Haru announced as he grabbed Makoto’s hand and drug him towards the door of their apartment. “Bye Kisumi, have a good day.”

“Wait!” Kisumi cried, “I’m coming too!”

Everyone turned to look at Kisumi in surprise.

“Yasutomo is still not feeling well and I don’t really have anything else to do today,” Kisumi explained, “And I like watching swimming!”

Everyone shrugged and continued filing out the door with Kisumi bringing up the rear.

Yeah it was true, Kisumi did love watching swimming just as he loved watching all sports. But swimming wasn’t what he was excited to spectate today. He liked seeing Sousuke, smiling and laughing and just so happy, and he didn’t want to miss any of the Sousuke-Rin action. And it would be nice to hang out with Makoto and Sousuke while Rin and Haru were busy swimming.

He may have been a fifth wheel, but Kisumi felt weirdly a part of what was happening and that was something Kisumi didn’t feel very often.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise Christmas present! Happy Holidays! Leave me a comment, I love chatting :) Thanks for reading!
The Day After

Chapter Summary

Rin takes a picture and an important phone call. Then Rin and Haru swim the 200 free.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chlorine filled Makoto’s nostrils and the sound of splashing and cheering filled his ears. Haru and Rin were down there, talking with Haru’s coach about Rin joining the team. But for once, Makoto wasn’t too concerned about what Haru was doing, he was completely distracted by Sousuke.

Sousuke hadn’t stopped smiling all day and though Kisumi and Makoto had tried to make small talk, Sousuke was deep in his own thoughts, only perking up whenever Rin rejoined them in the stands. Yesterday’s anxiety about reuniting Rin and Sousuke had proven completely unnecessary and Makoto couldn’t help but be relieved and ecstatic for Sousuke. And Rin.

Sousuke looked happier than Makoto had ever seen him before and that had been quite entertaining during the long, dull hours of an insignificant swim meet. Makoto cheered wildly whenever he spotted members of his recreation league or a graduate from his swim school, but there were so many swimmers in so many age groups in so many events. Even Makoto, who loved swimming and loved watching swimming, was a bit bored watching the meet. It was amazing Kisumi, who knew little of swimming, had opted to watch. Then again, he’d been spending an awful lot of time on his phone.

“I’m worried about Yasutomo,” Kisumi announced above him, frowning down at a text message. He was sitting on the row above, in between Sousuke and Makoto, “I asked him what was wrong and he said there wasn’t anything physically wrong with him. And when I asked him what he meant, he didn’t reply.”

Makoto frowned, partly because he too was worried about Yasutomo, but more because Kisumi rarely looked so serious about anything besides his little brother Hayato.

“Give him some time,” Makoto suggested, “I’m sure he will tell you what’s on his mind when he’s ready to.”

Kisumi scowled and put his phone away, “I hope so.”

Just then, Haru and Rin reappeared, wrapped in towels but still dripping wet. Just as every time Makoto saw Haru again after a separation, his heart leapt with secret joy. From the sparkle in Haru’s eyes, Makoto knew Haru felt it too. That shared knowledge that each inspired the same reaction in the other, always made Makoto smile and he could tell Haru was smiling too, on the inside. Makoto stretched out an arm and Haru wordlessly slid to his place next to Makoto, wiggling until Makoto’s hand had fallen down to his waist. Spectating swimming involved hours and hours in hot pools filled with chlorine and Makoto was burning up. Pools had to be kept hot because swimmers, wet for hours at a time, always fought to stay warm with damp towels and warm ups. Pressed next to him, Haru’s body cooled Makoto down as Makoto’s body helped warm Haru up, a perfect, symbiotic
relationship. For just a brief second, everyone and everything ceased to exist and Makoto smiled, reveling in the feeling of having Haru, by his side and needing Makoto as much as Makoto needed Haru. After all their years together, their relationship had not ceased to amaze Makoto.

When Makoto came out of his Haru stupor, Rin and Sousuke were flirtatiously arguing over Rin’s open cell phone. He was standing in front of Sousuke, holding his cell phone in front of him while Sousuke half-heartedly tried to bat it away.

“Come on Sou!” Rin pleaded playfully, “I want a picture of right now! Give me a nice big smile!”

Makoto must have missed the first part of whatever was going on.

Relenting, Sousuke raised a hand, his middle finger raised in rude salute, while a devilish smirk cracked the corners of his mouth. Behind him, Kisumi thrust his head in the frame and stuck out his tongue. Rin snapped a picture and looked at his handiwork with a proud smile.

Then, his smile faded and he turned his head back up to Sousuke.

“May I send this to Ichirou?”

Suddenly all the air seemed sucked out of the room.

Rin’s request wiped the smirk off Sousuke’s face.

“You don’t have to talk to him and I won’t tell him specifically where you are,” Rin jumped in eagerly, “I don’t want to push you into something you aren’t ready for. But Ichirou lights incense for you, praying you aren’t dead. You don’t have to do anything else, but please let me show him that you are alive. He’s my friend and I don’t think I can lie about this to him. He loves you too much.”

For a very long time, Sousuke looked at Rin, his expression unreadable. Makoto could feel that Haru was holding his breath, waiting to see how Sousuke would answer. Honestly, so was Makoto.

Finally, Sousuke dropped his head in submission.

“Sure.” Sousuke mumbled, “Send the picture to Ichirou.”

Rin smiled excitedly, “Are you sure, Sou?”

Sousuke sighed and looked back up at Rin, “Yeah. I told you, I’m done hiding.”

Leaning forward, Rin kissed Sousuke on the forehead and mumbled a thank you before sending a text message to Sousuke’s big brother. When it was sent, Rin put a hand on Sousuke’s shoulder, his right shoulder, and Sousuke reached up to hold his hand.
Exactly thirty-seven seconds after Rin sent the message, his phone vibrated with a call. With his heart racing faster than the twelve-year olds currently in the pool, Sousuke looked at Rin, terror etched all over his face.

That had to be Ichirou.

This was it.

Without taking his supportive hand away from Sousuke, Rin answered the call. Sousuke couldn’t hear what was being said on the other line, but he recognized the cadence of his big brother’s voice, could hear the unique tilt of his brother’s voice it had when he was nothing short of ecstatic. In closer proximity to his brother than he’d been in years, Sousuke’s heart suddenly ached for Ichirou harder than it had in years and years.

Rin squeezed Sousuke’s shoulder and spoke to Ichirou: “Yeah, I found Sousuke. He’s here with me.”

Sousuke froze.

After all this time…

His brother.

“He’s doing well,” Rin told Ichirou, “He’s healthy and seems pretty happy. He’s bigger now than he was before, definitely bigger than you. Hang on just a sec.”

Rin put the phone down against his chest so Ichirou couldn’t hear what was saying.

“I’ll take this out to the hallway,” Rin told Sousuke, “I won’t tell him where you are and I won’t make you talk to him, even if he asks.”

Sousuke nodded stupidly. He wasn’t capable of speaking at the moment.

Rin smiled nervously at Sousuke and left, leaving Sousuke to go talk with Sousuke’s brother.

Exhaling, Sousuke became aware that he had been holding his breath. For a full minute he sat there, aware that Makoto, Haru, and Kisumi were watching him but unsure what he should do next.

An indistinct snatch of Rin’s conversation floated over the sound of the swim meet and everything came into sharp focus. The years of anger and misery he’d suffered became instantly insignificant and a longing so deep he felt it in his bones replaced it.

Sousuke had to hear Ichirou.

In one swift movement, Sousuke bolted up and ran up the stairs to the hallway, taking the steps two at a time so he could get there faster. Out in the hall, Rin was leaning against the wall opposite the
stairs with a shoulder, his back towards Sousuke. From the lines of his shoulders, Sousuke could tell Rin was upset. He wasn’t expecting Sousuke.

“Yes, he is my boyfriend,” Rin said, his voice full of distress, “and I’m his and it’s not too soon. If anything we’ve waited way too long. This thing between him and I has been building our entire lives and I don’t want to waste anymore time with him...”

Sousuke listened to Rin’s side of the conversation with rapt attention, guessing what Ichirou was saying.

“I’ll be careful. Give your brother some credit. He’d never hurt me...Yes. I know what’s happened the last three years but I forgive him and I get why he did what he did. He’s Sousuke and he always has done things on his own...Yeah, except with me...Look, I don’t want to go into too much detail about it because there is a lot you wouldn’t understand...Why? Well a lot of it is about swimming and shit your dad said...He didn’t go into specifics but he gave me a general outline and it’s worse than I thought from what I remember and what you’ve said... I don’t think I’m the one who should explain the details to you, that’s for him to do when he’s ready...No, I got permission to tell you he was alive and doing well but I promised I wouldn’t do anything more until he asks me to...Yes I know he’s your brother!...Obviously because I love him!”

In frustration, Rin jerked himself around so his back was against the wall and it was then that he saw Sousuke standing there, frozen to the spot.

“Sou?”

Sousuke swallowed hard and found his voice again.

“Could I...can I say hi?” he asked.

For a painfully long time, neither Rin, Sousuke, nor Ichirou said a thing until finally Rin nodded uncertainly.

“Hey Ichirou...” he said into the phone’s receiver, “Yeah Sou is here. Um, he wants to say hi. That cool?...Yeah, here you go.”

Rin handed the phone to Sousuke. With trembling hands, Sousuke put it up to his ear.

But then his words failed him again.

Ichirou was right there, was waiting, but Sousuke couldn’t say anything. Ichirou, who Sousuke had missed so ferociously, was right there and Sousuke didn’t know what to say.

But after thirty seconds of silence, Ichirou broke the silence that had deafened Sousuke for nearly four years.

“Are you there, Tiger?”
When he heard his brother call him the childhood nickname only shared between the two of them, Sousuke nearly lost it. A strangled noise of sorrow, elation, and terror escaped from Sousuke’s throat, making Rin look worried. Sousuke took the phone away from his ear and handed it back to Rin.

“Sou, are you alright?” Rin asked nervously as he took back the phone, took back Ichirou.

Sousuke nodded solemnly, forcing down a flood of tears he had been suppressing since the night he’d last seen Ichirou, the night Ichirou had failed to save Sousuke, the night Sousuke’s entire world had come crashing down around him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Sousuke said, trying to hide the riot of emotions he was feeling, “I’m just going to go take a walk. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Rin asked.

“No, that’s ok,” replied Sousuke, “I won’t be too long.”

Before Rin insisted on coming with Sousuke, Sousuke turned and fled.

Hearing Ichirou’s voice again had pushed Sousuke over the edge. In less than twenty-four hours he’d been thrust back into the life he’d been running away from for years and it was all…it was all just so much to handle at once. He didn’t want to leave Rin, he never wanted to leave Rin again, but unless he had some fresh air and space to process everything, if only for a few minutes, he felt like he was absolutely going to loose it. And with the date of Rin’s inevitable departure still unknown, Sousuke needed to pull himself together quickly because he couldn’t waste a second of his precious time with Rin.

“Rin it’s almost time for the 200 free,” Haru observed an hour later, “We should go down and get ready.”

“Sousuke still isn’t back,” replied Rin sulkily.

“He’ll be back when he’s ready,” Makoto tried consoling him, “He’s Sousuke and he’s had a lot of things happen very quickly for him. Just give him some more time. I’m sure he wouldn’t miss your race.”

“It’s just the 200 free,” Rin said dismissively, “and I was off for a week for my mom. I don’t think it will be much of a race for me.”

The look of furious outrage Haru threw at Rin made Kisumi chuckle, despite the gloomy, anxious atmosphere Sousuke had created when he disappeared. When Rin came to live with him, which Kisumi was 80% convinced would definitely be happening though it hadn’t been brought up yet, it was going to be pretty interesting seeing the famous Haru/Rin rivalry on a day to day basis.

“Every race is important,” Haru growled, “Now get off your ass so we can warm up. I’m not taking
your ‘lack of conditioning’ as an excuse for when I crush you.”

Rin cocked an amused smile at Haru, but his anxiety was too great for such a smile to last long.

“You guys do think Sousuke will come back, right?” he asked nervously.

Kisumi stopped laughing. He’d never known Rin to sound so desperate and... well, pathetic.

Rin’s feelings were forgivable, of course, because on nights Sousuke stayed out late by himself, Makoto, Haru, and Kisumi had shared that same worry. Not long after they’d moved into the apartment, Kisumi had come to a silent agreement with the wonder couple that someone should try to be with Sousuke as often as possible and that duty had largely fallen on Kisumi and Yasutomo. In recent weeks, Sousuke’s increasingly common laughter and smiles had diminished that worry, but it was always there, just under the surface. Kisumi couldn’t look at Sousuke and forget him as he’d been, right after his father had kicked him out and he’d sought refuge with Kisumi because he hadn’t anywhere else to go. The poor kid had been filled with so much rage and sorrow that he’d scared Kisumi’s entire family. Kisumi’s mother had been the one Sousuke had been most receptive to, but even she couldn’t penetrate the fathomless grief and anger that threatened to drown Sousuke.

And Kisumi couldn’t forget the morning he’d woken up to find that Sousuke gone, vanished into the night, no trace of him remaining except a note promising Kisumi’s mother that he would let her know he was fine every month, just as she’d made him promise.

He’d kept his promise with the postcards and, later, with the boxes of books he’d asked to store but that image, of the wild, wounded beast Sousuke had become, was impossible for Kisumi to forget.

Something suddenly hardened inside Kisumi and an unexpected anger welled up inside him. Sousuke was a jerk for making everyone worry like this. He wasn’t the same beast he was back then; he had absolutely no right to run away from the people who cared about him. Kisumi wasn’t going to let him.

“I’ll go find him,” Kisumi announced, much to everyone’s surprise, “You guys go do what you need to do and Makoto can stay here with our stuff. I’ll bring him back, I promise.”

In the end, all Kisumi needed to do to find Sousuke was go outside and there was Sousuke sitting on a bench underneath a tree in the adjoining park. He had his elbows on his knees and was leaning forward so he could hide his face in his hands. But seeing him calmed Kisumi down, sending his anger into the summer’s day. It was very important that while Sousuke might hide his face, Sousuke himself wasn’t hiding. Or running.

“Hey there, champ,” Kisumi greeted, forcing himself to sound cheerful, “We were wondering where you’d run off to.”

Sousuke looked up and Kisumi was astoundingly relieved that there wasn’t a trace of a tear in his
“Hi Kisumi,” Sousuke said half heartedly. He leaned back on the bench and stretched his long legs out. Rather than shutting Kisumi out, this gesture seemed to be inviting Kisumi in. Kisumi sat down next to him.

“You alright?” he asked.

Sousuke looked at Kisumi for a long time before answering.

“Yeah, I’m fine. There’s just been an awful lot to take in, you know?”

Kisumi nodded solemnly, “I can imagine. In less than twenty-four hours, you’ve been reunited with Rin, scarred your beloved roommate with whatever the fuck you two were doing with that stupid banana, done the do with Rin which I’m guessing was something super, super big for you, and talked to your older brother for the first time in almost four years. Yeah, I can understand that you’d be a bit overwhelmed. But don’t you dare think of running away.”

Sousuke furrowed his eyebrows.

“I wasn’t thinking about running away,” he protested, “I just wanted a bit of time to sort through things. And I didn’t say anything to Ichirou. He called me Tiger and I couldn’t do anything.”

“Tiger?” Kisumi asked.

“Yeah, it was his nickname for me.”

Kisumi smiled fondly at this bit of information. It was a good nickname for Sousuke; he mostly preferred being elusive and alone (unless Rin was involved) and Sousuke had always had a certain ferociousness to him that made most people weary. Ichirou had done well to pick such a nickname for Sousuke.

“Can I tell you something, Sousuke?” Kisumi asked.

“Sure.”

“When I found out you and your brother were estranged, I was a lot more worried about you than to find you hadn’t talked to Rin.”

Sousuke’s eyes narrowed defensively.

“I didn’t really see you and Rin in high school so I wasn’t aware that you two had been anything other than best friends,” Kisumi explained quickly, “but you and Ichirou, you guys I remember very well.”

“I was so jealous of you because you had the coolest big brother in the whole world. He was always laughing and he was always so nice. Do you remember when he took that little girlfriend of his to see the lights at Obon and you, me, and Rin spied on them? Besides my parents, that was the first kiss I’d ever seen and to me, that made Ichirou a rock star. And with you it was always ‘Ichirou this’ and ‘Ichirou that’…whenever you gave Ichirou’s opinion about something, that was the end of the conversation, there was no point arguing with you because Ichirou was the end all be all for you. You couldn’t have been a prouder little brother.”

Sousuke sighed, whether in exasperation or nostalgia Kisumi couldn’t tell. Either way, Kisumi continued:
“There was this other time, when we were quite young and we were playing on the playground after school. You fell on the gravel and twisted your ankle. Your hands and your knees were cut up and bleeding too and your ankle was really swollen. You didn’t cry, because Yamazaki Sousuke did not cry, but you were really upset, I could tell. Rin ran to go get Ichirou while I stayed with you and the whole time you wouldn’t talk or even look at me because you were determined to keep a stiff upper lip. Then Ichirou came. I remember your whole face lighting up when you saw him. He hugged you and said you had been such a brave, big boy and that he was so proud of you. You must have been in so much pain but I’d never seen you look happier, not even with Rin. Your big brother had come to your rescue and that’s all that mattered. You gave Rin and I this embarrassed little look before you asked if he could carry you home. He laughed and picked you up and I remember watching the pair of you leave. I could see your face really well. It was resting on his shoulder as he took you away. You had your eyes closed and you were smiling so big, knowing that you were safe now because Ichirou had you. Your big brother had come to save you and for you, that was the best thing in the world. Not even Rin could make you smile like that. Do you remember?”

“Yeah, kind of…”

“Well when Hayato was born, I couldn’t stop thinking about that particular time. I thought to myself I was going to be the type of big brother to Hayato that Ichirou was to you because I remembered how much you worshiped him. I wanted to give Hayato the same thing. I wanted to be his hero just like Ichirou was yours.”

“The problem with heroes,” Sousuke sighed sadly, “is that they usually don’t live up to the high standards of perfection you set for them. When they let you down or when they die, it hurts more than anything. I’m not that little kid anymore, Kisumi. When I needed him most, he just stood by and I don’t know if I can ever forgive him for that.”

Kisumi patted Sousuke on the back.

“Heroes aren’t perfect Sou, that’s why their stories are so interesting. Ichirou made a mistake but he never stopped being your big brother. To be fair, you ran away and never gave him the chance to make things right with you. But he stayed in contact with Rin and together they looked for you. That has to count for something.”

Sousuke fell silent and looked down at the ground, pouncing his leg up and down to help him work out his feelings.

“It does. It counts for a lot,” he whispered, “and I…I’ve missed him…so, so much. Sometimes more than Rin…But it’s been too long and too much has happened, too much has been missed. I don’t know if we can be saved. I don’t know if it’s possible anymore. I don’t know what to do.”

At that particular moment, Sousuke didn’t look so much like a tiger as a very sad puppy and Kisumi had to do something to comfort him. He ruffled his hair affectionately, causing Sousuke to crack the tiniest smile.

“The first step is always the hardest,” said Kisumi, “and you’ve taken it. So for now, be happy about that because whatever is going to happen has started. And when the time is right you’ll know what to do.”

Sousuke nodded.

“You’re right. I’ve been running away from my life for so long, but living with you guys made me
stand still and now my life has finally caught up to me.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Kisumi asked.

“No, it’s not a bad thing, it’s a very good thing. It’s the best thing, really. I thought I could leave it behind but no matter where I ran, I couldn’t escape it. Today is the first day I feel that I’ve really, really stopped running. But at the same time, it’s hard. I’ve become so used to being alone and doing things for myself. Even living with you guys, I’ve been completely free. Now that I have a boyfriend to think about, I can’t just do whatever the hell I want, can I? I have to be accountable to him. I want to be accountable to him. And if things with my family really have started, I guess I am going to have to be accountable to them too. It’s just a big adjustment from being completely free to being part of my life again and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t going to miss that freedom at all. But freedom means being alone and being alone is far worse than being accountable to those I love.”

He fell silent and Kisumi liked the resolution in his face. Sousuke had changed. He wasn’t going to run away again. That made Kisumi very happy.

“So Rin’s properly your boyfriend now?” teased Kisumi.

Much to Kisumi’s delight, Sousuke blushed like he was in middle school.

“Yeah. He is.”

“Good for you guys!” Kisumi cried, thumping Sousuke on the back again, “Though I have to admit, it’s a sad day when all my roommates have significant others and I alone must bear the cruel burden of bachelor hood!”

“Oh come off it!” Sousuke laughed, “You’ve always been able to take your pick from any girl you wanted! What about those friends of Makoto’s? Minami and Miyoshi? As far as girls go, they aren’t too bad. Miyashi seems like she would be a whole lot of fun.”

Kisumi smiled, “She would be but I don’t know. They are the first female friends I’ve had, like ever, and I don’t mind keeping it that way. I’ve always kind of been the ‘girlfriend’ guy, always the guy who was too busy in his serious relationship to hang out. So I’m fine with the bachelor life for now; it’s been good to focus more on having friends, you know?”

Sousuke laughed.

“No I don’t. I’ve never been in a relationship so I am definitely the wrong person to ask! Well whatever makes you happy I guess!”

Kisumi laughed too and then, together, they fell into an amicable silence.

“Okay, I think that’s enough feelings talk,” Kisumi announced, “Their race is going to start soon, and you wouldn’t want to miss Rin, would you?”

“Absolutely not. I haven’t seen Rin swim since high school.”

Together, they went back inside. When they’d reached the hall behind their stands, Sousuke stopped Kisumi.

“Thanks for listening to me,” Sousuke said, “I…um…really needed that. You’re a good friend.”

Kisumi smiled warmly, enjoying the sound of the word ‘friend’. He’d never felt closer to Sousuke.
“Sure thing champ.”

Rin was behind the blocks, waiting for Haru’s heat to finish. Haru was at the final flags, leading the field from lane 4 by an impressive margin. It irked Rin that Haru had a significantly faster time than him in the 200, but Haru didn’t even have butterfly times so Rin was at least better than him in that.

Though it wasn’t the fastest 200 free he’d ever swum, the time Haru posted was the fastest in the meet so far and there was only Rin’s heat left. Rin stepped up to the blocks as Haru was pulling himself out.

“Nice job, Haru,” he congratulated. Haru’s time was two seconds off his insanely fast best time, but considering they were at a pretty low-key meet and Haru hadn’t tapered for it, two seconds wasn’t shabby at all.

Haru smiled his thanks then his eyes went instinctively up to the bleachers, looking for Makoto. When he found his love, his smile grew bigger. Then he turned back to Rin and nodded towards the bleachers with his sopping wet head.

“Rin, look up there.”

Sitting between Makoto and Kisumi, waving shyly down at them was Sousuke.

He had come back.

Rin smiled and waved back, exhaling a huge breath of relief. He’d been so worried that he’d overstepped the bounds of their nascent relationship by sending that picture to Ichirou, but Sousuke was smiling and he was here.

He had come back.

The rest of the last heat was out of the water and a whistle blew, summoning Rin’s heat to the blocks. Rin snapped his goggle strap and stepped up onto the block, smiling. Another whistle blew and he bent down for the start.

Sousuke hadn’t run away. He had come bak.

Rin touched the wall second, but contrary to all expectations he posted a best time. He was still .15 seconds off the time Haru had posted in the previous heat, but Rin was very happy to see his results. He had a suspicion Sousuke’s presence had something to do with it.
Happy New Years everyone!!!!!! Hope everyone stays safe wherever you are :D See you in 2015!
The Night After: The First Date!

Chapter Summary

Sousuke shows Rin something. Then they go out to dinner, see a movie, then go to sleep. A pretty nice first date.

“Sou, come on!” Rin whined, though the whining was more for show than for any feelings of actual annoyance, “Let me open my eyes now!”

“Just give me a minute!” Sousuke called back.

As promised, Sousuke was taking Rin out on a date – the very first one Sousuke had ever been on ever – and their first destination on this momentous occasion (after a quick pit stop at the apartment to drop off Rin’s swim bag and a rather unexpected, intense quickie) was here. Of course Rin wasn’t exactly sure where ‘here’ was because Sousuke had insisted Rin wear a blindfold as soon as they got off the train. But Rin wasn’t complaining, he loved surprises and Sousuke had been so uncharacteristically bubbly and excited the whole way here. Besides, the blindfold made it necessary for Sousuke to lead Rin by the hand and Rin really, really liked holding his hand in public. He quite liked the idea of handholding because it announced to the world that tall, handsome, manly Sousuke belonged with Rin and Rin alone. If only Rin had been able to see Sousuke’s face when they’d been holding hands….

“Okay, you ready?” Sousuke called from somewhere that sounded far away. His voice echoed.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Rin yelled back, his heartbeat quickening with anticipation.

He reached up to take off his mask, but before he could, the lights suddenly went all out. For a very brief moment, the darkness terrified Rin but before he could really panic, Sousuke’s voice rescued him.

“Tell me when you’ve taken the mask off,” he yelled, “then I’ll turn the lights back on.”

Rin pushed up the blindfold and opened his eyes to complete darkness. Where the hell had Sousuke taken him?

“O..okay..” Rin yelled uncertainly into the abyss.

Sousuke flipped on the lights.
The flood of bright light revealed a massive room that looked something like a warehouse. Instead of cartons of diapers or pallets of canned coconut milk, however, this warehouse looked like it was some kind of armory. Pieces of metal in every size imaginable littered the floor in various degrees of clutter and unless Rin was very much mistaken, he thought he saw what looked like several anvils. But then Rin realized that the big piece of metal in front of him wasn’t just a big orb of metal but rather a statue. This was a workshop and people made sculptures out of metal and because Sousuke had positioned Rin directly in front of this statue, Rin surmised that Sousuke must have made the sculpture.

This was the other thing Sousuke had found for himself.

Rin walked all around the sculpture, marveling at Sousuke’s handiwork. An androgynous human form stood in the middle of what looked like a tornado of flowers, their arms stretched upwards and their head thrown back. The portions of the figure were elongated and tapering. From the middle of the chest, the tips of the fingers, and the toes flew gusts or wind, making it look as though the tempest was of the figure’s own creation. Walking around the statue, Rin couldn’t find a clear view of the face but he supposed that was done on purpose. What Rin could see on the upturned face was hints of a smile and based on the arms spread up to the sky, Rin could guess that the smile was one of joy.

Androgynous the figure might be, but their maker had still expertly sculpted their muscles, tendons, and everything else with incredible detail. Sousuke had a superb understanding of human anatomy, so much so that even the distorted proportions looked anatomically correct and, well, oddly realistic. Like the face, the figure’s androgyny came from how slender the figure was and the strategically placed metal pieces that made up the wind, shielding the chest and the genitalia from every angle. Only enough was revealed. The tendrils of wind stopped at the figure’s ankles so Rin could see the feet fully. Standing on the balls of its feet, the figure looked to be in motion, like he was watching the wind lift the figure up.

Hundreds of little flowers adorned the long, swirling tendrils of wind and the intense realism of the blossoms made them easily identifiable as sakura flowers. Rin took a few steps back to look at the full sculpture once more.

Sousuke was the person in the middle, caught in a whirlwind of sakura blossoms and letting the wind lift him up in the air. And the wind….the wind made of Sakura blossoms, Rin’s absolute favorite flower, came from Sousuke’s heart…

The lines and proportions of the figure reminded Rin very much of art projects Sousuke had done at Samezuka, but it looked so much more sophisticated than anything he’d seen before….Rin had always gotten the feeling that Sousuke was ashamed of his artistic talents and it had always made him sad, even when they were in elementary school. But this…this sculpture…

It was lovely…
It was a love letter made of metal in a secret language only spoken by the two of them. It was… it was… so beautiful…

A tear fell down Rin’s cheek and his heart felt like it was going to burst with pride and admiration and love and… everything…

“So what do you think?” Sousuke asked, suddenly right behind Rin.

Rin wiped his eyes and turned around. Sousuke was watching him intently and because Rin knew him so well, he could see how very, very nervous Sousuke was. In that moment, he wasn’t the tall, broody, beastly man he’d become but the shy, lonely, over-sized little boy in first grade who had first sucked up his courage and walked up to popular, laughing, and chatty Rin and asked if Rin would play with him after school.

That was Rin’s very first memory of Sousuke and this man, this sculpture, this whole weekend made the entire span of their life together flash before his eyes.

It was overwhelming in the best, possible way…

Rin let his tears flow freely as he threw his arms around Sousuke’s chest and hugged him tightly. In Rin’s arms, the tension in Sousuke’s body ebbed away.

Sousuke must have been afraid of how Rin would react to his new passion. It wasn’t swimming, after all, and Rin had a history of not understanding people’s dreams unless they involved a pool. Especially Sousuke…

And yet, just as so very long ago, Sousuke, a solitary person by nature, had risked rejection from Rin. And just like back then, Rin had put Sousuke’s lonely heart at ease because Rin had, and always, would accepted Sousuke with open arms.

It was a beautiful moment.

“I had some idea that at some point I’d give it to you…” Sousuke explained in a whisper, “but it’s too big for something like that. I’ll have to think of something else to do with it. Maybe I could sell it; a lady who came to the studio a week ago said she’d like to buy it.”
Rin pushed off Sousuke’s chest so he could give him a look of betrayal.

“You were going to sell it?” Rin cried, “But isn’t…isn’t it about…us? And you wanted to sell it?”

Sousuke nodded gravely, guilt written all over his face.

“Yeah, but only so I could afford a ticket to Australia.” Sousuke mumbled, “It’s very cheesy to say so, but I liked the idea of my love for you lifting me up and bringing me to you on the wind. That’s dumb huh?”

Rin shook his head, “No, it’s not dumb.”

“Well that’s how I was going to get to Australia. I wanted Haru and Makoto to let you know I was there with them, then I was going to write you a really long letter explaining everything and with it, I was going to send you this…”

Sousuke tore himself away from Rin’s arms so he could go over to his nearby work bench and retrieve a small box.

“Hold out your hands, Rin.”

Rin did as he was asked and Sousuke opened the box, taking out another metal flower and giving it to Rin.

It was a perfect lotus flower.

When the lotus flower was safely in Rin’s hands, Sousuke put his own hands over Rin’s so they were holding it together.

“Lotus flowers bloom from the murky waters of a pond,” Sousuke explained, his voice soft and deep and his eyes intent, “they have to rise above it, be reborn into the light. That’s kind of how I feel about you, that I had to be a lotus flower and rise above the much that was my life, before I could have a proper chance at happiness with you, in your light. Lotus flowers are symbols of rebirth and I really do feel like a new person. Another meaning of lotus flowers means love from afar so it was really the perfect thing to give you, to show you how I feel. That even at a distance, I have always loved you and always will. I remembered that you like flowers a lot so when I decided I was ready to face you, I started doing some research into hanakotoba. My idea was to send you a bouquet that explained everything I felt for you. Then maybe you’d understand everything, forgive me for running away, and allow me to come to you. This is the only I had time to finish so far, though, but I think it’s the most important. Now that my plan is irrelevant, you can have the lotus flower if you want.”

Rin looked away from Sousuke’s over its stunning details. Really, if Sousuke had painted it, it would have looked real. Rin couldn’t be prouder. He let go of that final, clinging hope that Sousuke and him would swim together somehow, someway, because this new thing Sousuke had found for himself…it felt right and wonderful and perfect for Sou.

“I haven’t shown anyone any of this yet, besides the other people who are members at this studio. A buddy at work told me about it, he gave me the idea of the flowers in the first place because he’d
made a rose for his wife. I know it’s not very good yet, but…”

“Sou,” Rin said, leaning his forehead against Sousuke’s chest while still looking down at the precious lotus flower in his hand. Tears fell down on the metallic leaves, “I can’t even tell you how beautiful this is. Of course I want it, I’ll treasure it always. I’m so, so proud of you. You’ve found the perfect thing for yourself.”

He looked back up at Sousuke and was delighted to see Sousuke beaming down at him.

Holding the lotus flower between their hearts, they shared a long kiss that left both of them smiling.

When they pulled away, Rin turned back to look at Sousuke’s sculpture and Sousuke did the same, put an arm around Rin and pulling him close. Rin still held the lotus flower in his hands.

“Maybe I was being presumptuous,” Sousuke laughed, “but I decided its name is Winds of the Future. Because I hoped it would bring me to you and, therefore, also to my future.”

“No,” Rin replied, “you weren’t being presumptuous. One way or another, we were always going to find our way back together. That’s what kept me going anyways.”

Sousuke kissed the top of Rin’s head, then rest the side of his head where he had kissed. They stood like that for a long time, admiring Winds of the Future together.

Later, they were at dinner and Sousuke was watching Rin eat his lentil soup. It was a French restaurant because Rin thought it sounded romantic and Sousuke had fond memories of France, the second and longer time he’d been there anyways. The ambience was really nice, but not as much as his company.

Rin looked up from his soup and smiled.

“Aren’t you going to eat your food or are you just going to watch me eat?”

Sousuke smiled and picked up his fork, “Yeah I guess I should, huh.”

He started in on his onion soup and Rin went back to his soup, thought it was hard for him to eat soup when he was smiling so much. Sousuke was eating slower than usual because he kept stealing glances at Rin, glances that lingered until Rin felt his gaze and looked up too. They would both smile and look away, but their eyes always found each other again.

When they had finally finished their starters, a waiter came and took their empty bowls away. Without them, they were left with each other.

For years, Sousuke had wondered what it would be like to go out on a proper date, especially a proper date with Rin. So far, the experience had exceeded all expectations. But their lovely evening was bound to be ruined because there was something Sousuke really needed to ask, but was terrified of finding out the answer.

“Rin,” Sousuke began, his voice shaking a bit, “I need to ask you something.”
Rin cocked an unfair smile at him, "Oh yeah, what is it big guy?"

Sousuke responded to that smile, but his own faded as he remembered what it was he dreaded knowing. For a whole minute, they sat in silence. Sousuke wanted Rin to change the subject, but Rin waited for Sousuke patiently. He could tell it was important.

“When are you leaving?” Sousuke finally managed to choke out.

“Tomorrow.”

With that one single word, Sousuke felt his heart being ripped in two. He’d been heartbroken and hurt before, but nothing compared to this! Probably because he’d never been happier than he had been this past day…

“How…how should this work?” Sousuke sputtered, desperate to cling as tightly as he could to the crumbling paradise he’d had with Rin, “I can come to Australia if you want.”

Rin smiled and shook his head. “Nope! No need for that.”

So Rin didn’t want to be with him after all….

A profound darkness came over Sousuke as the truth sunk in. After everything Rin had said and done in the past day, after everything ever, they weren’t going to be together…

Sousuke should have known it was too good to be true.

He hung his head down, as unable to look at Rin as he was to look at his own breaking heart.

“Okay,” he whispered, “that’s fine. Whatever you want.”

“No, wait, Sou!” shouted Rin, “That’s not what I meant. I guess we’ve had other things going on, I didn’t have time to tell you. I’m coming back from Australia. For good this time. At the end of August.”

Sousuke dared to look at Rin, whose whole face was suddenly full of worry. A flood of relief washed through Sousuke.

“What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

“That’s why I came to Tokyo, to see if Haru’s coach would take me on his team. We talked to him all day at the meet and he was thrilled to offer me a spot. I’ll be sharing a lane with Haru and that Tsukino pretty soon. I was 90% sure I would come back before I knew you were here. But now that you’re back, there’s no way I’m staying in Australia!”

Sousuke sighed with relief, relishing the warmth Rin’s sincere enthusiasm gave him. But there was more to the story than that, Sousuke could feel it.

“Why did you want to come back?” he asked.

Rin’s smile turned into a sad, frown.

“Oh, right. I guess I didn’t tell you that part yet either. My mom got into a pretty bad car accident a few days ago, that’s why I was in Iwatobi with her this past week. I don’t know, it was one of those traumatic experiences that really puts things into perspective. It’s time I came home, so I could be close by if she needs me because I’m the oldest and she’s my only parent.”
Rin’s mom was a very sweet woman who had suffered a lot in her life. Sousuke had always really liked her.

“I’m so sorry to hear that Rin,” he said quietly, “Is she alright?”

“She’s lost the use of her left eye and she was pretty shaken up about it, but she has a new boyfriend and he’s been taking really good care of her.”

Rin could tell there was more he needed to hear by the way Rin said ‘boyfriend’.

“Is that the first one since your dad?” Sousuke asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s not alright with you, though, is it?”

Rin frowned, “She’s a grown woman and she’s been alone for so long. She seems really happy with this guy so I’m happy for her. But I’d be lying if I said I was 100% fine with the idea. Not necessarily that I don’t want her to date, because I do. She’s been alone for so long. It’s just I also don’t want to forget our dad and I’m kind of worried that that’s how it will be.”

Sousuke sighed. He hadn’t heard Rin speak about his father since elementary school, but the image of Rin the day his father died was still vivid in his memory. It always would be because Sousuke had felt so profoundly helpless. That night, as he hugged wailing Rin and tried to find words but couldn’t, he would have given anything just to know what he could do to make his sunshine boy smile again. He prayed every god and ancestor and Pokémon he could think of to take the pain away from Rin and give it to Sousuke to bear.

Even when the pain had numbed and the sunshine returned back into Rin’s smile, Rin’s father was always something precious. Even now, he could see in Rin’s face that the love Rin bore for his father was the same as it had always been.

“Rin, that’s not how it’s going to be,” Sousuke replied, “Your dad is always going to be with you, he’s as much a part of you as your bones. You’ve kept him alive in your heart this long, you’re not going to forget now.”

At that moment, the waiter brought their main courses. *Canard du confit* for Sousuke; *Ratatouille* for Rin.

“I guess you’re right,” Rin sighed once the water had gone, “Not a day goes by I don’t think about him and miss him.”

Rin quirked up his mouth in a smirk, “I guess that’s the thing with me, isn’t it? Once I love someone, I don’t forget them. No matter how far away they go.”

Sousuke blushed and decided it would be a good time to start on his duck.

“So you’ll stay in Tokyo?” Rin asked.

“Yeah,” answered Sousuke, as casually as he could, “if you’re coming to live here, I’ll stay.”

Once more, Rin smiled.

“I hope so.”

Sousuke smiled too.
“Have you thought about where you want to live yet?” he asked.

“No, not really. I thought I’d find some little apartment somewhere.”

“You wouldn’t…” Sousuke burst out, then promptly shut his mouth.

Rin gave him an amused look.

“I wouldn’t what?”

Why was it suddenly so hot in here?

“Would you, uh, consider coming to…” he stuttered.

Rin laughed, “Come on, Sou, spit it out!”

Sousuke gulped hard.

“You could live with me.”

Rin laughed, but when Sousuke didn’t laugh too, he openly stared.

They both needed a moment to pull themselves together.

“Wouldn’t that be awfully soon?” Rin finally asked, “To live with you like that?”

“No, you’re probably right…forget I said anything.”

Sousuke turned back down to his plate, feeling utterly deflated though what a mad, stupid… wonderful idea. Of course Rin was right. It was way to soon. But the idea of waking up with Rin every morning…

Rin brought Sousuke’s attention back to him by kicking Sousuke gently behind the knee. Just like he used to. When Sousuke looked back at him, Rin was wearing a crooked grin.

“Then again we were roommates at Samezuka and that worked out really well. Better than with Ai, anyway. You weren’t as messy as he was but I guess your room now is lots different.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Sousuke said, a bit too eagerly, “That’s just sort of the way things are.”

“Oh no, don’t change it! Ai’s desk was just chaos, but yours is sort of, like organized chaos. And it’s a work of art too. What changed anyways? You used to be so neat.”

Sousuke chuckled, liking the direction their conversation was going.

“I spent two months in New York,” he explained, “working pretty much illegally on this construction project I’d found in Chinatown. It was about a year and a half after I left Japan and I hadn’t really been around much Asian anything for a long time. It was surprisingly nice to hear snatches of Japanese again, considering that I’d sworn I was never coming back home. Anyways, while I was there I found this Japanese bookstore and they had this book about *wabi sabi*. It really resonated with me because it was all about accepting imperfections and my life was nothing but one huge imperfection. I reread that book probably 50 times and it was really helpful, just in accepting
things as they were. So when I got a space of my own when I moved in with Makoto, Haru, and
Kisumi, I kind of forced myself to embrace and enjoy the imperfections of everything and not waste
energy worrying about aligning books perfectly, stuff like that. I like it a lot more because it feels so
much like me, I guess. Having a room that feels like mine reminds me I’m not just a ghost roaming
the world without leaving a trace. I live somewhere and I have a space.”

“And you want me invading that space?”

“Well, uh, you’re a big part of me too so don’t think of it as invading. Because you’re already living
in my heart so it makes sense that you belong in my space too.”

Rin laughed a charming, crystal clear laugh, “When you put it like that, how can I refuse?”

“So you’ll come live with me?”

“Only if everyone is alright with it. You already have three roommates. Five people in that flat is
going to be a lot. Makoto and Kisumi would probably be fine with it, but I don’t want to make Haru
feel crushed by people. And if Haru raises even the slightest objection, I will find a place of my own.
I would love to live with you, but it would also be pretty fun having a place of my own. Is that a
good enough plan?”

“That’s fair,” Sousuke conceded, “I don’t want Haru to feel uncomfortable either. Makoto treats him
like china and you kind of did too when we were in high school. And after seeing him when Makoto
had his appendix out, I can see why. He’s pretty fragile, isn’t he?”

Rin nodded, “He is about some things, mostly swimming and Makoto, but other things he could care
less about. He lived alone during high school so he took care of his house by himself for a long time,
I think his home is something he’s pretty concerned with.”

“He did? I didn’t know that.”

“Oh yeah. I guess you never went to his house in Iwatobi, though. You guys didn’t like each other
much.”

“No we did not,” Sousuke agreed, “And yet we are friends and roommates now. Goes to show you
how strange life is.”

“I guess so.” Rin smirked, “But really, I just think it shows how stubborn and moody you both can
be.”

Sousuke rolled his eyes, but the idea that Rin might be living with him in two months was more than
enough to keep him smiling.

“Ah Rin,” Sousuke laughed as they walked out of the discount cinema, “You’re so cute!”

“Why do you say that?” Rin demanded. He was sexy, hot, cool…but not cute!

“You cried so much!” Sousuke teased.
Rin crossed his arms and pouted.

“So what!? Hachi waited for Parker everyday for ten years and Parker never came back! How did you not cry? Is my boyfriend a machine?”

Sousuke laughed again but he didn’t have a comeback. Instead, his smile became small and introspective, the type that Sousuke probably didn’t know he was making. Rin had a feeling that smile was because he’d called Sousuke his boyfriend and that made Rin very happy.

Truthfully Rin had lain on the waterworks a bit thick during the movie, but that was only because he’d been seeing it with Sousuke. If he’d been by himself or with someone more neutral, Makoto for example, he probably wouldn’t have cried as much. Ok, Makoto was a bad example because Rin felt Makoto couldn’t handle that level of cuteness and canine caused heart destruction. The two of them would probably just feed off each other until they had to hold onto one another, sobbing hysterically because the poor puppy...

But the reason Rin had cried so much with Sousuke was because with Sousuke, Rin could relate to the poor dog. And naturally, comparing himself to the dog – because Rin knew he would have waited forever for Sousuke – made Sousuke Parker – the owner who died. Rin had just gotten Sousuke back, he didn’t want to think of Sousuke dying...

“You are cute, though,” Sousuke whispered as they boarded the metro that would take them back to Sousuke’s apartment...hopefully Rin’s future apartment. “Among many other things. It was kind of hard to pay much attention to the movie because I thought you were more interesting to watch.”

Rin elbowed him as they took their place in the crowded car and once more, Sousuke chuckled. Since there were so many people, they had to cram in against the opposite door.

The train began to move.

Before, Sousuke had held his hand, leading him to his metal working studio. But that had been in a pretty deserted, industrial area and Rin hadn’t heard any people around them. Apart from the little kick behind Sousuke’s knee that Rin had given him during their meal, they hadn’t touched since. Not even in the movie theater, when they were sitting so close and everywhere around them was so dark. Rin had shown physical affection in public to guys he’d dated before, so it wasn’t a problem for him, but Sousuke...well Sousuke was different.

How long would it be until Sousuke could hold Rin’s hand and not care?

As an experiment, Rin leaned back so his back brushed against Sousuke’s broad chest. The train was crowded enough that such a thing looked natural, something necessary people put up with in order for everyone to fit on. Behind him, Sousuke’s whole body tensed up and Rin felt him moving, looking around to see if anyone had noticed. But Rin took it as a very good sign that Sousuke didn’t break their contact. In fact, once he’d determined that their contact had gone unnoticed, he leaned forward slightly, so they were pressed a bit closer together.

They made a few more stops and the train became even more crowded, the press of people even
tighter. Rin took a step back so he was standing completely against Sousuke. He shifted his weight, so most of it was against Sousuke.

Again, Sousuke stiffened but instead of looking around, he did something else, something completely surprising.

Sousuke’s left hand was holding onto the strap above him, but his right hand, shielded from view by a pram and the throng, was free. In a very secretive, hidden movement, Sousuke moved that free hand on Rin’s hip, hooking his thumb around the waistband of Rin’s pants.

The sudden, very unexpected touch sent immediate fire all through Rin’s body and he had to lower the box containing his metallic lotus flower down in case his loose fitting trousers weren’t enough to conceal the inappropriate stiffness that the touch inspired. Usually something like a hand on his hip wasn’t quite enough to get this sort of reaction out of him, but no one had ever touched him so… intimately… in somewhere so public and crowded and well lit before. And having that someone be Sousuke…

Unaware of the situation he’d caused, Sousuke’s long, index finger reached around and traced a slow, seductive line on Rin’s hip bone. Rin couldn’t help but sigh and close his eyes, his blush doing nothing to hide how much this was exciting him.

Suddenly, The baby in the pram next to the illicit activity began to cry. At once, Sousuke’s hand jumped off Rin and Rin took a step forward so he wasn’t quite so close to Sousuke.

Thankfully, the mother didn’t notice what had been going on right by her baby’s head, she was too concentrated on getting her child to stop crying.

If his ear hadn’t been so close to Sousuke’s throat, he would have missed the deep chuckle that stayed in his throat.

Sousuke smiled and leaned back, not as hard this time but enough that they were touching. Content that the situation in his pants wasn’t going to get out of hand after all, Rin closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of having Sousuke next to him.

Maybe there was some hope of them openly holding hands after all.

As the train rolled on, more people came on and got off, but Rin was in his own little with Sousuke, immune from the bad vibes from unhappy office workers and tired parents with screeching children.

Sousuke was back, he really was, and Sousuke was now Rin’s lover. He really was. Under the harsh lights of metro car, Rin’s heart finally let go of his doubts and accepted it fully.

Sousuke was really, truly back.

Rin was beautiful in the moonlight.
Sousuke was sitting against his headboard, his hands on Rin’s hips as Rin rode him. It was the first time Sousuke had ever taken any kind of passive role and it was shockingly enjoyable. They were getting close.

What was making this experience so nice was Rin. He made really lovely, soft little moans every time he steered Sousuke’s dick towards his prostate and his eyebrows were furrowed in either concentration or pleasure or both. But the nicest part of all was the tank top Sousuke had asked him to keep on. Rin had borrowed it from Sousuke earlier so it looser than the usual things Rin chose to wear. After the incident on the subway, both he and Rin had been a bit rougher with their amour than they had on the previous two occasions and leading up to Rin’s ride, Sousuke had torn the collar of the tank top a bit, making it even looser than it already was.

Be that as it may, Sousuke had asked him to keep it on. The way it hung off Rin’s shoulders, the way it clung to the light sheen of sweat caused by his sexual efforts, the little buds of his hard nipples Sousuke could see through the thin fabric…with the pants of pleasure and the light, all of it together, Rin looked…he just looked so…

“Sou,” Rin panted, his voice a plea, “Sou I’m going to…need…”

Anticipating him, Sousuke took a hand off Rin’s hip so he could encircle the head of Rin’s penis. That familiar, warm fire started to pool up behind Sousuke’s navel but it was different this time because it began spreading down his limbs less intensely, more leisurely than he’d ever experienced it before. It was really nice. Rin on top of him bent his forehead down against Sousuke’s chest, rattling the headboard behind him.

“Sou…” Rin moaned, his voice higher and shakier than usual.

“My love,” Sousuke panted, the fire finally growing intense, his toes curling somewhere far away.

It was a moment for an epiphany, right before they tumbled over the edge into ecstasy. The sweat on Rin’s skin glistened in the moonlight and everything stood still, just long enough for Sousuke to have an epiphany. Well, not so much an epiphany as an acceptance that yes…Rin was really, truly here and he was here, doing this with Sousuke. This whole day, Sousuke had half expected to turn his head and Rin would disappear. Under the moonlight, however, Sousuke finally stopped doubting. Rin loved him, he really did. And he was here with Sousuke.

Rin came, followed almost immediately by Sousuke.

When the last tremors of their orgasms had finally faded, Rin collapsed against Sousuke’s chest, completely exhausted. Sousuke, of course, wrapped his arms around Rin and shifted his hips so his now flaccid dick fell out.

Rin took a minute to catch his breath and when he did, he started laughing.

“What are you laughing about?” Sousuke asked lazily.

“I have the record now!” Rin declared against Sousuke’s chest.

“What record?”

Rin pulled away so he could look Sousuke straight on. His smile was both impish and triumphant.

“Sex. You said you hadn’t slept with any one person more than twice. Now, we’ve had sex three times. So I have the record.”
Laughter boiled deep from Sousuke’s belly and when he’d laughed it out, he kissed Rin sloppily.

“There’s your prize, champ!”

And then they both started to laugh again.

A few minutes later, they were cleaned off and laying in bed. Rin was cuddled up on Sousuke’s chest and already asleep. Poor kid had had a swim meet and sex twice, all in the same day. Sousuke smiled sleepily and hugged Rin in tighter.

Sousuke couldn’t have asked for a better first date.

In fact, it was hard to imagine a better day period.
4:52 PM

All around Sousuke, people were coming and going, anxious to get through security quickly so they could enjoy a beer in an airport bar. Or they were hurrying to claim their bags from baggage claim so they could finally go home after a long journey. The world was a blur of motion, full of people with their own lives, their own stories that Sousuke would never know.

A myriad of microcosms.

Tiny worlds unto themselves.

They might as well be stars, separated from each other by light years with only a faint twinkling of light far beyond their reach connecting them together.

Standing in their midst at the airport, decidedly not wanting to move, Sousuke was the same as all of them. His own universe was a small bubble around which other people’s lives flowed.

An indifferent stone in a great stream of humanity.

And what was it that rooted him to the spot, making him stand still in all this motion?

He was with Rin again.

His dark, lonely universe once more had its sun.

But so very soon, the star that had come and brought warmth and life to the desolate vacuum that had been Sousuke’s world would be leaving. And dying stars leave behind black holes.

So he was determined to stay here, as long as he possibly could.

Because he was tired of black holes.

All he wanted was the sun.

They were in front of the security checkpoint, the last point where they would be together before Sousuke had to let Rin go. Facing him, Rin was on the verge of tears, but he was holding himself
together admirably. It was kind of sweet, seeing him work so hard to not ruin this, their last moments together. But Sousuke felt it might be easier, for both of them, if Rin did cry. At least that way, they would be able to talk. Sousuke wanted to bring back whatever words Rin said so he could treasure them when Rin was gone.

But Rin remained silent. All his effort was going to keeping his tears in check. If Sousuke wanted to speak with Rin before they left, he would have to take the initiative.

And Sousuke so wanted those last words.

“So…” Sousuke breathed, trying his best to sound light and airy when he too was just holding himself together.

Despite his best efforts, a tear escaped out of the corner of Rin’s eye. Sousuke had to smile, Rin was just too adorable.

More tears began to flow.

“It’s about time,” Sousuke continued.

Instead of inspiring heartfelt words, Sousuke broke Rin’s resolve.

Rin hung his head down and covered his face with his hands, the violence of his sobbing shaking his body.

This was not how Sousuke wanted to leave things.

Contrary to what Rin believed, Sousuke didn’t like seeing Rin cry. It always effected him, usually not in a very positive way.

How could Sousuke enjoy the sight of Rin in distress? No matter what the situation, Rin’s tears always reminded Sousuke of the night Rin’s father died and he never wanted to see Rin in pain like that again.

That was why he’d waited so long to tell Rin about his shoulder when they were in high school, he really hadn’t wanted to see Rin cry because of him.

Just like he didn’t want Rin to be crying now. For him.
While Sousuke racked his brain for a way to save these precious moments before their separation, Rin was in need of some comfort. He reached out and grabbed the front of Sousuke’s shirt.

Instantly, Sousuke tensed up, feeling as though every eye in Narita International Airport was on them. Rin had kissed his forehead at the swim meet, but that wasn’t such an open, public place and they had been sitting away from everyone else.

He wanted to run, but he couldn’t leave Rin like this.

Quickly Sousuke looked around to see how much damage this physical contact had done. Contrary to all Sousuke’s expectations, no one was stopping and staring at them. No old women were pointing their fingers and calling him vile. No little kids tugged on their mother’s skirt, asking why two men were acting like a mommy and daddy did. In fact, no one was looking at them at all. No one cared at all.

Sousuke swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heart.

No one cared.

And he couldn’t leave Rin like this.

Gathering up his courage, he lifted his arms and wrapped them loosely around Rin. Such an unexpected display of affection in such a public place shocked Rin out of his tears. For a few seconds, they stood perfectly still and Sousuke tried desperately to reconcile his long held notions on public displays of affection and the reality of what he was experiencing.

No one cared.

And he wanted to hold onto Rin for as long as he could.

Once the shock wore off, Rin dropped his hands down around Sousuke’s hips and stepped in closer to Sousuke. Sousuke’s heart rate increased rapidly.

They were doing this, Sousuke was in.

But it was still terrifying.

Yet holding Rin here, now…Sousuke wanted it with every fiber of his body.

And apparently so did his lover.

Rin took a deep breath and rotated his head so his ear was against Sousuke’s heart. He squeezed Sousuke’s waist tighter.
They’d done this.
It wasn’t so bad.
In fact, it was kind of perfect.

All of a sudden, the people around Sousuke ceased to exist and the tension eased out of his body. He closed his eyes and hugged Rin tighter, a tiny smile teasing the corners of his mouth up.

Rin was going, but right here, right at this moment they were together and for now, Sousuke’s universe was complete.

11:37 AM

Rin was getting ready for the 100 fly and Sousuke was having trouble telling which splashing person in the warm up pool was his lover. Makoto and Haru sat snuggled up next to each other, smiling and oblivious to everyone around them.

Sousuke envied them; he wished he could be so free with Rin.

Kisumi was watching the ten-year old girls swim the 50 fly without much interest. Sousuke had to hand it to him, Kisumi had been a trooper watching the seemingly endless heats and heats of each event. If you hadn’t grow up swimming or weren’t emotionally invested in the swimmers, regular, mundane swim meets like this one were almost unbearable.

But Sousuke was glad Kisumi had joined them yet again for the meet. He had something he needed to talk to all his roommates about. Since Rin wasn’t around, now was probably the best opportunity to begin the conversation with his roommates.

Sousuke cleared his throat, drawing Kisumi’s attention to him, but Makoto and Haru were still too distracted with their cuddling. As Haru was closer and Sousuke would never dream of hitting Makoto, Sousuke swatted Haru’s leg. Haru’s smile disappeared, replaced by the deep scowl he saved especially for Sousuke. Sousuke quirked up his mouth into a smile. It was a lot of fun teasing Haru.

“What?” Haru asked flatly.

“I wanted to talk to you guys about something important,” Sousuke explained, “while Rin’s not here.”

Now he had the wonder couple’s attention. Makoto pulled away from Haru a bit so he could give Sousuke his full attention.
Sousuke began: “As you may already know, Rin is coming to Tokyo at the end of August…”

Admitting the wonderful truth out loud for the first time, Sousuke’s throat suddenly felt tight. All morning, Sousuke had been wondering how he was going to ask them if Rin could live with them, making him increasingly nervous as the day wore on. It was a weird feeling, to be stuck between fear and ecstasy like this.

“Go on…” Kisumi said, a stupid, smug smile on his face.

Sousuke’s face flushed hot.

“I was wondering what you guys think…”

Sousuke could feel six eyes on him, making him feel even more nervous. The blush on his cheeks went down his neck. He looked at Makoto for help because if anyone was going to help him out, it was Makoto.

Sousuke had expected a kind, understanding, encouraging smile but what he saw instead was a smug smile that rivaled Kisumi’s.

An arrow of bitterest betrayal pierced Sousuke’s heart because he had never, ever expected to see a look like that on Makoto’s face. He couldn’t help thinking, *Et tu, Makoto?*

Makoto sapped the will out of Sousuke; fear overcame the elation and sunk him down into deep despair. Unable to cope with the weight of it all, he hung his head down and rubbed the back of his head.

They’d never agree to let Rin be a roommate, he’d been an idiot to think it could be that simple.

“You want to know what we think of what, Sousuke?” Haru asked.

“Nothing,” Sousuke mumbled, not daring to look up, “Forget it.”

For a painful moment, they were all silent and Sousuke tried to swallow his disappointment. He’d help Rin find an apartment of his own nearby and maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

That vision, of him waking up next to Rin every morning, of sharing meals together, of falling asleep in each other’s arms…it was all just a dream that Sousuke was foolish to think about.

Suddenly a big body crashed into Sousuke’s back and a pair of strong arms hugged him so tight across the chest, he could barely breathe.

“Oh Sou!” Makoto yelped right in Sousuke’s ear, “We are just teasing you! Of course Rin can live with us! Don’t be so sad!”

Sousuke’s eyes popped opened.

They’d already discussed Rin moving in.

They’d known exactly what Sousuke was going to ask of them.

That dream, of sharing his life with Rin…it could happen.
“Makoto, you can stop hugging him now!” Haru snapped angrily and a moment later Makoto released Sousuke.

“Ah don’t be mad Haru-chan!” Makoto sighed sadly. Sousuke turned around to find Makoto clutching Haru’s hand. For a second Haru pouted and refused to look at Makoto, but he was incapable of being mad at Makoto for long. They exchanged a long look before they got up in unison. They made to go.

“Where are you guys going?” Kisumi asked.

“We’ll be back later,” Makoto said cheerfully over his shoulder, “But yeah, it’s fine if Rin lives with us.”

When they were gone, Kisumi chuckled low under his breath.

“Those two are seriously ridiculous.” Kisumi laughed.

“You guys talked about Rin moving in in August?” Sousuke asked.

Kisumi clapped Sousuke hard on his shoulder.

“It was pretty obvious once we knew Rin was coming back,” Kisumi explained, “We had a bet when you were going to ask. I said yesterday so now I have to make Haru and Makoto dinner. I hope they realize that it might be more of a punishment to make me cook for them than a reward.”

“Oh.” Sousuke replied stupidly, embarrassed that his desires were so obvious to his friends.

But then again, it was a pretty nice feeling that he had friends who were concerned enough about him and his happiness to make bets about what he would do.

4:53 PM

Rin buried his face in Sousuke’s strong chest and breathed deeply. Tucked at the bottom of his bag was a shirt he’d stolen from Sousuke’s dirty laundry basket. It was a bit of a weird thing to do, but he’d forgotten how good Sousuke smelled. To take back home with him, he wanted something that smelled like Sousuke. But no stolen shirt would ever smell as good as the real thing.

“Rin…” his beloved said, his voice vibrating down through his chest.

Rin knew what Sousuke was going to say, that it was time for him to go.

Rin tightened his hug.
He wasn’t ready to let go.

But he knew he had to.

It was only going to be for two months.

But more than anything, Rin didn’t want to let go.

“Rin,” Sousuke said again.

It was time.

Rin stepped away from Sousuke and forced himself to smile. His arms dropping down to his side, Sousuke forced a smile too. Rin patted Sousuke’s right shoulder.

“Don’t forget about this,” he said with forced cheer, rubbing Sousuke’s right shoulder, “I mean it. Really.”

Sousuke dropped his head down and laughed quietly, his smile becoming more natural. From this angle, Rin could see his eyelashes, feathered out across his upper cheeks. It always had surprised Rin how long and pretty Sousuke’s eyelashes were. It was the kind of thing he found in other people that had always, always reminded him of Sousuke.

Rin squeezed Sousuke’s shoulder.

“So you should come to Australia the last two weeks I’m there,” Rin said, “And you should keep this on until then.”

Slowly Sousuke turned his eyes back up to Rin.

“You want me to come to Australia?” he asked, his voice a little rougher than usual.

Rin smiled, “Of course I want you to come to Australia! I’ve bagged quite the boyfriend, I want to show you off to all my friends down under! And besides, you’ve never been to Australia.”

Sousuke nodded.

“No I haven’t. It’s the only continent I haven’t been to.”

Rin made a surprised grunt.

“You’ve been to Antarctica?” he asked.

Again, Sousuke nodded.
Rin chuckled, “Well aren’t you just full of surprises!”

But when his laughter died, they were both enveloped in an almost painful silence.

It was time.

“I should go,” Rin finally announced, trying his best to seem cheerful. Like saying goodbye wasn’t tearing him apart, “Hugging in public is a big step so we don’t need to kiss goodbye. But I love you, Sou, and I’m very happy to be your boyfriend. Long distance will be hard but it might be a good thing to just talk about things for a while and get to know each other again. And it’s just for two months. I hope you come visit me in Australia, it would be really nice to leave there with you.”

“I’ll request the time off tomorrow.” Sousuke jumped in immediately.

“Well let me know what they say tomorrow.” Rin said as he bent down and picked up his bag.

“Alright, Sou,” he put out a fist for Sousuke to bump, “I’ll be seeing you soon. I love you.”

Sousuke looked at Rin’s fist in confusion for a while before lifting his own fist up. He’d never once left Rin hanging; he wasn’t about to start now.

Rin swallowed down his tears and patted Sousuke on his right shoulder one final time.

“Take care big guy.”

Rin turned and walked away from Sousuke. He didn’t look back. If he had, he wouldn’t have been able to keep his composure.

And it really felt like he wouldn’t have been able to go.

12:43 PM

“The conquering hero returns!” Kisumi cheered as Rin rejoined everyone in the bleachers. At that welcome, Rin broke out into a huge grin, the water from his hair dripping down his face. He’d posted a really solid 100 fly time and placed first. It was still two seconds off his best, but it was still pretty impressive.

Rin’s eyes automatically found Sousuke and his smile brightened. Of course Sousuke was already watching Rin and when their eyes met, he smiled too.
It was kind of conflicting for Rin because he knew it must suck for Sousuke to watch Rin swim an event he’d excelled at. One he probably still dreamt about swimming. But at the same time it was really nice to know Sousuke was there, watching him, supporting him. The surprisingly good times he’d been posting at such a low key meet had to be because Sousuke was here.

How fast would Rin go if Sousuke came to the Pan Asian games with him?

Consciously or not, Rin had always been a show off and he had forgotten that Sousuke was his best, most receptive audience.

“You’ve gotten so fast!” Makoto gushed as Rin took a seat near Sousuke. Sousuke’s hand was splayed out in the space between them and Rin put his hand down so his pinky barely touched Sousuke’s index finger. It was a minimal amount of contact, but it made Sousuke hang his head and smile, a blush creeping down his neck.

Seeing his reaction hit Rin right in the groin.

How the *fuck* was he supposed to leave Sousuke?

“Thanks Makoto!” Rin squeaked, doing his best to ignore that Sousuke was the most adorable, sexiest guy on the planet.

“I’m telling you now,” Haru said darkly, “When you live with us, you and I are forbidden from talking about our times in the house. At practice it’s fine, but not in our home.”

Rin came back to reality and stared at Haru for three seconds before he understood what Haru was talking about. When the pieces all fell into place, he turned excitedly towards Sousuke.

“You asked already?”

With his head still hanging down and his hand on the back of his neck, Sousuke nodded in confirmation.

Elated, Rin spun to look at Haru, Makoto, and Kisumi.

“You guys are cool with it?” he cried excitedly, “I promise to pay whatever you want!”

Makoto smiled widely, “Of course you can live with us! We can split rent equally between five, you don’t need to pay extra.”

Rin’s maniacal smile fell.

“Haru,” he said seriously, “are you really okay with me moving in? I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable with so many people around.”

Haru sighed, a little mellowdramatically.

“Yes, I’m fine with it. I know you are a very clean person so maybe together we can clean up after these two.”

He nodded at Makoto and Kisumi.
“Oh Haru, I really do try!” Makoto protested, “You can always show me exactly how you want things done. I just don’t have as much practice as you!”

“No, it’s fine Makoto. Sousuke is good at cleaning and Rin is too. It will be fine.”

“Haru, seriously I won’t agree to move in with you guys unless you are 100% okay with it.”

“Yes, Rin,” snapped Haru, “I told you it was fine so it’s fine.”

“Ohay then,” Rin laughed, “If Haru is fine with me moving in, then I guess I’ll be moving in when I get back at the end of August.”

His head was still hung down, but Rin saying those words out loud made Sousuke smile widely.

Makoto and Kisumi began babbling about logistics and fun things they could all do together and Rin half listened to them. But the larger part of his attention was focused on Sousuke, who had kept his hands behind his head, his face averted through the entire discussion. Rin leaned back and put his elbows on the bleacher behind him. But he scooted his knee so it was pressed against Sousuke’s.

Sousuke dropped one of his hands, the left one, furthest away from Rin. That hand, he draped across his knees so it was hovering right by Rin’s knee. Rin didn’t look straight down, but he watched Sousuke’s hand with his peripheral vision. After a few seconds, Sousuke lifted a finger and oh so shyly, reached out to touch Rin’s knee.

Rin smiled happily to himself. He didn’t hear any of Kisumi arguing with Haru about Kisumi’s housekeeping skills. The only thing that mattered was the contact between them and their future, where they’d get to do this stuff every single day.

4:54 PM

Time seemed to slow down as Rin’s back retreated away from Sousuke. It was the oddest sensation Sousuke had ever experienced and a part of his brain marveled at how his body was reacting, watching Rin go.

It sort of felt like a big, goopy something emanating from his chest and stomach was stuck to Rin’s back and the further away Rin walked, the more that goopy whatever was pulled taught. It would have been a pretty cool feeling except that goop was pulling his heart and all his good feelings out, leaving Sousuke as nothing more than a husk.

Rin was leaving.
And Sousuke hadn’t even been able to kiss him goodbye.

For most of his life, Sousuke had tried very hard to pretend he didn’t care about things. It was safer if people didn’t think you cared. But the thing about Sousuke was that he did care about things. He cared about things very, very deeply. He could usually hide how deeply he cared about things from people, but not once those feelings were stirred.

And experiencing this feeling, of Rin walking away from him after such a brief, world changing reunion…

Well…

Sousuke was stirred.

Panicking, he turned away, hoping that would help. But not seeing Rin made it worse.

Rin was leaving.

That goopy whatever was stretching thin…in just a few precious moments, it would break completely.

And Sousuke couldn’t leave it like this…

No matter how many people might see.

Summoning every once of courage he had, he quickly turned around and dashed back towards Rin, the goopy whatever was like a magnet, drawing him straight to his heart’s desire.

In five bounds, he caught up to Rin and when he did, he grabbed Rin’s upper arm and turned him around roughly. The sudden exertion and those stirred feelings left him breathless.

When Sousuke gruffly turned Rin around, he found, predictably, tears were streaming down Rin’s beautiful face. But Sousuke, doing something so public and so full of emotion had shocked Rin thoroughly so his face was all surprise. And when he recovered from his shock, Rin began to beam.

“Sou,” he whispered and Sousuke could hear how happy he was that Sousuke had come back.

With his heart hammering wildly in his chest, Sousuke paused, conscious of all the people around them.

But he couldn’t leave Rin like this.

He had to jump out in the abyss and trust that things would turn out alright.

Because he really, really loved Rin.
In one violent movement, he grabbed Rin’s head with both his hands and yanked it towards him, smashing their mouths together. The heat rose on his cheeks and he squeezed his eyes tight, the only thing he really knew to do to shut out the rest of the world.

And then he was kissing Rin, with every ounce of stirred feeling he possessed.

Rin made a surprised noise at the ardor with which Sousuke kissed him but, much to Sousuke’s relief, he only needed a second to return Sousuke’s kiss with equal gusto.

That kiss…it was going to stay with Sousuke for a long, long time.

Rin was the one who broke away and when he did, Sousuke fluttered his eyelids open.

It didn’t last long, but that kiss was….exceptional. Sousuke could tell Rin felt the same way.

Rin smiled. He leaned his forehead against Sousuke’s right shoulder and very gently kissed it goodbye.

“Remember to keep it on,” he said quietly, “I’ll be with you if you keep it on.”

“I will Rin. I promise.”

Rin turned his head back up so he could give Sousuke a final peck goodbye.

“I love you Yamazaki Sousuke.”

“I love you too, Matsuoka Rin.”

Smiling, Rin pulled away and began walking backwards.

“In two months, you’ll be in Australia with me, big guy.”

Sousuke nodded firmly, “I will.”

Rin gave a final wave.

“I’ll see you then.”

Sousuke brought his hand up to wave, but he didn’t quite manage the motion.

“I’ll see you then,” he repeated.

After a long minute of drinking in the image of Rin before they were parted, Rin finally turned around.
Sousuke turned around and began to walk away.

This time, he did not look back.

There was no goopy whatever feeling as Sousuke walked away. Instead, Rin’s kiss had supercharged Sousuke’s lips. He walked out of the airport, onto the train, and eventually back to his home and all the while, he couldn’t help ghosting his fingers over his lips.

He could still feel Rin’s lips on his.

Even if people had seen, Sousuke was glad he’d kissed Rin because that kiss was something he would feel for a long time to come.

Hopefully it would be enough to get him through two months.

6:27 AM

Together they fell down on Sousuke’s bed, panting after vigorously having sex.

Rin hadn’t been especially aroused when he woke Sousuke up twelve minutes ago, but they weren’t going to see each other for two months and Rin didn’t think they’d have another chance.

It hadn’t been their best sex (it was pretty hard to beat the first time), but it was enough to work up a sweat. It was too early and they were both too tired for much technique. But even unremarkable sex with Sousuke was better than half his ex-boyfriends on their best nights.

Rin turned his head to look at Sousuke, laying on his back and catching his breath, his eyes closed and his face relaxed into a smile.

Seeing Sousuke like this, free and happy, sent a wave of love through Rin, warming him up. He didn’t know how on earth he was expecting himself to leave tonight. They hadn’t had enough time together; it was too soon for them to be parted again.

But, he told himself, at least they were in this together, they were finally on the same page.

Sousuke turned his head to face Rin and slowly, unintentionally seductively, he opened his eyes.

He smiled the kind of big, open smile that was a rare sight on Sousuke. For just a second, he looked as carefree and happy as he did when they were little, playing Officers MacGruber and O’Neil, when it was just the two of them.

Rin couldn’t help himself, he had to lean in and kiss Sousuke, long and slow and sweet.
How had he been so afraid of doing this before, when they were at Samezuka?

As Sousuke caressed his face gently and their tongues did an elaborate dance together, Rin couldn’t help but feel a little angry with himself.

They could have been doing this all along and who knows, maybe if Rin had been brave enough to do with Sousuke exactly what he wanted to do, maybe then Sousuke wouldn’t have disappeared.

But then Rin had to remind himself that if things had happened earlier, they wouldn’t have had such an excellent, excellent reunion.

And they’d both grown up and gotten ready for each other.

As painful as it had been, maybe those three years had been necessary.

And after that, Rin reminded himself that he needed to shut off his brain so he could enjoy the feeling of Sousuke’s tongue pressed against his.

Because tomorrow he wouldn’t be able to.

After a minute of kisses, Sousuke began laughing against Rin’s mouth. Rin jerked his head away.

“What’s so funny?” Rin asked, his voice a little flustered.

“Nothing,” Sousuke yelped, taking Rin’s tone to be offended, “I just really have to pee and I was considering just pissing myself because I don’t want to leave. Not very romantic, huh?”

Rin smirked.

“Go pee, you big buffoon. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Grinning, Sousuke gave Rin one last kiss before crawling out of bed and out of the room.

Smiling, Rin watched him go, but once he was out of sight, that smile faded.

He was here now, but tomorrow he wouldn’t be.

Rin sat up and hugged his knees to his chest.

Thinking about leaving made him feel like throwing up.

But no, if he started thinking about it too much, he was going to start crying and he did not want to get their last day together off to a sad start. It was only two months after all. Looking for anything to distract himself with, he let his eyes roam around Sousuke’s room.

It really was beautiful in here; Sousuke had done a really nice job decorating. Everything felt infused
with Sousuke and, just like the man himself, there were more details Rin wanted to discover than he had time for right now.

Rin’s eyes drifted to the desk and eventually came to rest on the box that housed the metal lotus flower. Rin got out of bed and walked over to the desk so he could open it and admire the blossom’s beauty once more.

He trailed his fingers along the metallic petals, tenderly feeling every ridge and vein.

It was such a lovely gift. Rin would treasure it always. And the meaning behind it…love from afar…rebirth…well it was all so terribly romantic and wonderful.

If only Rin was half as talented as Sousuke, if only he knew how to explain the feelings in his heart as well as Sousuke had explained his.

Sighing, Rin put the box back down on the desk.

In a lot of ways, Sousuke was the ideal partner for Rin because Rin was such a hopeless romantic and Sousuke, well he had a gift for romantic gestures.

But it shouldn’t all fall on Sousuke, Rin should be able to do something too…to let Sousuke know that he too was loved.

Rin’s eyes wandered over the rest of the desk. Lying to the side of the lotus box was a permanent marker. Rin picked it up, then looked back down at the lotus blossom.

Maybe it was stupid, but an idea began to form in Rin’s mind…

Sousuke returned.

He came up quietly behind Rin and hugged Rin from behind, kissing his cheek in greeting. Rin smiled.

The soft light of sunrise streamed in through the window, like the world was reflecting how Rin felt in Sousuke’s arms. Soft and warm and wonderful.

Rin turned around and gently caressed Sousuke’s cheek with his free hand before leaning in to give him a lingering kiss. Then he broke away.

“Would you mind laying down on your bed?”

Sousuke smiled, too drunk off Rin to question him. He did as he was told and laid down on his back.

Rin uncapped the marker and sat down on the bed, right next to Sousuke’s right shoulder. Sousuke’s right hand found Rin’s thigh and he began to rub it, more as a tender gesture than foreplay.

“I’d like to draw something on you, Sou,” Rin explained, “And I was thinking every morning until we are together again, you could redraw what I make today. That way, you’ll start your day thinking about me.”
Sousuke laughed.

“I think about you most of the time anyways. But go ahead, do whatever you want.”

Smiling, Rin got to work.

Ten minutes later, Rin and Sousuke were in the bathroom, brushing their teeth. They’d both put on boxers because the rest of the apartment was finally stirring, but neither of them had put on a shirt yet. Rin looked at Sousuke’s reflected shoulder and smiled a toothpasty smile. He looked up to find Sousuke, watching him in the mirror. He was smiling a toothpasty smile too.

It wasn’t nearly as beautiful as what Sousuke had done, but Rin was pretty satisfied with the lotus flower he’d drawn on Sousuke’s right shoulder, over the scars and the character branding Sousuke a traitor.

And every morning, until they could be together again, Rin’s lotus flower was going to be with Sousuke, reminding him that he was loved from afar and that he was no longer a traitor.

6:29 PM

29D

Rin’s seat.

It was time to go.

Rin wiped his eyes again then slid down into his seat. As soon as he’d gotten through security, he’d fled into a bathroom near his gate so he could vent the tears that he’d been holding back. He’d been so caught up in lamenting this bitter departure, he’d nearly missed his flight. But here he was, leaving Japan.

Leaving Sousuke.

Once settled, Rin rummaged in his bag until he found his cell phone. He pulled up his text messages and created a new one using Sousuke’s number. He’d only remembered to ask for it on the train ride
Rin smiled.

It was sort of symbolic, that there was nothing written between them yet. It was a new chapter in their lives and it felt like all the muck from the past was gone.

They could say anything, make their relationship whatever they wanted because they were starting over, starting fresh. Rin typed out a message.

_I love you, Sou! I can’t even tell you how happy I am that we are back together. Can’t wait to show you Australia!_

He pushed send.

The conversation could begin with that.

Five seconds later, Sousuke replied with a kiss emoji followed two seconds later by a text:

_Have a safe flight and let me know when you arrive safe and sound. I love you lots and lots!_

Thirty heart emojis at least followed the text.

Snorting out a laugh, Rin put his phone on airplane mode and stowed it back in his bag.

Not in a million years would he have expected Sousuke to use emojis and Rin kind of loved that he did.

For him to respond that quickly, Sousuke must have been staring at his phone too, maybe even trying to compose the perfect first text to Rin.

Rin leaned back and smiled; he no longer felt like crying.

With anyone else, a long distance relationship, even one that lasted a mere two months, would have been impossible for Rin to even consider.

But Sousuke was different.

A half hour later, the plane was rolling down the tarmac, gaining speed as it prepared to take off.

Rin closed his eyes and gripped the armrests tight.

Leaving Japan had never been so hard before because he’d never felt like he was leaving his heart behind.
As the plane lifted up off the ground, severing Rin’s last contact with Japan, a single tear escaped his closed eyes. He pictured it, glittering in the blinding sunset filling the cabin with orange and pink light.

Okay, maybe he did still feel like crying.

The only thing that stopped him from breaking down again was the picture of his next plane trip.

Maybe the sunlight would be just as brilliant, as beautiful as it was now, as Rin headed up into the clouds. But when he’d be flying again, Sousuke would be by his side and then, the next time, they would never have to be apart again.

When the seatbelt light went off, Rin dove back down into his bag and pulled out the magazine with the story Sousuke had written in it.

The 8-hour plane trip was going to go by quicker than it ever had before because Sousuke had given him such excellent reading material. And everything Sousuke had written, Rin was determined to copy down onto his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovely readers! Hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I'm sad to have Sousuke say goodbye to Rin (only for two months!) but there is lots of good stuff coming up! You can find me on tumblr: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

Thanks for reading :D :D :D!!

Next chapter is all about Yasutomo :)
The Man on Mt. Fuji

Chapter Summary

Kisumi learns something about Yasutomo. Then, they get noodles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Bye Rin, have a nice flight back!” Kisumi called over his shoulder, “See ya soon!”

“Bye Kisumi!” Rin yelled back, “See you in two months!”

Forcing a smile, Kisumi waved then turned away from the others, away from the pool. It had been a very long, hot day watching the races slowly go by. The cool, afternoon breeze against his flushed cheeks felt magical.

Almost like a kiss.

Kisumi’s back was to the others so he dropped the pretense of a smile.

It had been a long time since anyone had kissed Kisumi; he was starting to forget what it felt like.

But surprisingly, this didn’t bother him.

At the moment he was too preoccupied by Tomo’s disturbing behavior in the last couple of days to worry about the lack of kisses for Kisumi.

Heaving an inward sigh, Kisumi walked to the train station and waited for the train that would take him to Yasutomo’s suburb. Mechanically he boarded, paying only enough attention to make sure he was on the proper train. As the train rolled on, Kisumi became completely engrossed with Yasutomo to pay much attention to the other passengers.

Since they’d started hanging out, there hadn’t been a single day Kisumi hadn’t at least seen Yasutomo until this weekend. And when Kisumi had tried to figure out what was wrong, Tomo had said it wasn’t something physical.

Kisumi’s personality was well suited to the medical profession because when a problem was presented to him, it weighed on his mind until he could come up with an explanation. And the worst part was that maybe he could help with something physical, but what could he do for something that wasn’t?

As he’d been doing all weekend, Kisumi asked himself the same questions over and over again. Was it something to do with his ex Rajin? Tomo hadn’t mentioned him for months and Kisumi had kind of forgotten about him. Maybe it was something to do with his parents.
Well whatever the issue was, Kisumi was rolling through Tokyo to find out the cause of Tomo’s despair and to do whatever he could for him. A good doctor treats the root of the disease, not the symptom.

The train pulled into Tomo’s station and Kisumi let himself be swept along with those departing. He’d only been to Yasutomo’s house twice before, he’d stayed outside while Yasutomo grabbed a bag or whatever, but Kisumi was still able to find it pretty easily.

The house was small and old with a tiny garden out front, but as Kisumi walked up to the front door, he noticed how nice and neat it was. The Matsuzaki’s didn’t have much, but they clearly took great pride in what was theirs. Gulping, he knocked on the door.

He hadn’t met Yasutomo’s parents before; what would they be like if they were the reason that Tomo was hurting so much right now?

When nobody answered the door, Kisumi knocked again, this time a bit louder. Still, no one answered. Conceding defeat, Kisumi turned to go when the door suddenly opened up onto a tiny, older woman who looked to be in her sixties. She smiled at Kisumi sweetly but uncertainly.

“Can I help you dear?” she asked.

Her voice was not quite shaky, but not very firm. The peculiar cadence was not caused by emotion but with natural timidity that Kisumi could tell had stayed with her throughout her entire life. Just hearing her voice and seeing that sweet, self-conscious smile, Kisumi could picture her as a young girl. She would have been very kind and quiet, probably always hiding behind her own mother’s legs.

Kisumi loved her instantly and he felt she wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

Kisumi smiled warm and wide and bowed to Mrs. Matsuzaki respectfully.

“Hello, ma’am. My name is Shigino Kisumi and I am friends with Yasutomo. Is he at home?”

The old woman’s smile grew bolder and her eyes grew large.

“Clearly, she recognized Kisumi’s name.

“It is very nice to meet you, Shigino-kun!” she peeped as she opened the door to the apartment wider, “Please come in!”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

As Kisumi walked by Mrs. Matsuzaki, he noticed that the top of her head only reached up to the middle of his chest. It was true Kisumi was an exceptionally tall young man, though he never felt it because his group of close friends included Makoto and Sousuke, but even Tomo would tower over his mother. She was a bit plump, but that only added to her overall appeal.

Meeting his mother, Kisumi felt like a piece of Yasutomo made more sense. He was kind and caring
- traits that would make him an excellent doctor, and those things he’d learned from his mother. Kisumi wouldn’t trade his own mother for the world, but he could stand to have Mrs. Matsuzaki as an aunt.

“Tomo has told us all about you,” said softly Mrs. Matsuzaki as she waited for Kisumi to remove his shoes, “My husband and I have been asking him to invite you to dinner for quite some time.”

Kisumi smiled, though he felt a little wounded. This was the first he’d heard about it and it felt almost cruel of Tomo to keep him from this sweet woman.

“Please come in!” Mrs. Matsuzaki continued as she began walking, “I’m afraid Tomo has been out of bed all weekend, but maybe he will come out for you.”

She led him into the main living room, which was as tidy and well-cared for as the outside of the house. At the end of the room was sliding doors that opened out onto a verdant garden. A warm breeze filled the living room through these open doors. From the scattered tools outside, it looked as though Kisumi had interrupted Mrs. Matsuzaki in the middle of her gardening. But his attention was drawn instantly towards a small bookshelf. The shelves held more pictures than books and even from a distance, Kisumi could see framed photographs of Yasutomo and two other, much older boys. In the central position in this bookshelf lived a larger picture of one of those unknown faces. Next to that portrait was a small incense burner and an urn.

For ashes.

The pit of his stomach felt like it had suddenly fell out.

Yasutomo spoke rarely of his family so Kisumi hadn’t been prepared to discover older brothers, one of whom was dead.

“If you don’t mind waiting here, dear,” Mrs. Matsuzaki interrupted, stopping him from sinking too far into gloom, “I will go see if I can get Tomo out of bed.”

When she was gone, Kisumi practically ran over to the bookshelf to look more closely at the photographs.

Although a shy woman, Mrs. Matsuzaki beamed from each and everyone of them because she was always flanked on all sides by her handsome sons. Although far from a homosexual, Kisumi could freely admit that yes, each of them were very handsome boys. Judging by the pictures, Kisumi guessed that the brothers were at least ten years older than Yasutomo. From the way they stood, Kisumi could see that the brothers were extremely close, much closer to one another than to Yasutomo. They looked an awful lot alike, both full of the boyish good looks of healthy young men.
Poor Yasutomo, while very attractive in his own way, looked slightly effeminate compared to his strapping older brothers. They could practically be twins, both in physical build and with their matching smiles. In all of the pictures, the two older brothers had their arms slung over each other or one were making a goofy face over the other one’s shoulder. Yasutomo was always a little to the side, looking at the camera quietly. Just like the stern looking man in all the pictures, always to the side of the two energetic young boys in the center. It was natural, with such an age difference, that Yasutomo wouldn’t have played as much with his older brothers, but it still made Kisumi a little sad that he looked so out of place with his effusively affectionate brothers.

Tomo was definitely the misfit in his family.

There were two pictures where Tomo looked to be a part of their fraternity. One, where he was a baby, smiling joyful up at his two big brothers who were both crouched over and smiling fondly down at the baby. The other, taken when Tomo looked to be in middle school was the three of them together, in some high place, probably a mountain. In that one, the dead brother hugged his brothers close to his side and all three, even Tomo, wore matching smiles.

But the mood of the family changed once the doomed brother vanished from the family pictures.

The stern father looked the same as always and Mrs. Matsuzaki put on a brave face for the camera, though Kisumi could see a deep, deep sadness in her usually clear and bright eyes. But the most startling transformation could be seen with the other, older brother, the one left behind.

Kisumi didn’t know him at all, but even he could recognize that the death of his other half had destroyed the survivor.

It was easier to see the chronology of time once the dead brother disappeared because the remaining brother gradually sunk more and more into his despair.

He grew thinner, he never smiled, but the worst part of all was his eyes.

There was no life, no hope in them.

In these pictures from the after, Yasutomo was forced to come into the center, just to fill in the hole his brother had left behind. Tomo looked uncomfortable in each and everyone of these pictures and in his own way, it was really depressing to see.

He felt he didn’t belong in such a central position and he clearly wished he didn’t have to take it.

Kisumi could trace the chronology of the family through maturing Tomo until he came to the last one, taken probably at his graduation from high school. In this picture, the Mr. and Mrs. Matsuzaki beamed with pride at Tomo, center stage for the first time. Kisumi was well aware of how intelligent Tomo was and he would probably guess from the smiles on his parents’ faces and his stellar performance at university, that Yasutomo had graduated first in his class. This was the only picture that Yasutomo was truly the star, the pride and joy of his family. But even in the center of all this hard-won and well-deserved pride, Yasutomo looked slightly awkward. He was standing a little rigid and in that frozen moment, his eyes had flicked over to the brother left behind, standing slightly to the side of everyone else.

The ghost of the dead brother weighed heavily on the brother left behind, Kisumi could see it in the dead eyes and dark circles and sunken cheeks. More heartbreaking still was seeing, in this picture taken at the moment when Yasutomo should have been proudest, was how heavily the brother left
behind weighed on Tomo.

Kisumi didn’t know his name and had only just learned of his existence, but his heart broke for the brother left behind and for Tomo.

Why had Yasutomo never told Kisumi about any of this?

Two sets of footsteps echoed in the hall, interrupting Kisumi’s melancholy thoughts. Quickly, Kisumi slid down next to the kotatsu and tried to press down the sadness the brother left behind and the brother gone and Tomo and Mrs. Matsuzaki had inspired.

“Look who got out of bed!” Mrs. Matsuzkai chirped happily as she returned to the living room, pulling Yasutomo along by the elbow. Kisumi suspected their delay was because Yasutomo had to change out of pajamas. He was dressed for the day, but his hair was a huge, purple mess.

Their eyes met and Kisumi was startled by how closely Yasutomo’s eyes resembled those of the brother left behind in that last photograph. They were dull and dark circles ringed them. And of course, Kisumi couldn’t help but parallel one pain with the other.

Was it something to do with his brothers’ that was depressing Tomo so much?

If it was, Kisumi probably shouldn’t intrude.

But he didn’t have it in him to leave a friend like this.

Seeing Kisumi seated in his living room, Yasutomo began to blush as he and his mother sat down at the kotatsu. For a split second, Kisumi questioned the wisdom of coming.

But he had to do something.

“You came here.” Tomo said flatly, his voice devoid of relief or accusation.

Kisumi smiled and tried to sound like his usual light and airy self.

“I’ve been cooped up in a hot pool all weekend,” he explained, “I thought it might do me some good to go get a beer somewhere and I had a feeling you could probably use one too.”

Yasutomo opened his mouth to protest, but his mother began to gush before he had an opportunity.

“Oh what a wonderful idea!” she chirped, “Some fresh air would do you good!”

“Mother, I don’t really…” Tomo began to protest, but then he caught sight of his mother’s eyes, brimming with concern.
Discovering the tragedy of their family, that concern had new meaning. And it wasn’t lost on Tomo.

“Fine,” he sighed.

Kisumi grinned triumphantly, “A very good idea, I think!”

Mrs. Matsuzaki nodded her head solemnly and Kisumi turned his smile to her.

“It was very nice to meet you Mrs. Matsuzaki.”

She made a small peep and her cheeks turned a shade darker.

“Please come by to have dinner sometime,” she said, practically in a whisper.

Kisumi’s smile turned all the brighter.

“Absolutely,” he agreed, “And now that I know the offer is there, Tomo won’t be able to hide it!”

She laughed quietly and Yasutomo rolled his eyes.

But despite himself, Kisumi could tell Tomo was pleased.

“You didn’t have to come all the way out here,” grumbled Yasutomo twenty minutes later, after they were seated on the patio of a nearby restaurant. They’d both decided the afternoon called more for a bowl of cold soba than a beer.

Kisumi frowned. These were the first words Yasutomo had spoken to him since leaving his house.

“Yes I did,” Kisumi argued without offering further explanation.

Yasutomo sighed and turned his attention back down to the menu. He could feel Kisumi studying closely.

Kisumi really didn’t have to come out here.

But Yasutomo knew Kisumi well enough by now to realize that Kisumi did have to come. For himself. And he wasn’t going to let this go anytime soon.

Better to just get the embarrassment and humiliation over with so Yasutomo could go back to bed.

A cute waitress came by and Kisumi lavished a big smile on her. She was not immune to his charms and took their orders with much giggling. When she was gone, Kisumi’s frown returned and turned his attention back to Yasutomo.

“What are your brothers’ names?” he asked.
So he’d seen the pictures. Yasutomo had gotten that feeling, when they’d been in the living room, but now he knew for sure.

So he knew.

“I only have one brother now,” Yasutomo explained, “and his name is Mitsuki.”

Matsuzki Mitsuki. Tomo had always liked the ring of it.

“And what about the other?” Kisumi pressed.

Tomo sighed heavily and Kisumi took that as a sign that he’d overstepped his bounds.

“Sorry,” Kisumi mumbled hurriedly, “I shouldn’t pry.”

But it wasn’t prying.

It wasn’t a secret exactly, but no one ever asked and he didn’t volunteer.

But Kisumi was asking.

So what the hell.

“His name was Ichiro.”

Kisumi inhaled sharply. Emboldened, Yasutomo continued.

“His name was Ichiro and he was an avid mountain climber. He died soloing Mt. Everest when I was in my third year of middle school. He was at the top of the world and then he died. He was twenty-six.”

And now the truth was out.

Both of them looked down at the table and fell into a deep silence.

It had been a very, very long time since Yasutomo had said Ichiro’s name out loud and, as always, the name flooded him with memories, both good and bad.

The waitress rescued them from their silence by bringing out their drinks – two Sapporo beers because yeah, they’d still wanted beers. Yasutomo took a nice long sip. Kisumi’s can remained on the table. He was too busy boring holes into Yasutomo with his eyes.

The flood of emotions and memories rose up in him. That was surprising because he’d spent years keeping these things down and in check. Manageable. However the moment he set down his beer can, the great torrent broke through and poured out.
“Mitsuki was a year younger than Ichiro and he’s ten years older than me,” he said quickly, “Mitsuki and Ichiro were the best of friends and I was the accident kid they were too old to play with. Mitsuki worshipped Ichiro and when they found Ichirou, frozen solid on the top of the world a month after he disappeared, it broke all our hearts. At least they could bring him back down so we could cremate him. So we could have something. But ashes weren’t enough by a long shot for Mitsui and Ichiro’s death broke Mitsuki’s spirit. Hearts cannot heal if the spirit is broken. Ichirou was our golden boy, the brave adventurer who laughed in the face of all danger and who led us bravely on. He always had the most fantastic stories and was always there to encourage and console you, even if you were someone so insignificant as me. And no one, no one loved Ichirou as much as Mitsuki. I was so insanely jealous of Ichirou and Mitsuki my entire life, because they were as close as two people could be. There were so many secrets and adventures they went on and I was always left at home, doing the things I did best. But I wasn’t as athletic as them and unlike them, I was really good at school. With the age difference and my personality, I never had a chance of fitting in with them. And now there is no ‘them’ and Mitsuki is a broken soul. So that’s the big tragic story of my family.”

By the end, Yasutomo was panting.

His heart beat rapidly against his chest for an entire minute before Kisumi dared to say anything. He was probably waiting to see if there was anything else coming.

But that was it.

That was more than Yasutomo had ever told any of his friends, especially Rajin who’d never known about Ichiro.

“I’m so sorry, Tomo.” Kisumi breathed.

But what else was there that Kisumi could say?

Hearing about Mitsuki and Ichiro made Kisumi think of Hayato. He was more than ten years older than Hayato, but they were still extremely close. Kisumi made sure they talked to each other at least once a day and Hayato told him absolutely everything that happened in his life. If anything were to happen to Hayato, Kisumi would be like Mitsuki…he’d fall apart.

He’d break.

Once before he’d had a taste of what it would be like when Hayato had nearly drowned…and it had been Kisumi’s fault…

It was too unbearable to think too much about his brother dying. He couldn’t imagine how terrible it must be to live through it. If Yasutomo felt like moping, Kisumi couldn’t blame him.

“Is Ichiro the reason you’ve been feeling bad all weekend?” Kisumi asked.

Yasutomo shook his head.
“Oh.” Kisumi said dumbly.

Quite fortuitously, the waitress chose that moment to bring them their food.

For a while, they both ate in silence.

Kisumi didn’t know what to do. Either he changed the subject, to find the real root of the problem, or he let Tomo talk about his brother because he so clearly needed to. Kisumi had never heard Tomo sound like that before.

In the end, Kisumi decided the best thing to do was see what Yasutomo did and follow his lead.

So he picked up his chopsticks and began eating, though the story of Ichiro had taken all the taste out of his soba.

It had been a long time since Yasutomo had talked about Ichiro out loud. For the first two years, Ichiro’s death seemed to be all his family was capable of talking about, primarily because Mitsuki had been in the process of breaking himself apart. But after that, after Mitsuki moved out and visited only on holidays and birthdays – well it was hard for them all and not talking about Ichiro was easier. He was always there, but not talking about him allowed them to live again.

Very few people knew about the tragedy of his family and most of them were classmates, friends, or relatives from that horrible time long ago. Rajin had been over to dinner three times during the years they had dated and not once had he noticed the shrine to Ichiro. Wishing to avoid discussing his dead brother, Ichiro had never brought it up.

It was easier that way.

As Yasutomo ate, he observed his emotions unfold in a strange, detached kind of way.

Telling Kisumi about Ichiro didn’t hurt as bad as he had thought.

This was new.

Apparently enough time had passed. Maybe it was because it was Kisumi he was talking to, but telling people about the tragic fate of his eldest brother had always been much, much worse.

And actively thinking about Ichiro, for the first time in years, dislodged something in Yasutomo that he hadn’t realized was blocked.

Of course he knew he’d have to tell Kisumi the truth – Kisumi wasn’t going to back down and Yasutomo was a terrible liar. That was part of the reason he’d been hiding under a blanket all weekend, to avoid this exact question because he didn’t want to admit his feelings for Sousuke.

But whatever Ichiro had dislodged in him made that fear seem incredibly pointless. Kisumi was his
friend who cared about him enough to come all the way out here. And it wasn’t like there was really anything wrong with liking Sousuke. He was, after all, the definition of tall, dark, and handsome and there shouldn’t be anything embarrassing about being attracted to that. Honestly, who wouldn’t be? All he could really be embarrassed by was how high he’d let his hopes get but even that wasn’t all bad. He really liked Sousuke and he’d hoped.

It was always a vain hope, but he’d been brave enough to hope and that was something.

That’s what he told himself anyways.

Yasutomo’s stomach clenched up.

If only Yasutomo could be as brave as Ichiro, live his life as fearlessly as his dead brother. In the dwindling conversations Yasutomo had had with Mitsuki over the years, his surviving brother had been fixated on how Ichiro had been cheated out of life and how Ichiro had left him behind when Mitsuki should have been by his side. And then those feelings transformed into something uglier. Ichiro became a coward who wanted to escape his life…escape Mitsuki.

To sift through his grief, Mitsuki had to make his hero into a coward. But all he’d succeeded in doing was breaking himself when he couldn’t reconcile his dead brother with the living brother he’d worshipped and loved more than anyone else.

And still, years later, Mitsuki was stuck in that painful place, barely even a shell of the vibrant person he’d once been when he had his brother. He villified Ichiro and cursed him, but most of all he missed him bitterly until his heart had shriveled and he’d given up on life.

Rage and pain had given way to denial and finally indifference until Mitsuki was nothing more than a shell, a dead-man walking because he couldn’t let Ichiro go.

Because of Mitsuki, Yasutomo hadn’t let himself think of Ichiro for years.

Until now.

Now, remembering, things were different.

Ichiro had attacked life and he held nothing pack in pursuit of his passions.

Sure he’d died, but he’d died at the roof of the world, doing what he loved. Although he hadn’t seen his body once they’d brought it down off the mountain – his father had arranged for it to go straight to the crematorium – Yasutomo had no doubt that Ichiro had died with a smile frozen across his face and the highest view on earth reflected in his eyes and on his heart.

He wasn’t afraid to be who he was.

His wasn’t afraid to love what he loved.
And what was braver and better than that? Even if it cost him everything>

Though he had been dead for years, Yasutomo was still learning things from Ichiro.

“It’s Sousuke,” Yasutomo said, his voice low and full.

Kisumi’s chopsticks clattered down into his bowl.

“I like Sousuke,” Yasutomo continued, feeling the ghost of his brother urging him on, “You said one time that he liked someone with purple hair and I’d gotten my hopes up that it was me. I thought I could have something with him because I didn’t know about Rin. So that’s why I’ve been hiding this weekend…I like Sousuke a lot but he doesn’t like me in that way.”

Kisumi was at a loss for words.

But it didn’t matter; Yasutomo was strangely relieved. And he was proud of himself for saying those words out loud.

Maybe he really was channeling Ichiro today because this feeling, this lighter than air feeling that he only ever got when he was embracing the truth…this must be what Ichiro felt when the world was at his feet after a long, arduous trek up. He’d only really felt like this once before, when he’d told his parents that he was gay. They’d known, as parents usually did in those situations, but at the time, it had been a huge relief revealing the big secret.

That was the last time Ichiro had let himself think much about Ichiro because that was the last time he’d felt Ichiro would have been truly proud of him.

Maybe his heart was like the mountains were for Ichiro.

“I’m sorry, Tomo,” Kisumi said, “I didn’t know…I should have told you about Rin…I should have figured it out…”

For the first time all weekend Yasutomo laughed.

“No you wouldn’t have because you’re a big idiot about this kind of stuff,” he teased, “Really, it’s fine.”

The image of Sousuke, tears streaming down his stoic face as he held his beloved, flashed through his mind and that gut-wrenching feeling of things that would never be choked him up. But the ghost of Ichiro helped him swallow it down.

“It’s going to be fine,” he corrected himself.
For a long time Kisumi stared at Yasutomo but Yasutomo didn’t particularly feel self-conscious revealing that he had feelings for Sousuke.

Finally, Kisumi made a long, low whistle, breaking the silence.

“Well shit, Tomo. That’s a whole lot of crap, isn’t it? I’d tell you to not give up on him, but Rin’s moving in when he comes back at the end of August and it’s pretty much a done deal with them.”

Yasutomo nodded through this latest blow, which glanced off him much easier than the first time he’d seen the two together. Really, this was nothing knew

“I could tell when I saw them together,” he agreed, “It was a shock, but I’ll get over it. I want Sousuke to be happy and if Rin makes him happy, then I’ll find a way for myself.”

“He respects you a lot,” Kisumi told him, “and I know he likes hanging out with you. Even with being reunited with Rin, he still asked how you were doing this weekend. Obviously I won’t press you to hang out with him all the time, but I would hate for you guys to not be friends. I love it when it’s the three of us.”

Yasutomo nodded.

This weekend, he hadn’t really thought that far beyond the immediate shock of seeing Sousuke with someone else. But remembering Ichiro could help him. He’d tried, he’d let himself feel, and he shouldn’t be ashamed. And truthfully, he really did care about Sousuke and the thought of him being completely of the picture was not one Yasutomo particularly liked.

“Maybe I won’t come around as much for a while, while I get used to the idea,” Yasutomo said, “But he’s a good guy and I like hanging out with him too. I’m sure I’ll get over it once I’ve gotten used to the idea. Like I said, I want him to be happy.”

Kisumi smiled.

“Understood. In the meantime, it’s fine if you don’t want to come by my apartment and it’s fine if you don’t want me to invite Sousuke out to do things.”

Yasutomo smiled once more before turning towards his meal.

A huge warm, wave of relief washed over him because, in his heart, he knew he’d be fine.

Together, they finished eating in amicable silence that was broken only once both sets of chopsticks were lain down.

“Want to go see a movie?” Kisumi suggested.

Yasutomo had spent enough time mourning; it was time to live.

“Sure, anything in particular?”

Kisumi shook his head then stood up, “Maybe an action movie?”
Yasutomo stood up too and together they made to go inside to pay. Before they went through the patio door, Kisumi grabbed Yasutomo’s elbow to stop him.

“I don’t want you to get suddenly surprised by this,” Kisumi said, “but Sousuke’s older brother is named Ichirou. And Rin sort of initiated a conversation between them for the first time in years. Sousuke’s Ichirou is really great and I think there is a pretty strong likelihood that he’s going to be showing up here at some point. Just so you know.”

Yasutomo blinked a few times.

Sousuke had an Ichiro too?

His insides clenched up and his heart howled.

“Thanks,” Yasutomo said stupidly.

What else could he say?

They continued on into the restaurant and headed towards the cash register. Kisumi paid first and while he did, Yasutomo had the opportunity to look around a bit, gather himself up.

Hanging above the cash register was a poster of Mt. Fuji and, as always, Yasutomo saw it and saw the smiling face of Ichiro.

During his life, Ichiro had climbed Mt. Fuji once a year since the time he was fifteen to the time he died at the age of twenty-six. In fact, a few weeks before he went on his final climb up Mt. Everest, the three brothers had climbed Mt. Fuji together. It was the first and last time Yasutomo had been invited into their inner circle and it was the last time Yasutomo had seen Ichiro.

The trip was hard and Yasutomo couldn’t summit with his brothers, but those memories were still the most precious gift Ichiro had had time to give him.

They’d been brothers together and just for that wonderful trip, they’d all been happy together.

Looking at that picture, Yasutomo felt himself calm down and he smiled.

Even while he was still alive, Yasutomo couldn’t look at a picture of Mt. Fuji and not feel like Ichiro was there, smiling down on him.

And right now, with everything he’d told Kisumi, that feeling was especially strong.

He wasn’t going to be with Sousuke; maybe he was always going to be doomed to one-sided love. Rajin had always made him feel like he was doing Yasutomo a favor by sleeping with him and Sousuke was wildly in love with someone else.

But still…

Yasutomo had had the courage to love them and while it wasn’t quite the same as climbing mountains, letting himself love someone was a very brave thing to do.

His heart might be broken, but Yasutomo knew his spirit wasn’t. His heart would mend and he’d move on.

Because what he wanted, more than anything, was to feel loved, really loved, by a guy.
And maybe, just maybe, there was someone out there whose heart was looking for Yasutomo’s.

Some might call Ichiro stupid for throwing his life away at such a young age, but in his own way, Ichiro’s wisdom was far superior to almost everyone else Yasutomo had ever met.

And Yasutomo made a vow to himself, right in the middle of that noodle shop on that day in June that he was going to live his life as Ichiro had done. With nothing held back. And no shame.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhh this was definitely the first time I cried while writing a part of this fic :'( if you want to know, the part where Yasutomo is remembering the trip he went on with Ichiro and Mitsuki to Mt. Fuji :'( ‘:(....I’ve been looking back through this (holy shit, it's so long now! how did that happen!?) and this thing needs some editing. I'm going to be rewriting a few parts that I'm not 100% satisfied with, so updates instead of additions will be happening for now. Really, thank you all for reading this, it's been such good fun and it means so much to have so much support :)

You can find me on tumblr: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/ and please feel free to chat me up anytime!
The Skype Date

Chapter Summary

Rin reads letters. Kisumi teases Sousuke. Then Sousuke and Rin have a chat.

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely readers!!! It's been quite a while since my last update because I have been rewriting and editing things I wasn't 100% happy with. Some of the chapters that underwent the most construction are Chapter 7 and Chapters 13-16. Basically lots of Rin stuff because I wasn't happy with how I'd written him (or their first sex scene) and I redid the MakoHAru origin story because it was fairly clunky before...If you are interested in reading them, there are changes in most of those chapters, but those ones especially ;)

Thanks everyone for reading and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was Friday night and for the first time ever, Rin had declined going out to the bars with his mates.

“Oh why?” Chris, one of his roommates, whined, “Just because you say you’ve got a boyfriend now, you can’t come out with us? You don’t have too many weekends left, you know. Best enjoy them while you can!”

“Piss off,” Rin yelled as he flipped Chris the bird, “I’ve been tired all week and I just want to sleep!”

“Uh hu,” Sam smirked, “and you’ll sleep loads better once you have this mysterious boyfriend of yours talk your rocks off.”

Rin frowned.

“Sousuke’s not mysterious,” he mumbled, “you guys were there when he disappeared our first year. He’s definitely the same as he always was, maybe a little bit different. But he’s the same.”

From the corner of his eye, Rin saw Chris and Sam give each other a look that Rin knew all too well. It was the ‘oh-dear-we’ve-upset-poor-baby-Rin’ look.

“No worries, mate,” Chris said consolingly. He’d been Rin’s roommate for four years so he knew a thing or two about handling emotional Rin, “you can come out with us tomorrow.”

“Sure.” Rin said half-heartedly. The other two knew that was going to be that and it wasn’t too long before they wished him a good night and shut the door on their way out, leaving Rin alone in their massive apartment.
Coming back from Japan always screwed with Rin’s perception of space. He’d still not gotten used to the relative size of this apartment compared to his home…and Sosuke’s place…his home to be. The vastness of the rooms made him feel very alone. Rin craved a smaller, familiar space so he locked the front door, filled up his water bottle, and went to his bedroom, shutting the rest of the world out for the night.

He’d come home early Monday morning and since then, Rin was experiencing some really screwy jet lag. At least that’s what he’d been telling his coach, because his restless nights had translated into poor performances in practice. But it wasn’t jetlag that kept him up at night.

Rin stood with his back against the door, looking out on his floor. As they had been all week, Sosuke’s letters were everywhere, arranged chronologically from the happy days when Sosuke wrote nothing but love and longing, to the breaking point, to the depths of darkest despair, to the steady climb up out of hell, and finally to a better place.

Rin tiptoed across his floor and flopped across his bed, his face still facing the letters.

Truthfully, it was Sosuke’s words that had been making it hard for him to sleep, and not from sexual frustration or longing.

From fucking worry.

By now, he’d read the full series through four times and he was starting to be able to quote some of the more memorable things. Rin sat up and plucked #172 up from the floor (yeah, Rin had labeled them and written their dates on the top to make it easier to sort them).

This one wasn’t the worst of them; it wasn’t especially remarkable. Rin’s eyes scanned the words he nonetheless had nearly memorized.

Rin,

I’m too drunk right now. Why the fuck did I drink so much. I know the answer, it was so I could face putting my cock up some guys ass. I wanted it, I needed it, but fuck. Did that, now I wish I could just cut it off and make it so I couldn’t ever do it again. I hate how much I need it.

It’s mostly dark in this room, I’m renting it for a month while I’m temporarily doing highway work. Where am I? What country am I in? How far away from you am I? Norway maybe? It’s cold even though the sun is always shining. I couldn’t even fucking tell you if I’m in Norway. I don’t care.

It’s light outside though it’s two in the morning, but I made it so it’s dark inside. I don’t think this place has heat and it was raining today. I left the window open so it’s freezing in here. That’s fine,
though, the cold makes it easier to hear the blood circulating through my veins. And when I can hear the blood circulating in my veins, I can think of what it would be like to stab a knife through one of them, interrupt the flow of blood so that it would pool out inside of me and around me. That blood would be warm and dark and beautiful. It started raining and the sound of it makes me think of when I’d cut myself, the sound of my blood, drip, drip, drip, drip.

Going down the drain because guess what, it fucking doesn’t matter.

I suppose this letter is meant for you, though you’ll never read it because how can I ever see you again? It’s fine, I don’t deserve it…but I wonder if you think about me sometimes. I’m sure in Australia, wherever you are down under, you’ve got a beautiful boyfriend…or girlfriend, I don’t know…and I hope you are really happy.

Thinking of you smiling and happy is the one sure thing to quiet the sound of my blood and make me regret the drip.

Drip.

I wish you were here.

- Sousuke

#172 was one of the tamer ones. Most of the time, Sousuke wouldn’t mention Rin at all. #23 - # 137, when Sousuke was at his worst, his letters had a tendency to be terribly confused and muddled, but nonetheless searing with pain that hurt Rin to read about. Because they so often spoke of death longingly and #45, the worst one of them all, was a very detailed letter about how Sousuke was thinking of ending his own life.

Things began to turn around at #190. It was in #189 that Sousuke wrote a long, beautiful letter about how he was finally going to stop pretending he didn’t love Rin and start working on himself, so Rin wouldn’t be disappointed with what he saw. Though there wasn’t a clear path Sousuke was taking, his letters became more thoughtful, his words more carefully chosen and elegantly put together. That tiny glimmer of hope Sousuke clung to like a drowning man would a life raft, because Rin understood now that Sousuke really had been dying. #189 was Rin’s favorite letter, not because it was so raw and beautiful and impassioned and true, but because it was the first drop of hope since before the break and it was the point the Sousuke started his way back to Rin.

Rin dropped #172 and watched it slowly flutter down to the ground, on top of the others. But Rin didn’t want that letter to lose its place so he got off the bed and put it back where it belonged.
Crouching over the letters, thinking of all the pain these words contained, Rin rest his chin on his knees and let silent tears fall down his cheeks.

He’d not actually spoken to Sousuke since he’d been back. They’d been texting every day, but Sousuke was worse at it than Haru. And even if he’d been more eloquent over emoji, like Makoto, it still wouldn’t have been enough.

It wasn’t going to be enough until Rin was with Sousuke, so his imagination wouldn’t run wild with terrible, terrible scenarios.

Rin stood up, took off all his clothes, and climbed into bed where he made himself the filling of a blanket burrito. His naked body soon warmed up his cocoon and the feeling reminded Rin of what it was like to fall asleep in Sousuke’s arms…

Things would probably be easier once he’d actually talked to Sousuke and they’d already scheduled a Skype date for tomorrow, after Rin’s practice. But as much as he missed Sousuke, he was dreading the call. Reconciling his Sousuke with the Sousuke from the letters was going to be difficult. What should he say about the letters? How should he deal with them? And what if, when Rin calls, Sousuke wasn’t there? Rin knew Sousuke was playing videogames with Hau, Makoto, and Kisumi tonight (and losing spectacularly as Haru informed him in a text message that was more colorful than anything else Haru had ever sent him). But what if tomorrow, Sousuke wasn’t there?

After a good cry, Rin’s hand ventured out of his blanket burrito and groped for his phone, lying on the bed next to him. When he found it, he brought it inside his warm little cocoon and texted Sousuke.

_I love you Sou. I wish you were here._

Rin let the phone drop and he shut his eyes. When the screen finally turned off, he was left in blissful warmth and darkness. He’d been sleeping very poorly since his return to Australia and most of this anxiety about Sousuke and the letters was probably exacerbated by this lack of sleep. Which was, in turn, caused by the letters. A vicious cycle that Rin resolved to break.

An hour later, the light of his phone startled Rin out of whatever halfway conscious place he’d been and when he looked at it, there was a new message. From Sousuke.

_I love you more Rin. I’ll be there soon. But until then, I’m with you in spirit my love._
Rin smiled and pressed the phone close to his heart, letting the completely cheesy lines wash over him. Probably Sousuke was more than a little bit drunk because he’d given more than monosyllabic answers, but that didn’t matter. It made Rin feel better and after hearing from Sousuke, Rin was able to drift off to sleep.

But during the night, he woke up three times and each and every time, he woke up in a panic, afraid that Sousuke was going to be gone again.

Saturday – it had been almost a week since Rin had left and Sousuke was still riding the high of having seen and slept with his love. Today, Sousuke had a Skype date scheduled with Rin. They’d planned it for ten in the morning, after Rin would be well done with practice and early enough so Sousuke could still get in a good solid day of work at the studio. But it was only 8:45 now.

For a few minutes after waking up, Sousuke lay in bed, thinking about the Skype date. He’d been texting with Rin, or more precisely Rin had been sending him novels that Rin had a hard time responding to. He had never been a very big texter, even before he didn’t have a phone for three years. Talking to Rin over Skype, where he would actually get to see Rin, was going to be a lot better.

Too excited to be in bed any longer, Sousuke jumped up and opened up his laptop, ready to chat. But it was only 8:52.

Frustrated, Sousuke closed his laptop and went out into the living room to see if anyone else was up. He needed a distraction otherwise he was going to drive himself crazy.

It was early on a Saturday, so of course Sousuke wasn’t surprised to find Makoto not out in the living room. He tended to sleep until one in the afternoon on Saturdays, when Haru returned from Saturday practice. Sousuke also wasn’t surprised to find Haru absent from the living room, because his practice started at 9 and got over at 12. But thankfully Kisumi was reliable as an early riser and Sousuke was glad to see him awake, reading some biology book. A steaming cup of tea, a small plate with two onigri, and a nice bowl of steaming miso soup sat on the kotatsu by his elbow. It was too early for the apartment to be sweltering yet and a nice, summer rainstorm outside made Kisumi look very cozy. Sousuke smiled.

“Morning, Kisumi!” Sousuke greeted, startling Kisumi out of whatever fascinating whatever he had been engrossed in.

Kisumi looked up, angry to be startled, but then smiled when he saw Sousuke. Quickly, Sousuke
wiped the grin off his face, but too late, the damage was done.

“Morning, Sousuke!” Kisumi trilled, like a cat in front of a bird cage. And Sousuke was the canary.

Sousuke grumbled a bit to himself on his way into the kitchen, to make himself some breakfast too, but it was really more for show than anything. Today, with a conversation with Rin so close at hand, nothing could really make Sousuke feel less than buoyant.

When Sousuke joined Kisumi at the kotatsu, Kisumi put down his book and gave Sousuke an entirely too smug look.

This was why smiling around Kisumi was dangerous, he was bound to act like a turd and tease you if you gave him any leverage.

“So what’s got you looking so perky this morning?” Kisumi asked.

Sousuke frowned. Kisumi was so annoying.

“Nothing,” Sousuke said straight-faced and quickly took a bite of the onigiri Haru had made last night.

Kisumi laughed.

“Bull shit, Sou! You are practically skipping around the place and you are wearing only your underwear. Maybe it’s morning wood, but you are definitely sporting a semi.”

Sousuke flushed all over and tried to look down discreetly at his crotch, to see if Kisumi was right. Thankfully he wasn’t, but Sousuke hadn’t been discreet enough. Kisumi snickered.

“Well whatever,” Sousuke growled, “It’s a nice day, so what!?”

Kisumi’s smirk looked like it was about to break his face.

“Nothing’s wrong with that, but I have a sneaking suspicion you are smiling because of a certain purple haired guest we had last weekend, goes by the name of Rin. You heard of him?”

At the mention of Rin’s name, Sousuke couldn’t help but smile and, consequently, his whole body seemed to blush with embarrassment for such a hokey reaction. Kisumi was delighted and he watched Sousuke gleefully, letting him writhe with discomfort while he waited for Sousuke to answer. Sousuke had half a mind to get up and stalk back off to his room, abandoning stupid Kisumi and breakfast, all so he could avoid Kisumi’s teasing. But the other half of him, the traitorous half, wanted nothing more than for Kisumi to tease him about Rin because that would mean Sousuke would get to talk about Rin. Sousuke had been dying to talk about Rin. Makoto was very respectful of his privacy and had said nothing more than how happy he was for the pair of them. Haru kept giving Sousuke weird looks, that were somewhere between overprotective friend who didn’t trust the new boyfriend, proud papa, and profoundly uninterested. Kisumi, well Kisumi had been off with Tomo a lot so Sousuke hadn’t seen much of him.

“Yeah,” Sousuke mumbled, “We are going to talk on Skype at 10.”

Sousuke had a vague thought that if his color right now were to be made into a nail polish color, it would be called ‘Most Mortified Mauve’. Or ‘Ridiculously Happy Ruby’. God, when had he gotten so corny?
Kisumi looked like a satisfied cat that had a dead canary in his mouth.

“Well look at you,” he laughed, “what good boyfriends you are! I suppose you will be busy all day talking to him, then?”

“No,” Sousuke said defensively, which only made Kisumi laugh more.

“Alright, if you say so. If you aren’t doing anything tonight, do you want to see if Haru and Makoto want to do something? I’m going to be a good boy and read this book all day and I think I’ll want to do something fun tonight.”

“Sure,” Sousuke agreed instantly, “It will be good to see Tomo tonight. Is he feeling better?”

The mention of Tomo wiped the smug right off Kisumi’s face and Sousuke was stunned to see that Kisumi actually looked upset.

Something bad must have happened. Something Kisumi was trying to hide. Oh shit, what had happened?

Kisumi tried to hide it, but Sousuke saw. There was something going on with Tomo.

“Tomo has plans with his family tonight,” Kisumi tried explaining. Sousuke had known Kisumi since he was a kid and Kisumi had always been a terrible liar.

He didn’t push it though. He didn’t want to make things worse.

So he ate his breakfast and after a minute, Kisumi finished eating his.

While they ate, they were both silent, but the second Kisumi had drained his teacup, he leveled a death glare at Sousuke.

“Yasutomo is a good guy,” he blurted out defensively.

Sousuke nodded in agreement, “He’s one of the best guys I know.”

For some reason, this only seemed to make Kisumi more riled up.

“Is someone saying he isn’t?” Sousuke asked, trying to get to the bottom of Kisumi’s strange behavior.

“No, just forget about it.”
“Ok.”

Kisumi picked up his book again, signaling the end of the conversation.

In general, Kisumi was a solidly cheerful guy. He didn’t really dip above or below his usual, even happiness. So what was going on that was upsetting Kisumi, so much so that he had plummeted so far below his steady, happy mood? Sousuke got up and cleaned up his dishes, thinking about what could possibly be going on with Tomo.

From the way Kisumi was going on, it sounded serious.

Was it Rajin?

Sousuke went back into his room, closed the door, and flopped down on the bed.

Yeah, Rajin would make sense. Screw that guy!

Well, Sousuke would have to buy Tomo a beer next time they saw each other, and of course he would offer to beat the snot out of that dick for Tomo.

Sighing, Sousuke looked at the clock on his phone.

9:13.

He’d worry about Tomo later.

It was 12:04 and Rin was having a minor panic attack, because Sousuke wasn’t online yet. Where was he? They’d agreed on 12 Rin’s time, 10 Sou’s time. So where was he!?

Snatches of Sousuke’s darkest letters began drifting through Rin’s mind in a continuous flow that made Rin feel numb.

What if Sousuke had relapsed and had done something? What if he’d run away again?
Oh please, oh please, let Sousuke be safe and sound in Tokyo!

While Rin was busy freaking out, he missed the little notification from Skype, announcing that ‘Yamazaki.Sousuke’ was now online. But then the familiar dial tone for Skype finally grabbed his attention because yes, it was Sou calling.

Rin had to take a deep breath to calm himself down a bit before he could answer. What the hell was wrong with him?

When he did accept Sou’s call, it became immediately clear what had caused the delay.

“Stupid fucking thing,” Sousuke muttered, apparently unaware that he had called Rin or that Rin could see him, “how the hell am I supposed to…”

Sousuke had his tongue stuck out to the side and his eyebrows were scrunched together in concentration as he looked at the screen.

Rin had been stupid to worry. Sousuke was not tech savvy, Rin should have expected delays on the first run for a non-text conversation.

There was nothing to worry about.

“Come on, you piece of shit,” Sousuke growled at the computer, “Rin’s going to…”

“Oi, what am I going to do big guy?” Rin asked loudly. He was pleased to see oblivious Sousuke jump with surprise. He was also pleased to see Sousuke’s scowl lighten up into a tiny little smile.

“Rin?” he asked as his eyes scanned the screen frantically.

So adorable.

“Okay buddy, you need to maximize the window and make sure you have the video options turned on correctly,” Rin instructed. He wondered if Sousuke could hear him smiling at Sou’s fumbling attempt to make Skype work.

“How do I do that?” Sousuke asked, his eyes focused on the top of the screen.

Chuckling, Rin began giving him the simplest possible instructions and three minutes later, Sousuke’s eyes focused on a spot in the center of the screen and his whole face lit up brighter than before.
He could see Rin.

A wave of warmth crashed over Rin and all the anxiety he’d been holding onto melted away.

“Hi.” he said quietly, beaming at his beautiful…boyfriend.

“Hi,” Sousuke greeted back.

For a few moments, they only looked at each other, each smiling and acting like middle school girls, all blushing and eyes darting away when they made contact. Rin was, of course, the one to initiate the conversation.

“How have you been, Sou?” he asked.

He’d asked this multiple times over the week via text, but he’d only received a ‘fine’ or a ‘good’ answer. Sousuke really was a frustrating texter.

“I’ve been really good,” Sousuke said and the happiness Rin could hear convinced him that Sousuke was telling the truth. “How about you, Rin?”

For a brief moment, Rin debated whether he should say anything about how upset he’d been about the letters. But Sousuke would regret giving them to Rin if he knew how worried they made Rin and then maybe he wouldn’t want to share so much personal stuff with Rin again. And Rin was glad he had the letters, hard as they were, because Sousuke not sharing things was really at the root of a lot of things between them.

“I’ve missed you,” Rin said truthfully. Because yeah, that did sum it up pretty well. And it was the truth without having to say anything about the letters.

Sousuke’s eyes widened and he was at a loss for words. Rin laughed.

“So now that I have you in person, tell me what you’ve been up to this week?”

“There isn’t too much to tell,” Sousuke mumbled, “I worked at the ship yard and worked at the studio and came home for dinner.” He paused before adding, “And I’ve been missing you.”

Rin smirked, Sousuke smiled and for a moment, everything was perfect.

“So I was thinking,” Rin began again after they’d smiled at each other some more, “when you come to Australia, I would kind of like you to surprise me.”
“Oh yeah?”

Rin nodded, “Yeah! It would build up the anticipation a lot and I bet you could find a really cool way to show up.”

Sousuke smiled, “Okay. I can do that.”

Having reaffirmed that yes, Sousuke was still planning on coming to Australia, Rin felt better, more relaxed. They started chatting, about nothing and everything. Rin asked Sousuke about his travels (he was able to refer to the letters without going too far into the darker parts) and Sousuke asked Rin about his life in Australia, all the things he hadn’t had time to ask before. Rin told Sousuke about his friends and then they talked about Sousuke’s story, the one that won the prize. It was beautiful and Rin had adored it. Sousuke also clearly loved hearing Rin praise his story. From the way Sousuke talked about his writing, there was apparently much more where that came from. Sousuke said that after he came back with Rin from Australia, he would be in a good position financially where he could work in the shipyards part time, so he could devote more of his time to art and writing. Then they talked about their plans for the day and Sousuke convinced Rin that he should go out with his friends, because Sousuke was going out with Haru, Makoto, and Kisumi.

“Soon enough we will be able to go out together,” Sousuke promised, “but I want you to enjoy yourself with your Australian friends because you are leaving soon.”

Rin chuckled, “Fine, if you insist. But I’d rather stay here, talking to you.”

At first their conversation had been a bit forced and slightly awkward, but that was to be expected. Everything was still so new and there was a lot to catch up on. Sooner than Rin had expected, however, they fell into their same old, familiar, comfortable pattern and in no time, two hours had flown by. Rin felt like he’d only just begun to scratch the surface. The longer they talked, the more desperate Rin was to hear

“Rin, I should get to the studio now,” Sousuke finally said, “I have a meeting with this lady who owns an onsen further north. She wants to buy my sculpture and I want to sell it.”

Rin nodded, though he was reluctant to let Sousuke go, “Okay. Will you text me how it goes?”

Sousuke smiled. “Sure. If you want me to.”

Rin nodded again.

“Okay then, I’ll talk to you later, Rin.”

“Okay Sousuke.”

Rin paused then blurted out ‘I love you, Sou.’

Sousuke beamed and looked bashful and so cute, “I love you too Rin. A lot. I’m really happy to be with you.”
Rin’s heart skipped a few beats, “Yeah me too. But I’ll let you go for now. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Sousuke had a hard time clicking the disconnect button, but he really did need to meet his potential clients. How had so much time gone by so quickly? Rin smiled to himself as he gathered his things to go.

The best part about Rin was that Sousuke could talk to him so easily. He always had been like that and Sousuke didn’t have that with anyone else. And Rin had never been very good at hiding things. It was so nice to talk with someone and not have to guess how they were feeling or wonder if there was more going on. No, it had never been like that with Rin and Sousuke had never had to guess. Rin was exactly who he was and there was no guessing or wondering with him.

Sousuke left the apartment. Sousuke’s head was full of all the things he wanted to talk with Rin about, all the millions of questions he had for him. He was so distracted, he didn’t notice Makoto and Haru greeting him from the kotatsu on his way out.

Rin went out and got some lunch after the call. He was famished because he’d come straight home after practice to talk to Sousuke and he had been a bit too nervous to eat. But he’d been an idiot before, because there was nothing to be nervous about. Sousuke was still Sousuke and the things in those letters, they were something new but they didn’t really change Sousuke fundamentally. Not really. Rin hadn’t realized how much he needed just an honest to goodness conversation with Sousuke. He felt so much better.

As Rin ate a big shrimp Caesar salad from his favorite restaurant nearby, he made three solemn resolutions. First, that he was going to put the letters away when he got home and try not to think about them so much. They were important, but Sousuke had even said that he wasn’t that person anymore. And Rin believed him. Rin’s second resolution was that he was going to be the best boyfriend in the universe to Sousuke, because Sousuke was something special. He’d have to make a plan of action and he knew already he’d have to learn to cook. Because Haru cooked for Makoto and Rin could do that for Sousuke. Maybe Rin wouldn’t cook as well as Haru, but he could learn to take care of Sou.
And the third resolution was that he was totally not going to worry about Sousuke running off and leaving him alone again. Because after having less than a week with Sousuke back, Rin couldn’t handle it if Sousuke left him. It was too soon. It was too wonderful to have Sousuke back. He couldn’t loose Sousuke again.

Uninvited anxiety began to claw Rin from the inside out, shattering his euphoria. Rin tried to push it back down.

No, Rin was not going to worry about Sousuke leaving. Or the Sousuke in the letters reemerging. And the way to do that would be to focus on the second resolution, being the perfect boyfriend. After lunch, maybe he’d go out and buy a cookbook, maybe something Sousuke wouldn’t have an opportunity of eating much in Japan. He talked about France fondly, maybe something French.

Because Sousuke deserved the perfect boyfriend and Rin could be the perfect boyfriend.

And maybe if Rin was good enough, Sousuke wouldn’t leave him alone again.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!!!!

I'm on tumblr....https://www.tumblr.com/blog/tornadoquakes

Feel free to chat me up sometime and talk about the glory that is SouRin! I always love a chat!

And thanks everyone for reading :)
Memories, Fears, and Wishes

Chapter Summary

Makoto cleans the bathroom. Then Haru, Kisumi, and Sousuke come home. They all think about things a lot.

Note: I added a tiny section with Kisumi at the very end after I posted the main chapter...completely forgot I wanted to add it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The apartment building wasn’t anything entirely special. It had a few larger units for cheap (cheap-ish, this was Tokyo after all), but other than that there was nothing interesting or remarkable about the gray building from the outside. Yet for an entire week, Ichirou couldn’t stop thinking about this building and a very, particular person he now knew lived here. And now, here he was, standing across the street from the building that his long lost and very sorely missed little brother now called home.

Being so close made Ichirou ache.

His pocket buzzed, interrupting his thoughts, and he fished his phone out. It was Minako.

“Hi honey!” he greeted his wife, trying to mask the many emotions he’d been struggling with since he’d reached this address.

“Daddy!” little Kumiko squealed into the phone, “Daddy, daddy, daddy! When are you coming home?”

Ichirou smiled, getting swept up in the warm feelings he always felt when he thought about his kids. How many three-year-olds could use a cell phone?

“Hi my little Kumi-quat!” Ichirou laughed, “Where is Mommy?”

“She’s right here but I just wanted to know if you are coming home tonight? Satu is very worried.”

Ichirou laughed, “Saru is a cat and I’m sure she has much more important things to think about than me. I will be home in two days, don’t you worry! Is Mommy there sweetie?”

For a moment, the line went dead, then Minako greeted him.

“Did Kumiko dial the phone all by herself?” Ichirou asked, a bit too proudly.
Minako laughed that crystal clear laugh that was as beautiful to him now as it had been when they first met, “Oh of course not, she asked me to call you, something about Satu. And I wanted to talk to you anyways. Have you found him?”

Ichirou frowned, remembering the feelings the phone call had momentarily distracted him from.

“I found his apartment building,” he said, “I’ve been standing in front of it for almost an hour now.”

A few seconds elapsed in silence until Minako responded.

“It will be alright, Ichirou. No matter what he says, you always will have us and your mother at home waiting for you.”

Ichirou knew that Minako was trying to comfort him, but her response only made him frown harder.

“I know, I know. I just…”

Ichirou was suddenly choking on his words. Minako waited.

“I just have missed him a lot,” Ichirou finished, “He’s my baby brother and I want him to be apart of my family too.”

“I know, sweetie,” Minako answered, Ichirou could hear her sweet, sweet smile, “And I’m sure he will listen to you. So go and get your brother back. Just be careful of yourself, sweetie. I don’t want you to get hurt if he doesn’t want back.”

“Okay,” Ichirou agreed, they’d discussed this extensively since Rin sent him the picture proof that Sousuke was alive, “I’ll call you later.”

“Of course. I love you, Ichirou.”

“Love you too, Minako.”

“Good luck!”

“Thanks.”

Ichirou stood with his phone still pressed to his ear for a full minute after Minako hung up.

The long lost brother.

Ichirou looked up at the apartment building and took a deep breath.
It was time to explain himself to his baby brother and, hopefully, to right some wrongs.

It was rare for Makoto to be the only one home and without anyone around, Makoto was feeling a little lonely. Even if he wasn’t interacting with them, he always liked to feel other people’s presence, especially Haru’s. But no matter, he was an adult and it was silly to feel lonely if he was home for a few hours by himself. And he had an important mission. He’d decided to use this opportunity and do his best to make the place nice and clean, as a surprise for Haru. Makoto could tell that the current state of the bathroom was stressing Haru out and he wanted to surprise him, so his evening with Haru-chan would begin well.

Scrubbing the floor, Makoto smiled to himself while he imagined their upcoming evening. They’d decided earlier in the week that tonight they would splurge and go to a French restaurant that served a really delicious mackerel dish. Makoto had been over the moon all week, looking forward to it. There was nothing he loved more than going out on dates and they really didn’t do it enough. After dinner, they would split a romantic sorbet, then they’d come home and play video games for a while. Once Haru had had enough, he would turn off the TV, then hold out his hand for Makoto, leading him to their bed while blushing fiercely and oh so cutely. Even though they’d been together as a couple for years now and knew every detail of each others’ bodies, Haru still became adorably flustered every time they got intimate with each other.

At first they would lie down, fully clothed and facing each other. Haru would find it hard to meet Makoto’s eyes and he wouldn’t stop blushing, but slowly he would inch closer and closer and his hands would become more daring. He would touch Makoto’s arms first, then slowly move up, until he could cup Makoto’s face in his hands. This whole time, Makoto would be beaming at Haru, adoring the sight of Haru like this, and his hands couldn’t help themselves, they would inevitably find Haru’s hips and bring Haru closer. For a while they would stay like this, Makoto smiling and Haru embarrassed and gathering his courage. Usually Makoto would try to soothe him by rubbing circles on his back or moving his hands up so he could stroke that beautiful, black hair. And when Haru finally felt comfortable enough, he would finally, finally look Makoto straight in the eyes and he would nervously kiss Makoto, like it was the very first time again. This ritual they went through every single time, but it never got old for Makoto. It always made him want to burst with happiness. From that point on, Makoto would try hard to restrain himself and not say silly things, like how much he loved Haru and how happy he was to be with him. Makoto could make no promises though; he had a tendency to gush.

The first kiss was Haru’s way of giving permission and afterwards, he would relax and things would get going.

Haru-chan was so cute and precious, but as Makoto scrubbed the floors, thinking about this ritual, he couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit sad.

Not in a million years would he ever admit it to Haru, because he liked letting Haru come to decisions in his own time, but it would be nice if this ritual could change up a bit. The only thing that
Makoto could possibly wish differently for his relationship with Haru would be that maybe, every once and a while, Haru would become overwhelmed and gush about his love for Makoto and maybe, just maybe, become a little bit more comfortable with Makoto when they were being intimate. They’d been together, as a couple, for years now and Haru was still so bashful and embarrassed about his feelings. Not nearly as much as at the beginning, when it had been almost too much for poor Haru-chan, but Haru was taking a very, very long time to relax with Makoto. When things got going, of course, Haru’s inhibitions slipped away and Makoto saw sides of Haru that Haru was probably unaware of within himself.

But Haru was still getting used to the change in their relationship.

Of course Makoto knew Haru loved him, he could see it reflected in the smile that was only for Makoto, that came out much more often than it used to in the time before. He could say incredibly sweet things sometimes too and when he couldn’t, his eyes were eloquent enough so words weren’t necessary.

But still.

Makoto dreamed of hearing his Haru-chan be unable to control his feelings from pouring out, to be the cause of ripples disturbing the tranquil waters of Haru’s heart. And he dreamed of the day he could be intimate with Haru without any fear or hesitation. Nevertheless, Makoto was patient; he knew Haru would get there in the end. And when he finally did, Makoto would be glad that he hadn’t tried to rush because admissions and feelings from Haru were so beautiful if they came from Haru. Like when Makoto had been in the hospital for his appendix.

Haru really was the most precious person and it still amazed Makoto that he was lucky enough to call Haru his boyfriend and that it was Haru who had initiated the shift from just friends to something more.

A knock came at the door, interrupting Makoto’s scrubbing and Haru reflections.

Who could that be?

Miyashi and Minami were having a shopping afternoon that Makoto was strictly prohibited from joining in on and if Yasutomo were to come over (which hadn’t happened for a worryingly long time) he’d be with Kisumi. No other visitors had been to their apartment, so Makoto quickly washed his hands and went to get the door.

Had Haru forgotten his keys again?
When Makoto opened the door, he was surprised to find Sousuke there. Sousuke never forgot his keys, why would he be knocking? It only took Makoto a fraction of a second to realize that these teal eyes were a little lower than Makoto’s, not a bit above him like they should have been, and the face was less angular, more filled in. And Sousuke’s wardrobe consisted entirely of dark grays, blacks, dark blues, and, occasionally, a forest green. The Sousuke at the door was wearing a light blue, button-up shirt and khaki slacks, entirely too respectable and non-dramatic to be Sousuke. This was not Sousuke.

“Hi,” the stranger at the door said in a voice that disturbed Makoto, because it came out of a mouth that looked so similar to Sousuke’s but sounded so much lighter, less grave, “I am looking for Yamazaki Sousuke. Is this the right place?”

Asking after Sousuke, looking like a slightly shorter, better fed version of Sousuke…

The pieces fell into place and Makoto broke out into a huge grin.

“You must be Yamazaki Ichirou!” Makoto cried happily, “Yes, this is the right place! Please come in!”

He moved to the side, allowing Big Brother Ichirou in.

Amazing! Was this a surprise from Rin!?

“Sousuke is still at work,” Makoto explained excitedly, “but he should be back in an hour, but you are welcome to wait here if you would like. I’m Tachibana Makoto, one of his roommates. It’s very nice to finally meet you.”

Ichirou was taken a bit back by Makoto’s words, but then smiled warmly at Makoto, “It’s very nice to meet you too, Tachibana. If it isn’t too much trouble, I would like to wait here for him.”

“Absolutely, I will get some barley tea for you while you wait.”

While he prepared the drinks, Makoto was buzzing with excitement. Ichirou! Here! Oh, this was going to be so good for Sousuke!
Haru came home from practice, excited for his date with Makoto. The mackerel at the French place Makoto loved going to wasn’t Haru’s favorite preparation of his beloved saba, but watching candlelight dance in emerald eyes over dinner and seeing him so happy to be out on a romantic date was more than worth the trouble. After they would come home, they would play video games and Haru would lose because: a) Makoto’s personality changed completely when he was playing games and the sudden, competitive, cut throat Makoto that emerged made Haru think dirty, distracting thoughts and b) the romantic dinner would make Haru think about Makoto’s beautiful, big body, the tendons in his strong forearms, the ripple of muscles in his back. He remained completely oblivious to how beautiful he really was and that, of course, just made him more desirable.

While they played videogames, Haru’s mind would begin to race with all sorts of half-formed fantasies – having sex in a pool, in a shower of a pool, with Haru’s back up against a rock face while a waterfall crashes down on them.

Makoto didn’t know about the things Haru thought about doing with him, it was too embarrassing to talk about. No one knew.

With Makoto completely unaware of the things Haru was thinking, they would play until Haru couldn’t take it anymore. Until he absolutely had to have sex with Makoto. He would turn off the console, take Makoto’s hand, and lead him to their bed.

Haru had thought about talking about the overwhelming and hugely embarrassing fantasies he had about Makoto with Rin, because Rin was always telling Haru about the sex he’d like to have. But telling Rin would no doubt set Rin off on his own wild fantasies and treat it like a joke.

But it wasn’t a joke.

It scared Haru how his body reacted to Makoto when they were lying together and when they were having sex. His desire was just so strong, he wondered if this was how it was supposed to be, if this was normal.

Something Haru had never been.

Part of the reason Haru didn’t mind keeping his fantasies a secret was because he didn’t want people knowing how weird they were. The water things, a lot of people had water related fantasies. But then there were the deeper things, like dressing Makoto up like a bizarrely beautiful fish found at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, pretending they were jellyfish….the list went on and on and definitely became more bizarre the deeper Haru went. Like the ocean. Sometimes Haru was desperate to tell Makoto all the things he wanted to do with him, but he didn’t want Makoto to freak out or reject him. Haru was still pretty certain Makoto wasn’t attracted to guys in general, but Haru had been the exception. Haru didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize what he had with Makoto because he didn’t want to wake up one day to find Makoto would be much happier with a girl.

Rejection from Makoto was the most terrifying thing in the world so Haru kept his sex fantasies to himself.
And their sex would stay the same as it always had been.

After videogames, Haru would take Makoto to their bed, where they would lay down and snuggle while Haru tried to control the crushing fear of rejection and the overwhelming desire that raged within him. But safe in Makoto’s arms, Haru would eventually calm down and all those thoughts would blow away because Makoto was so big and beautiful and kind. Before sex, Makoto had a way of always making Haru feel so safe and accepted and Haru would just want to melt inside of him. They felt like one being and it was only when Haru reached that level of comfort with Makoto that he was able to relax and have sex with Makoto.

This was more or less what was going through Haru’s mind when he walked through the front door of his apartment that night. Since Makoto had spent several hours by himself, Haru knew he would be a little bit lonely and would eagerly greet Haru with a kiss. But to his extreme disappointment, Makoto did not jump all over him in greeting like he usually did and Haru felt a surge of panic.

“Haruka!”

Haru found Makoto sitting at the kotatsu and the panic ebbed away, but it returned again in greater force when he realized that Makoto wasn’t alone.

He was with someone who looked like some cleaned up, respectable version of Sousuke.

“Haru, this is Yamazaki Ichirou,” Makoto introduced as Haru walked over to join them at the kotatsu, “Ichirou, this is my boyfriend Nanase Haruka, I was telling you about him.”

Yamazaki Ichirou?

This guy had to be Sousuke’s brother.

They looked shockingly similar.

“It’s nice to meet you, Nanase-san,” Ichirou greeted Haru, “I’ve heard a lot about you from Rin as well.”

Haru narrowed his eyes at Ichirou.

Why would he be telling people about Haru?
“Rin and Haru are very good friends,” Makoto chimed in, “They have had a fierce rivalry since elementary school and they will both be on the National Team one day!”

Haru watched Ichirou’s smile falter and fade, no doubt because he knew swimming with Rin on the international stage had been a dream Sousuke had shared with Rin and, no matter how you looked at it, Haru had pretty much replaced Sousuke’s part in that dream. But Ichirou soon recovered himself and smiled warmly at his hosts.

“Rin-rin has mentioned your rivalry before,” he said pleasantly, “I am glad to know he has someone to push him. That kid is like a brother to me, I want him to go as far as he can. Maybe he will be an actual brother one of these days!”

“Yes,” Haru said suspiciously, “maybe he will.”

“Would anyone care for more barley tea?” Makoto asked, oblivious to the angry, suspicious look Haru was giving Ichirou.

“Yes please,” Ichirou answered, equally oblivious.

Haru watched Makoto get up and go to the kitchen.

Looks like their big, romantic date wasn’t going to happen after all.

Stupid Sousuke.

__________________________________________________________

It was hot out and Kisumi was feeling mopey. He and Tomo had been reviewing Organic Chemistry all afternoon and it hadn’t gone very well. Classes would start up again soon and he seemed to have forgotten almost everything. How was he supposed to become an amazing doctor so he could save Hayato if he ever had an asthma attack?

Plus, it was really, really hot.

He didn’t want to go home, because he didn’t want to be alone, stewing in his own patheticness, but his feet took him there automatically.

Kisumi hadn’t expected the wonder couple to be home, both Makoto and Haru had separately mentioned the big, romantic date they had planned, but when Kisumi walked through the door he
found them at the kotatsu. With a visitor.

For a moment, Kisumi roused himself out of his wallowing to wonder. The wonder couple rarely had friends over.

This stranger had dark hair and when he turned to look at Kisumi, Kisumi recognized him instantly. There was only one person in the entire world that looked so similar to Sousuke!

“Ichirou!” Kisumi cried eagerly, forgetting his misery.

Ichirou’s eyes took in Kisumi and he smiled warmly, making Kisumi’s miserable day a thousand times better. It wasn’t everyday he was reunited with his childhood idol!

“And there he is,” Ichirou said slowly and with a smirk that was very much like Sousuke’s, “the missing link. It’s nice to see you again, Shigino Kisumi.”

Kisumi darted over to the kotatsu and sat down next to Ichirou, grinning like an idiot. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Haru staring daggers at him and Makoto looking entirely too amused with Kisumi’s reaction.

But who cared! Ichirou had taught Kisumi so much about being a big brother! And, if Kisumi was being perfectly honest, he still kind of worshipped Ichirou.

“It’s nice to see you again, Ichirou,” Kisumi gushed, “It’s been such a long time!”

Ichirou nodded, “I think the last time I saw you, you were probably 12 or 13. I hadn’t even thought about connecting you with Sousuke anymore!”

Kisumi blushed hard, sinking back into the frothy stew of despondency and feeling completely mortified by his eager reception of Ichirou.

Reading between the lines, Ichirou was telling Kisumi that he’d forgotten all about him.

Once again, Shigino Kisumi was not important enough.
When Kisumi was seven, Rin’s birthday party had been a beach day and Kisumi’s mom was late picking Kisumi up. Mrs. Matsuoka (a widow already) had been busy cleaning up and Gou was helping, like a big girl. Ichirou had volunteered to help with the party and while Kisumi waited for his mom, Ichirou was helping Gou put the food away. Rin and Sousuke had run off together as soon as possible and Kisumi hadn’t been invited to play tag in the waves with them. That was fine, because Kisumi had been too worried that his mom wasn’t going to come and he was trying his best to stop crying and not make a lot of noise. He didn’t want Mrs. Matsuoka to notice because Rin’s party had been a lot of fun. It was the first birthday that her husband hadn’t been there and it was the most Kisumi had seen Rin smile in a long time.

Being with the Matsuokas near the ocean made Kisumi think of Mr. Matsuoka and what Rin was like when his daddy died. For a few months, he practically clung to Sousuke’s side and would yell at anyone for anything. He was a bit more of his old self again, but he still lashed out a lot and he still clung to Sousuke. Waiting for his mom, Kisumi couldn’t help but worry that maybe she had died too. And because he was trying not to make a fuss and ruin the day, he had to sit off alone and wait, which only made him more upset.

That’s when a pair of teal eyes found Kisumi and, quietly dismissing himself from cleaning duties, Ichirou came over and clapped a hand on Kisumi’s trembling shoulder. Little Kisumi looked up through teary eyes and found Ichirou, smiling at him warmly.

He didn’t say anything, but when he released Kisumi’s shoulder, he took a seat on the sand and patted the ground next to him. Kisumi sat down and curled up against Ichirou’s side.

If it had been Kisumi to lose a parent instead of Rin, Kisumi would have wanted to cling to Ichirou because Ichirou was just so nice and big and smart and good.

With Ichirou there, Kisumi felt safe.

The sat like that for the remaining ten minutes it took Kisumi’s mother to come to the beach. It remained one of Kisumi’s most vivid memories of Ichirou and he always tried to be that pillar of strength for Hayato that Ichirou had been for Kisumi that day.

But apparently, Kisumi was no one worth remembering.

Even though he had Tomo now, it still hurt to hear how little he meant to people he obviously cared more about.

He was pathetic.

Completely pathetic. And unworthy of notice.
A hand clapped Kisumi’s shoulder and startled out of his memories, Kisumi once again looked up into a pair of smiling, teal eyes. There were a few more lines around the edges, but reflected in those eyes, Kisumi was a runty, pink haired kid with a snotty nose, crying for his mommy one golden afternoon at the beach. And despite wanting to feel sorry for himself, he felt a sudden, childish surge of relief that Ichirou was here and smiling at him.

Some things never really change.

“I felt like such an idiot when Rin sent me that picture of Sousuke and I saw you sticking your tongue out,” Ichirou explained warmly, gripping Kisumi’s shoulder tightly, “I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought to ask Shigino Kisumi because of course you were still friends with Sou!”

“We were never that close,” Kisumi mumbled pathetically, “I don’t blame you for forgetting me.”

Ichirou snorted, “That’s not true. Sousuke could have run to any of my mom’s family or to the Matsuokas or really anywhere, but he ran to your house first. And out of everyone, he trusted you enough to let you know where he was. I’d say that shows you mean a lot to him.”

Kisumi blushed harder, feeling a juvenile breakdown beginning underneath the surface.

He’d never considered that before.

He’d always thought Sousuke had run off to him because he could intimidate Kisumi into being quiet or something. It had never occurred to him that Sousuke had come to Kisumi for help because he trusted him. And despite all odds, he’d stayed in touch too. Sure, Kisumi’s mom had forced him to agree, but then again she was more the sweet-caring-mom-to-everyone’ type, not really the ‘do-as-I-say-or-else’ type.

Under Ichirou’s intent gaze, Kisumi’s mind went back in time, to that morning years before, when Sousuke left to travel the world. The rest of his family had already said their goodbyes, but Kisumi had gone with him to the train station. In the red glow of sunrise, they parted ways.

“Take care of yourself, Sou,” Kisumi urged sadly at the train platform, “Please do.”

“Yeah,” Sousuke agreed quietly, “You too.”
The train that was going to take Sousuke to parts unknown pulled into the station. Sousuke turned to go, then stopped, took off his duffle bag, and fished something out. He wouldn't meet Kisumi’s eyes, but he thrust the small package out to Kisumi, who accepted it feeling very perplexed but pleased.

“Don’t open it here,” Sousuke muttered, “Not while I’m around.”

“Sure.” Kisumi agreed.

“Well, I’ll be going now.” said Sousuke, shouldering his bag again.

“Alright Sousuke,” Kisumi said, “Good luck. I hope our paths cross again someday.”

Sousuke stared at Kisumi. Following the break with his family, Sousuke’s face had assumed a lot of grief and heartbreak and pain and sorrow, but for that brief moment before he boarded the train and disappeared into the blue, Kisumi could see him feeling something else.

“Thanks for everything, Kisumi,” he said quietly, “You’re a good guy. And I will keep my promise to your mom, I’ll let her be my lifeline since she insists.”

Kisumi was relieved. Walking down to the train station in the quiet dawn, he’d been trying to squash the gut feeling that this was the last time he would see Yamazaki Sousuke. Maybe it was, but at least Sousuke was agreeing to the lifeline.

Before Kisumi could say anything, before he could beg Sousuke to stay and live with his family one last time, Sousuke bolted off onto the train and in two minutes, he was gone. The walk home from the train station had been pretty lonesome and Kisumi had to restrain the urge to run back to the station, run after Sousuke, and drag him back.

Or go with him.

They’d talked a lot the last few days Sousuke was with the Shiginos and while Kisumi didn’t understand what was going on with his family, he did understand that leaving and finding himself was something Sousuke had to do.

And Kisumi hadn’t been brave enough to go with Sousuke, to find out who Kisumi really was.

When Kisumi got home, he remembered the little gift Sousuke had given him and he ran up to his room to open it in privacy. It was a little piece of wood, carved into a really beautiful and incredibly lifelike raven. Ravens weren’t particularly important, but it was beautiful and treasured nonetheless.

The raven figurine came with Kisumi to Tokyo. It lived in his windowsill.

In the apartment that he now shared with Sousuke.

So maybe Ichirou was right. Maybe Sousuke cared more about him than he ever let on.
Kisumi wasn’t Rin, but in his own way, maybe he was still very important to Sousuke.

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Kisumi roused himself out of his memories to listen to the conversation that had continued without him.

“Rin-rin refused to tell me where Sousuke was,” Ichirou explained to Sousuke’s assembled roommates, “something about honoring Sousuke’s wishes or some bull like that. But that picture. With Kisumi in it, I had my first lead and it didn’t take much detective work to find your Mrs. Shigino and hear the whole story, about how Sousuke came to you guys first. I told her I’d like to send Sousuke a letter and she gave me the address. So here I am.”

“So here you are!” Kisumi repeated, drawing Ichirou’s attention back to him.

Ichirou smiled and Kisumi wondered if this is what it felt like to have a big brother.

“Does Rin know you are here?” Haru asked.

“No,” Ichirou confirmed, turning his attention away from Kisumi, “No, Rin has no idea.”

Haru frowned deeper, “You should have told Rin. He would have wanted to know.”

Ichirou laughed coldly, “I told him I was going to find Sousuke, with or without his help, so he’s been warned.”

“Well you are here now,” Makoto broke in before Haru could argue Rin’s case more, “And I’m sure Sousuke will be back soon.”

Ichirou relaxed and sat back, smiling.

“I hope so,” he said.

Sousuke’s body was tired from a long day at work followed by a few hours at the studio. He wished the weekend were sooner, so he could concentrate on his new sculpture. It was of two androgynous figures, one propped up on its elbow while the other crawled on top of the other and kissing the
reclining one. Well, they would be kissing, except Sousuke wasn’t giving the two figures heads, hands, or feet, just the torso and the limbs up to the wrists and ankles. And the two figures were made of twisted strands of metal shaped into muscles and bones, not smooth surface for skin. Sousuke was loving it. It was sort of a monument to the Rin Reunification Weekend (as he called it in his head) and it dripped with sex.

Yeah, Sousuke loved it and the fatigue was completely worth it. But no way in hell was he ever going to admit to anyone, least of all Rin, which figure was supposed to be Rin and which was supposed to be Sousuke.

Slowly, Sousuke dragged himself up the stairs to his apartment, thinking about Rin. They’d talked on the phone during Sousuke’s lunch break, their conversation about nothing in particular yet at the same time, covering everything. And before he’d hung up, Rin had said he loved Sousuke and was excited to see him in Australia.

Sousuke would never get tired of hearing Rin tell him he loved him. It was the single most amazing thing Sousuke had ever heard.

Finally, Sousuke made it to his apartment and considered writing for a while as he fumbled with his keys. He’d started a new story too, one about two people, stranded on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The story spanned the coarse of a full day in the boat. During the day, the two hardly spoke, each absorbed in the small tasks that needed doing so that they could survive. But then, when the sun begins to set, they sit together, share a meal, and marvel together at the scenery. Later, lying side by side in the boat for warmth and contact, they look up to the universe and talk about their place in the wide open sea, under the vastness of heaven, and hold hands. The concluding observation of the story would be that the world may be vast and perilous, but so long as there was someone by your side, it could be incredibly beautiful too.

Or something.

They’d been together for over two weeks now and Sousuke’s face felt sore from smiling so much. And in no time, they’d be together again and then they too would get to share sunsets and stars and a bed and all the secret thoughts that Sousuke couldn’t share with anyone else.

Oh Rin…

Sousuke succeeded in opening his front door, stopping some lively talk at the kotatsu instantly. Looking up, Sousuke first saw Haru and Makoto and wondered why they weren’t out on their much talked of date. And why were they staring at Sousuke? Kisumi was home too and for some reason,
the punk was staring at him, just like Makoto and Haru had been doing.

What was going on?

That’s when Sousuke noticed there was another person, sitting on Kisumi’s other side. A dark head began to rise as the stranger began to stand up and….

Oh….

Oh FUCK!!!....

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck!!!!

Ichirou!!!

He was alive!

He was really and truly alive!

Ichirou had looked Sousuke in the eye for a total of fifteen seconds before Sousuke had given into his flight, not fight, instinct and ran into what Ichirou could only presume to be his room. That was ten minutes ago and Makoto and Kisumi had not been able to convince Sousuke to open the door. Haru had helpfully added that Sousuke couldn’t escape from his window, so he was still inside. Kisumi, good old Kisumi, was getting a little bit frantic.

“Come on, Sousuke,” he called from the other side of the door, “Come out and talk with him. He came all this way just to see you.”

“Yeah!” Makoto agreed, his voice full of sweet concern, “Please come out.”

As Ichirou expected, there was no response.

It hurt. It hurt a whole lot.

To come to Tokyo, to finally find Sousuke, to see him, and then, to get a door slammed in his face. Yeah, it hurt.
But it was what he deserved. If Sousuke wasn’t ready to talk yet, well Ichirou wasn’t going to push him. That wasn’t how things went with Sousuke.

For now, seeing with his own eyes that Sousuke was alive and well would just have to be enough.


Kisumi and Makoto both turned around to look at Ichirou. Kisumi looked near on the verge of tears. Somehow, Ichirou managed a weak smile.

“But Ichirou, you came…” Kisumi began, but Ichirou couldn’t let him go on.

“It’s okay,” he said, “I know he’s alive and from what you all have told me and from what Rin’s told me, I know he’s doing well. So for now, that’s good.”

Makoto and Kisumi looked at each other, then together came back to the kotatsu.

“Thank you all for your hospitality,” Ichirou said as he stood up, “I should be going now.”

“Wait, you’re going?” Kisumi practically shouted, “You only just got here!”

Ichirou’s smile gained a bit of warmth. Kisumi had always reminded him of a cute puppy and it had always made him both extremely gratified and a little uncomfortable how all that doggy adoration seemed to be focused on Ichirou. But he had always been such a good kid, Ichirou didn’t mind.

“I know, Kisumi, but that’s the way it goes.”

Too stunned to say anything, Ichirou could feel everyone’s eyes on his back as he began walking towards the door. Maybe Haru was right, maybe Ichirou should have told Rin; at least so Rin could warn Sousuke that he was coming. Now, it seemed that Ichirou had spooked Sousuke.

He knew Sousuke didn’t deal with surprises too well and it was a delicate situation.

But once he’d found out the address from Mrs. Shigino, Ichirou couldn’t resist.

His heart had been aching for his little brother for so long and he’d wanted him back too much.

No!
He couldn’t leave like this!

Because it wasn’t just his heart that had been aching for Sousuke and really, that was the reason Ichirou had come. He recalled a scene in his mother’s kitchen a few nights ago, the night Ichirou had visited Mrs. Shigino.

It had been late and only his mother was still awake. She was padding around in the kitchen, getting things prepared for another fun filled day of babysitting and minding the house while Ichirou and Minako worked. Ichirou had felt disoriented, unmoored after his visit with Mrs. Shigino. His father had never gotten along with Mr. Shigino, Mr. Yamazaki wasn’t a well liked man, so Mrs. Shigino and Ichirou’s mom had never been friends. But Ichirou should have known, should have put the pieces together before then.

“Mom,” Ichirou’s voice croaked out in the stillness of the kitchen. His mother turned around, her brow furrowed with worry. But she didn’t say anything. Like always, she waited patiently.

“Mom, I know where Sou is.”

His mother was a very quiet, timid woman, and her life was all about obeying and not being seen. But for the third time in his life, Ichirou witnessed a crack in her surface. The first time had been the night their father kicked Sousuke out. The second time was after Ichirou had kicked his father out of his home, banished him and replaced him as the patriarch of the family. But unlike those first two times, these tears were full of joy and relief.

“My baby,” she said quietly, because she barely did anything above a whisper, “you found him?” Ichirou then ran to his mother and hugged her tightly.

“I did, mom, and I’m going to bring him back to our family if it’s the last thing I do.”

His mother was hardly a woman of firm resolve. Her father had beaten her into a submissiveness that she’d never outgrown, though it was only through cousins and other relatives that Ichirou had found out about his mother’s devastating childhood that unfortunately explained a lot about her. The only time she’d stood up for herself was the day Ichirou had kicked their father out of the house.

“Come woman,” he’d shouted, “Leave these infernal brats now!” Ichirou nearly threw up, thinking that he had lost his entire family for good, but his timid, mother had
for the first and only time raised her voice.

“You go to hell and leave my babies alone!” she shouted, “Never come in this house again!”

Ichirou would never forget his father’s face. It was like he was looking at a woman possessed. So shocked was he, he left without saying another word. When he was gone, his mother broke down and wept.

Ichirou wasn’t the only one who had missed Sousuke, but just like everything she had accepted that Sousuke was gone and missed him silently with all of her heart.

For his mother, Ichirou wasn’t going to leave yet.

He wanted to give his mother her baby boy back.

Sousuke’s door was shut and locked, but unlike Sousuke’s roommates, he’d rehearsed such a scene hundreds of times when they were growing up. And with Sousuke, a closed door was as much an invitation for conversation as an open one.

He was probably on the other side, begging silently for Ichirou to make the next move. Because yeah, that was Sousuke.

Sousuke felt crippled, sitting with his back against the door, trying to block out the world. He couldn’t move a muscle.

He was older and domestic life had given him some extra padding, but he was still the same big brother he’d always been and Sousuke’s whole body was reacting. So many conflicting feelings were waging war on him, the spilled blood of the war was acidic adrenaline that made him feel tense and sour all over.

He tried to get up, to unlock the door, to hug his brother and tell him how sorry he was he had missed the wedding and the births (Rin had given him the highlight reel). But the last image of Ichirou’s face, glazed over in disbelief as the familial door was slamming shut, froze Sousuke.

What to do!

Makoto and Kisumi stopped trying to lure him out of his den and there was talk outside and a voice he’d recognize anywhere as Ichirou’s. He couldn’t hear what he was saying though. Sousuke strained his ears, desperate to hear what was going on outside, but unwilling to open the door and let
them in. This lasted for a few agonizing moments. Then footsteps, closer and closer to the door.

A shadow blocked out half the light from under the door and the wood shifted under the pressure of a back, leaning on the other side of the door.

“Sousuke?” Ichirou said.

New acid pumped through Sousuke’s body, wiring his jaw shut. But Ichirou seemed to have been expecting Sousuke’s silence because he continued:

“So I came here today for three reasons. First, to make sure you really were alive and well. Rin refuses to talk about you and I only found out your address from Mrs. Shigino, because Rin sent me that picture of you with Kisumi in the background. I put the pieces together. So don’t be made at him.”

Sousuke nodded silently to Ichirou. He hadn’t had time to process a possibility of betrayal, but Rin would surely confirm what Ichirou was saying. Rin wouldn’t betray him like that….

“The second reason I’m here is to explain myself when you left and tell you how sorry I am. I guessed you were in love with Rin when you were in elementary school and when you transferred to Samezuka, that pretty much confirmed it. He’s already my brother in spirit and my kid calls him uncle, I have no problem with him being your partner, lover, boyfriend, whatever. In my head, you two have always been a couple, like since before you hit puberty even. I’m sorry I wasn’t more open and encouraging with you about it and you felt you had to hide your feelings for him. I should have taken the initiative, but I wanted you to tell me in your own time. I waited too long.”

Sousuke was crying.

“What happened that night, how I acted. I am sorry for that too. I didn’t know how things were with you and Dad and I’d never seen who he really was before that night. Why I didn’t beat the tar out of him was because, at the time, I just didn’t know. I wish you would have told me something about it, but you never said a word. I swear to you Sousuke, had I known sooner, I would have kicked the crap out of him and you and I could have…”

Ichirou paused, probably because his voice had begun to waver. What would Ichirou have done? Run away with him? More than once, Sousuke had wondered what it would have been like if Ichirou had come and the idea of them, travelling the world together, looking after each other…

“No,” Ichirou continued, “I have Minako and the kids and I am eternally grateful for them. If I’d gone I wouldn’t have had them and I can’t be sorry for my family. But I am sorry I didn’t do anything, I was just too shocked watching Dad hit you like that…I think about it all the time.”
Ichirou paused again and Sousuke used that time to wipe away his tears. He hated crying, but if he had to do it, he preferred for no one to see, preferably in the dark.

“The third reason I came to Tokyo was to invite you and Rin, as a couple, to New Years. Mom misses you and I would really like to introduce you to Minako and your niece and nephew. And now that you are with Rin, it would be nice to officially introduce him into the family as well. If you don’t want to give an answer yet, you can think about it. I want you to be part of my family, Sousuke, because I love you and not a day has gone by that I haven’t missed my baby brother. I hope in time we can forgive each other the past. For now, I am going to leave. But even if you don’t come for New Years, I appreciate you listening to me tonight. When you are ready, I am always here for you. Now and always.”

After that, the light from under the door lengthened and Sousuke heard Ichirou stand up. Soon footsteps, muffled voices, and a door opening.

The adrenaline made him do it. Before Sousuke realized what his body was doing, he was up and flinging the door open. His eyes went immediately to the door, where they found his brother. He had his shoes on, he was on his way out.

“Ichirou…” Sousuke groaned despairingly.

Ichirou stopped, looked at him, and smiled the biggest, big brother smile. Sousuke felt like he was five again, scraping his knees and being rescued by Ichirou.

How much he’d missed Ichirou!

“I’ll get your number from Rin,” Sousuke said, “and I’ll talk to him to see if he wants to go to New Years. I’ll let you know.”

The words just came out, but once they did, there was no taking them back. The panic of feelings rose up again and Sousuke ran back to his room, locking the door and jumping into the cave of his blankets.

Too much…too much….
Fifteen minutes later, Ichirou ducked into a café and sat down. He couldn’t stop smiling. The waiter put a menu in front of him while he fished out his phone. Snapping it open, he considered calling Minako. But then, he decided instead to dial his mother’s number.

“Hello Ichirou,” she greeted him quietly, “I hope everything is going well in Tokyo.”

Ichirou laughed into the receiver, “It is.”

For a moment, they were silent as his mother waited.

“I think he will come, Mom.”

The silence that followed lasted a full minute.

“My baby boy,” his mother finally choked out, Ichirou could hear the tears in her voice – the fourth time he’d ever witnessed her crying.

“I’m going to see my dear, sweet boy again?”

“Hopefully, Mom,” Ichirou said, “hopefully.”

When Ichirou was gone and Kisumi was alone in his room, he called Hayato. It was a bit late but he knew his brother was having a sleepover with some friends. Really, he didn't want to disrupt his fun, but after watching Ichirou and Sousuke...he really wanted to talk to his own little brother.

Hayato picked up on the third ring.

"Hi Kisumi!" Hayato greeted, "You're calling awfully late."

"I know, I'm sorry," Kisumi said, though the smile cracking his face in half said nothing of the sort, "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Is everything okay, Kissi?" Hayato asked, his voice much graver than any kid's should be.

"Yeah, yeah! I just missed you, that's all."
"Kissi," Hayato whined, though Kisumi could tell from the pitch that he wasn't really complaining.
Kisumi laughed and because Kisumi laughed, Hayato laughed. Then, together, they fell silent again.
"So tell me about how you are, squirt," Kisumi said quietly.
And so Hayato excused himself from his friends to tell Kisumi about the things he'd learned in school and Kisumi, falling back into his bed, listened like it was the most important thing in the whole world to hear.
Because after witnessing the reunion of Ichirou and Sousuke, the paragon brothers of his youth, Kisumi felt like listening to his little brother probably was the most important thing in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! Thanks for reading! This chapter was quite long and lots of feelings/background stuff but I hope you all enjoyed! And hooray! Ichirou and Sousuke! And Kisumi....I really love Kisumi, poor kid!
Come find me on tumblr!: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/
I love to chat so absolutely come drop me a line ;)
Obon: The Making of Yasutomo and Sousuke

Chapter Summary

Yasutomo gets drunk and says some things. Then Sousuke spends Obon with Yasutomo’s family and Yasutomo gets an unexpected visitor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was hot.

Yasutomo’s brain felt like it was boiling inside his head.

Reviewing for classes? Helping his mom with the garden like he promised?

Forget about it.

Yasutomo was just going to lie on his porch and melt into the wood, his muscles and blood becoming a hot soup that his mom would have to wash off the porch with a hose.

By his head, Tomo’s phone buzzed, surprising him back into a solid state. Kisumi was home for the holiday and, to be honest, Tomo didn’t really have any other friends. Both his parents were home and Mitsuki hadn’t called or contacted anyone in their family for months, so it wouldn’t be him.

The fact that he was surprised someone was texting him, Tomo found infinitely depressing. Sluggishly he rolled over onto his stomach and picked up his phone, expecting to find a wrong number.

When he saw the screen, Tomo fumbled the phone, dropping it.

Yamazaki Sousuke

Suddenly Tomo’s heart was pounding and he was sweating even more than before. Quickly, he picked it up to see what on earth Sousuke – whose number he forgot he even had – was texting him for.

Hi Yasutomo. Haven’t seen you in a while, everyone is in Iwatobi, and most everything is closed. Want to go get a beer? Bored as hell.

Tomo heart lurched up into his throat as panic set in
Sousuke wanted to hang out.

He’d reached out and was asking to hang out.

Sousuke was asking to hang out with Yasutomo. On purpose.

And alone.

Yasutomo quickly began typing out a message:

*Sorry, I can’t. It’s too much….*

God, that may as well be a confession. The last thing he wanted was to confess how distraught he’d been since finding out about Rin. What good could it do?

While Yasutomo was erasing the stupid message, another came in from Sousuke.

*Cool if you don’t, I just hope you are okay. Sorry if I did anything to offend you.*

Yasutomo stared blankly at the phone, not quite believing the words he was seeing.

Sousuke was concerned. And to be concerned, you had to care about the person at least a little. Yasutomo knew it was pathetic, knew that it was never going to happen, but he couldn’t help but feel a little touched. Before he changed his mind, he furiously typed out a response:

*Hi Sousuke. I’m not mad. We can get a beer, the usual bar by your place in an hour?*

Closing his eyes, he clicked send.
He was going to stop moping and get on with his life and the way to do it would be to face Yamazaki Sousuke again.

Or he was going to spill his guts and hope that maybe, just maybe, there might be a chance. Even though there wasn’t.

Oh shit!

Why did texts not have delete after sending buttons!?

A new message popped up:

*See you in an hour*

It was unbearable to stay in the apartment any longer so Sousuke was pretty happy that Yasutomo had agreed to meet him for a beer. The past few days had been extremely lonely because Kisumi, Makoto, and Haru were all back in Iwatobi, leaving him suffocating from the emptiness of the apartment. Rin was at a training camp with his team and had abysmal cell reception. So their conversation had been a few minutes at most, always leaving Sousuke craving more.

Picking up his beer glass, Sousuke took a long swallow, despising himself.

Who had he become?

He’d been alone for *three years* and he hadn’t had any friends during that entire time. The exception to the rule was when he happened to go out with the random coworker of the month with whom he didn’t hate seeing after hours. Other than that, the only human contact he had was at bars picking people up and even then, those encounters were not for sustained companionship. Abroad, he’d become the master of solitude. Sure it had been hard at times and in hind sight, he realized now he’d been driving himself mad with loneliness. But in its way solitude like that was also pretty liberating, having no one to worry about but himself.

Now, he’d been alone for less than 36 *hours* and here he was, sniveling into his beer and begging Tomo to hang out with him when it was quite clear Tomo was upset with him and wanted nothing to do with him.
It was stupid to have texted him, he shouldn’t have done it.

He should have sucked it up, because he was being pathetic.

Yet no matter how many times he told himself that, it didn’t change the fact he really wanted to be around someone tonight, even if that person hated him.

Having friends had made Sousuke soft.

A bead of moisture dripped down Sousuke’s glass and he wiped it up with his thumb.

Still…

He couldn’t say he regretted his decision to stay in Tokyo. Because staying in Tokyo brought Rin back into his life. And was going to bring Ichirou back into his life. And, as much as he hated to admit it, he really did like having Makoto, Haru, and even Kisumi around all the time. After so many years where he didn’t have anyone around and absolutely no one to talk to, Sousuke found it absurdly comforting to have…friends.

“Hey, Sousuke,” called a voice behind him.

Sousuke turned around to see Yasutomo, standing a little awkwardly behind him. Dumb as it was, Sousuke brightened up at the sight of him. When was the last time he’d seen Tomo?

“Hey, Tomo!” Sousuke greeted eagerly as Tomo took a seat next to him at the bar, “It’s good to see you!”

Tomo mumbled something that was a bit incoherent. Sousuke frowned as his excitement turned into disappointment. Tomo didn’t want to be here.

This was a bad idea.

“So how have you been?” Sousuke asked awkwardly, in an effort to fill the silence.
“Alright. I’ve been really busy.” Yasutomo answered curtly. The bartender came to his rescue and he ordered a vodka martini, much to Sousuke’s surprise.

“What?” Tomo demanded, more fiercely than expected, “Is there something wrong with this?”

“No, nothing,” Sousuke said, “I just have never seen you drink something like that before. I’ll take one too.”

What was he doing?

Drinking martinis was not something Yasutomo was in the habit of doing, but today was a day of impulses and unfortunately he’d followed it.

His head was getting fuzzy and he was getting too hot.

So why had he ordered a second? And then a third?

Was he trying to prove something to Sousuke?

You can break my heart, but I’m still a man! I’m tough just like you!

He hadn’t done anything like this with his breakup with Rajin.

So what was he doing?

If only Kisumi were here. He would be the voice of reason and take Yasutomo away, probably to enjoy a nice, sobering bowl of noodles. He’d never missed Kisumi before now, because they’d never really been apart yet. Kisumi would not have let Yasutomo get into this situation; they would have seen movies or some other fun thing instead.

But Kisumi wasn’t here. It was only him and Sousuke.

God. Sousuke.

On the stool next to Yasutomo, Sousuke was knocking the martinis back like water. They hadn’t said much - okay they hadn’t said anything at all – but he didn’t seem to mind. There was an air of waiting and expectation about him and Yasutomo felt like they were playing some kind of game. Well whatever, Yasutomo was a champion at Monopoly because he never gave up. Besides, the silence allowed Yasutomo a chance to look at beautiful Sousuke, whom he hadn’t seen in weeks.
His eyelashes were so long and curly, his eyes so sparkly, his jaw so strong…

GRWAH!

This was torture!

He shouldn’t have come.

Sousuke frowned next to him, well aware that he was being observed, fawned over, whatever….

“What’s going on with you, Tomo?” Sousuke finally asked in that deep, growl of his that made Yasutomo’s toes curl.

“You shouldn’t call me that,” Yasutomo spat venomously, “not you.”

Sousuke took another sip of his drink, then took a bit of the sandwich he’d ordered. Maybe Yasutomo should get some food too.

But it was already too late; he was completely drunk. Truth was bubbling to the surface, along with nausea from too many martinis. He needed to keep his mouth shut if he wanted to keep Sousuke from running away.

“Sorry, Yasutomo,” Sousuke apologized, “I thought that was your nickname.”

“It is, it is,” Yasutomo rebuffed, draining his third, or fourth, martini, ignoring his inner voice that was telling him to shut up and go home, “but I don’t want you calling me that. Not you.”

“If don’t want me to call you that, I won’t call you that. No problem.”

The waiter returned and Yasutomo tapped his glass, ordering another against the express orders of his head.

Go home, he was shouting at himself, get away from this beautiful boy before you tell him everything! He won’t want to be your friend if you knows how you feel and then he’ll leave! Say nothing and move on, you can do that! Just go home, go home, go home!
“Do you want another?” the waiter asked Sousuke.

“No, I’m good.”

Tomo rest his chin against the bar and wished he would listen to his head. But the longer he stayed, the closer the truth came to the surface. Fuck, he wanted to tell Sousuke….

*Glug, glug, glug*

More martini.

He’d drunk enough that this one went down without any complaint, burning him with blistering cold that set his stomach on fire.

Blearily, he shouted for the bar tender.

“Another!” he ordered. His words were thick and syrupy coming out of his mouth and he was seeing double and triple. But still, he wanted more. Fuck! He wanted Sousuke to be impressed with him, see that he wasn’t just some sniveling crying kid who couldn’t get over a crush. If he showed Sousuke how tough he was, maybe Sousuke wouldn’t leave when the truth inevitably came out.

“Look, I’m cutting you off kid,” the bartender said menacingly above him, “You’ve had quite a lot.”

“Fuck you!” Yasutomo shouted, standing up to yell. Unfortunately, he’d misjudged how far the floor was and he ended up falling to the ground.

“Get him out of here!”

Sousuke’s hands were around his shoulders and pulling up, so Yasutomo was able to stumble up to his feet.

“We’re going, we’re going!” Sousuke growled back, “Come on Tomo.”
Yasutomo pushed off Sousuke with enough force that Sousuke, taken by surprise, stumbled backwards and over a chair. He came crashing to the ground.

“I told you not to call me Tomo!” he screeched, tears beginning to burn his eyes.

God what was he doing!? It was like some evil spirit had possessed his body and his mind and Yasutomo was observing, completely helpless.

Practically crying now, Yasutomo needed an escape! The bile and the truth were choking him.

A door. Good. That’s what he needed.

Had he had slightly less to drink, Yasutomo would have had the presence of mind to see that the door was in fact not the front door, rather the side door that led out to the alley way. But it didn’t really matter where the door led, so long as it offered an escape.

The alley way was an oven and Yasutomo felt burning hot liquid in the back of his throat. Any moment, he was going to burst.

Fan-freaking-tastic!

First, he embarrassed himself in front of Sousuke and had physically assaulted him in the bar they would probably never be allowed back into. Now, to add injury to insult, he was going to embarrass himself by throwing up all over the alley. Sousuke was definitely going to leave him now!

“Yasutomo!” came Sousuke’s deep voice from behind him, “What the hell!!?”

“Just leave me alone!” Tomo cried, hearing how melodramatic he sounded through the wobbly, haze of alcohol into which he’d plunged himself.

“Look, you say you aren’t mad at me,” Sousuke yelled, his voice raised to a frenzied panic, “But this is the first time I’ve seen you in weeks and I don’t understand what’s going on!”

It was coming. For fuck’s sake, the truth was coming!
Sousuke’s beautiful face was blurry, but Yasutomo could see real panic there. It was nearly as high as Yasutomo’s, with the truth bubbling so close to the surface.

He was worried! Yasutomo never drank like this and Sousuke was worried about him! Why wouldn’t he just leave Yasutomo alone?

“You are mad at me!” Sousuke continued, grabbing Yasutomo’s shoulders and shaking him as though that would produce an answer, “Just tell me what the hell I ever did so I can fix it!”

Yasutomo pushed himself away again and found himself on the ground, all sorts of pain shooting up from his hands and knees and tears streaming down his face.

“JUST LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE AND GO AWAY!!” Yasutomo screeched wildly, desperate to hide his tears.

“Do you really hate me that much?” Sousuke yelled, “I thought we were friends!”

“Go away!”

“Yasutomo, please! I want to help!”

Sousuke kneeled down next to him and grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull Yasutomo up. But it was at that moment, the vomit Yasutomo had been trying desperately to keep down chose to come up and spewed from his mouth onto the sizzling cement of the alley way.

Sousuke’s grip on his shoulder loosened, but he didn’t take his hand away. Instead, he moved it to Yasutomo’s back and rubbed a circle, meant to make him feel better. But, of course, that only agitated Yasutomo more.

He shrugged Sousuke off and awkwardly wiped his mouth and his eyes with the back of his grubby hand.
“What did I do to make you hate me?” Sousuke pleaded, the desperation in his voice thick, “Please, Yasutomo, I just want to understand and then I swear I’ll leave you alone.”

“I don’t hate you!” Yasutomo cried pathetically, “It’s the opposite! I like you so much it hurts and I got my hopes up because I’m stupid and now you’re with Rin and you’re going to leave me just like everyone!”

Behind him, Sousuke finally backed off, leaving Yasutomo alone. Just like Yasutomo knew he would.

“I should go home. This was a mistake,” Yasutomo whimpered pathetically, trying to scrub his face of evidence. He got up to his feet but the world tilted and lurch.

Sousuke caught him before he could fall.

Yasutomo couldn’t look at him.

“You’re drunk. No way can you make it home. You’re coming to my place.”

“No!” Tomo shouted, pushing Sousuke away. The force of it began to knock him off balance again. Sousuke reached out and caught him.

“Come on Yasutomo,” he said, his voice deep and warm with concern, “You can barely stand and your covered in your own vomit. No way you can make it home by yourself and I don’t think you’d want your parents to see you like this, would you?”

Sousuke had a point. His parents had one son who was currently breaking their hearts and one dead son that had nearly destroyed their family; they didn’t need to see Yasutomo as he was now. But that would mean going with Sousuke.

After what he’d revealed…

But he was too drunk to do anything on his own and before he realized what was happening, Sousuke was steering him the few blocks to the apartment.

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When he’d succeeded in convincing Tomo to take a bath, to wash away the vomit and maybe help him relax a bit, Sousuke frantically looked through the kitchen, seeing what he could make and despairing at the state of the kitchen. Without Haru or his other roommates home, he’d reverted to his old ways of eating – which was extremely simply and seldom – so there wasn’t anything really
edible in the house except a can of mackerel. And of course, Haru would kill him if he used it. He numbered his cans of precious saba and wrote his name on every tin top.

There was rice, however, and Sousuke was pretty good at making curry rice. The shop on the corner had everything he needed, so he’d let Yasutomo be for now and go to the store.

Quietly, so as not to alarm Yasutomo, Sousuke crept out of the apartment, into the baking hot day. Outside, a hot breeze ruffled his hair and warmed his cheeks. Well maybe the temperature of his cheeks had nothing to do with the wind. Maybe it had everything to do with the person sitting in his bath right now.

Was this what self-destruction looked like? Fuck, it scared the shit out of him! For the first time ever, Sousuke was grateful he’d decided to stay away from people, admittedly people who probably could have helped him, during his worst. Seeing Yasutomo like this….fuck!

As Sousuke walked to the store, he thought over the surreal afternoon and still, he wasn’t quite able to wrap his mind around them. His own buzz was gone and he’d been unhelpful by pushing things….but Yasutomo was supposed to be the level one, the one who was the voice of reason, the reliable one! And seeing so much raw anger and emotion that had made him actually cry…

And then…those words….

I like you

Shaking his head, Sousuke began plopping vegetables into his basket. He’d add pork, of course, because pork made everything better. What other foods did Yasutomo like? Sousuke didn’t know. He picked out a small packet of pork that looked good and dropped it into the basket. Yes, this curry rice was going to be amazing and hopefully it would make Yasutomo feel better. Sousuke knew what it was like to be in a dark place and he didn’t want Yasutomo to stay there….

Sousuke went to stand in the check-out line and while he waited, his mind was inevitably brought back to what Yasutomo had said.

I like you

Sousuke frowned so hard, the check-out girl looked a little frightened.

Yasutomo couldn’t be serious; something like that was impossible. No one but Rin was capable of
liking him and, even then, it was a bit of a miracle. Yasutomo couldn’t be serious.

But Sousuke respected Yasutomo too much to ignore the glaring facts. Yasutomo had been avoiding him for weeks, Sousuke had noticed, and he’d been distraught and on a warpath against himself and Sousuke at the bar. Not even the massive tip he’d given the bartender seemed enough to smooth things over.

And drunk as he was, Yasutomo hadn’t been able to look Sousuke in the eye since.

Impossible as it was, Yasutomo must have been telling the truth because Yasutomo always told the truth.

Sousuke handed the kid behind the cash register his money and vacantly watched her drop the change in his large hand.

What he and Rin had, it was the type of thing that narrowed his vision and made it impossible to imagine people outside of it. Really, it had always been like that. He only existed in the eyes of Rin and some deep force of nature seemed determined to keep them together. It was a world they made together, but a world that no one else could see.

So how was it that someone who wasn’t Rin was saying these things to him? Could see him like that?

No, there was absolutely no way Yasutomo was being serious.

It was impossible for anyone but Rin to love him.

But as Sousuke mounted the stairs back to his apartment, where Yasutomo was hopefully still in the tub, he paused.

Back to square one. There was a lot Sousuke didn’t know about Yasutomo, but what he did know and greatly appreciated was his honesty. His willingness to cut to the core of matters had impressed Sousuke from the beginning.

So Yasutomo wouldn’t be acting like this if what he was saying, the feelings he claimed, weren’t actually true.
Yasutomo did like Sousuke.

How was Sousuke supposed to deal with this? He valued Yasutomo so much as a friend. God, Kisumi must know! That’s why he’d been such a complete tool lately! Kisumi was always a tool, but he’d been so freaking weird since Rin left!

What was Sousuke supposed to do!? He loved Rin more than anything, but he didn’t want to hurt Yasutomo!

Well, really the only thing Sousuke could think to do was see what happened, and until Yasutomo brought it up again, Sousuke was going to do his best to make Yasutomo feel better. And curry rice was a good start.

While he waited for Yasutomo to say something else, Sousuke would just have to adjust his entire worldview and sense of self to this new, shocking fact.

Someone besides Rin liked him…

How the hell was Sousuke supposed to deal with this?

The bathwater was getting cold and Yasutomo’s fingers were getting pruny, but still he lingered in the tub, submerged far enough so his nose was only an inch away from the water’s surface. Honestly, Yasutomo was afraid to get out of the tub. A shirt and a pair of shorts a la Kisumi were waiting for him on the floor and outside the bathroom, he could hear Sousuke milling around in the kitchen. Hints of something wonderful drifted under the door, calling to Yasutomo’s empty stomach.

Was Sousuke cooking?

No, he couldn’t be. Haru was the only one who could cook in this infernal apartment.

Yasutomo shivered violently, then realized he’d been shivering for a while. The bathwater had long lost its heat. Maybe it was scorching outside, but Yasutomo’s budding doctor instincts told him he needed to get out of the tub unless he wanted to risk lowering his body’s core temperature to a dangerous, possibly hypothermic level.
Slowly, he raised his wobbly limbs out of the tub.

Now, practically sober, it was time to face the music.

He’d revealed his deep dark secret to the person involved and now, now it was time to say goodbye to the apartment because he would never be able to visit again. Sousuke would tell him that if Rin weren’t there maybe they could have had a chance or he would laugh at Yasutomo’s feelings, not take him seriously, but be so restrained around Yasutomo in the future, they could never be friends again. Yasutomo had heard all of it before. And loosing Sousuke, it was unbearable.

Still, Yasutomo felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders. He’d been honest and, embarrassing and horrible as it was, he didn’t feel like he had to hide anything anymore. More than losing friends he fell in love with once they found out about Yasutomo’s feelings, he hated hiding more. He hated hiding more than anything and he’d had enough of it growing up, pretending he thought the girls in class were cute so the boys he actually liked wouldn’t get suspicious.

Come what may, he was glad it was out in the open and as unpleasant and painful as the consequences were, he wasn’t about to take back his words.

Even if it meant losing Sousuke.

The bathroom door opened a crack and Sousuke looked up from the cooktop. Yasutomo peeked his head out.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Sousuke said, turning back down to the curry rice, partly because he didn’t want to burn it, partly because he didn’t want Yasutomo to see how badly he was blushing.

The door opened just enough to allow Yasutomo to squeeze out of the bathroom.

“You didn’t need to cook anything,” Yasutomo muttered, “I should probably be going anyway.”

Sousuke paused for a moment. There really wasn’t any reason Yasutomo couldn’t go home, the bath had sobered him up considerably and it was still pretty early. But the idea of him leaving, of Sousuke being all alone in the apartment to think about what Yasutomo had just said, well it didn’t sound like an evening Sousuke wanted.

It wasn’t over yet, there was still a lot of things that needed saying.

He took the pan off the cooktop and scooped the rice into two bowls.

Yasutomo got the hint and sat down at the kotatsu.
At least he’d stay for some food.

They ate in a restrained silence, both studiously avoiding the other’s eyes, the admission tangible between them. Sousuke had to say something. Yasutomo was a really good guy and Sousuke did like him a lot as a friend. He would really hate if they couldn’t be friends.

“Yasutomo,” Sousuke began awkwardly, “about what you said earlier….”

He trailed off, not knowing what to say next. He’d never dealt with such a situation before and Sousuke felt really awkward with most new social interactions, even at the best of times. This…this had to be the worst of times.

Finally he looked at Yasutomo for some guidance. Yasutomo had stopped eating his rice and looked painfully, painfully uncomfortable. He was blushing harder than he ever had before.

“Thanks for telling me,” Sousuke said quietly, practically a whisper. Yasutomo was too surprised to remember he was trying not to look at Sousuke. With wide eyes, he stared. Sousuke felt nervous. He wished he had had some more time to think of just the right things to say, but this was a crisis so he would just have to think on his feet.

“I mean,” he continued awkwardly, “if that’s how you feel, that’s how you feel and it does explain things. Kisumi has been such a weird passive aggressive mess to me for a few weeks now, I guess that explains the idiot.”

“Don’t say anything against Kisumi,” Yasutomo broke in, his brows taking on a defensive tilt, “He’s an awesome friend and the best thing that’s happened to me in years. He’s been really good to you too and you treat him like shit most of the times. So don’t you say anything against Kisumi.”

Now it was Sousuke’s turn to be surprised.

Did he treat Kisumi like shit? Maybe. Sometimes.

But Kisumi was just always around, whether you wanted him there or not, and he was always trying to butt in where he wasn’t wanted. Specifically with Rin. Sousuke had always liked picking on Kisumi a bit because, unlike his beloved Rin, Kisumi didn’t break down in tears all the time and it never seemed to bother him. But yeah, sometimes Sousuke went a little too far, got a little too mean.

And Yasutomo was right; Kisumi had been a pretty good friend to Sousuke. When Sousuke had run away, Kisumi had let him stay at his house for a while and, depressed and raw and panicked as Sousuke was, Kisumi asked only once what had happened and when Sousuke refused to answer, yelling at Kisumi that it was none of his business, Kisumi hadn’t pushed him or demanded an explanation.

Sousuke had always been extremely grateful for that because no way in hell would Sousuke have been able to talk about his feelings for Rin back then. It had taken him three years to be able to talk
about his feelings for Rin with anyone!

“Sorry, Yasutomo,” Sousuke apologized, “You’re right. Kisumi isn’t a little shit, he’s a pretty good friend. I can do better.”

Yasutomo nodded, “I know.”

Sousuke growled in frustration.

“See!” he cried passionately, “This is why I need you around! You are so good at calling me out on my shit and I appreciate that so much. I appreciate how much courage it must have taken to tell me and I do appreciate you telling me. I am with Rin and I never want to stop being with Rin because yeah, I’ve kind of been in love with him my whole life and I want to grow old with him. But please don’t say this means we can’t be friends at all. I mean, I understand if you don’t want to because I can’t just be friends with Rin, just like I don’t think Haru and Makoto could just be friends after how far into their relationship they’ve gone. So I do understand if it’s not possible. I just hope we can be friends because you are one of the good ones and you’re really important to me.”

Yasutomo blinked a few times, staring into those beautiful, earnest eyes.

One of the good ones?

This was not the reaction previous experience had led Yasutomo to expect. Unless Yasutomo was mistaken, Sousuke sounded desperate, almost like he was begging. Sousuke wasn’t the begging type.

But then, what did Yasutomo know of Sousuke? That he loved Rin, sure, but that he’d spent three years alone and that he’d visited some very dark places when he was alone, as the kanji carved into his shoulder showed. Maybe that was the real reason Yasutomo was so taken with Sousuke – his was a lonely heart that recognized another lonely heart.

His rejection – which he always thought would be the endgame – suddenly didn’t sting. Instead, Yasutomo felt overwhelmingly flattered. He knew Kisumi thought well of him, but Yasutomo wasn’t generally in the habit of hearing anything good about himself come from anyone else. Especially someone he liked. Sousuke was different; he wasn’t leaving.

The hard shell he’d coated his heart in cracked. While it was still bleeding from the rejection, the
stream of blood was only a trickle now and Yasutomo was confident that in time, it would stop. It always did, after all. But more importantly, Sousuke wasn’t going to leave. Maybe it hurt a little, but Yasutomo didn’t have it in him to give up the opportunity Sousuke was offering.

“Yeah,” he said, “If you want to be friends, I think I can do that.”

Sousuke smiled at him and it was hard to miss the genuine relief in his face. That made Yasutomo smile too.

Nothing but two lonely hearts…

“Good rice, by the way,” Yasutomo said, taking another bite.

“Thanks, it’s kind of my specialty.”

The night progressed without either Sousuke or Yasutomo mentioning what they’d been talking about again. It was like they both were taking special care with each other after Taking a cue from Haru, Makoto, and Kisumi, they tried playing some racing game for a while, but as neither Yasutomo nor Sousuke were particularly good at video games, they gave up fairly quickly. Instead, they played *Go* – something Sousuke hadn’t done in a really long time – and it was actually really enjoyable. Yasutomo was far better at it than him, he won every game, but he never gloated and Sousuke thought he got better with each game. When they finally finished their last game, it was two in the morning.

Sousuke convinced Yasutomo to stay the night, though of course Yasutomo protested and only relented when Sousuke flung open Kisumi’s door and told him he was sleeping in there. And it was from Kisumi’s room that Yasutomo emerged at 11 o’clock the next day.

Yasutomo was wearing a different one of Kisumi’s shirts and he looked incredibly embarrassed about it. Or about seeing Sousuke again, but Sousuke chose to believe the discomfort was because of Kisumi’s shirt. Not him.

“Thanks for letting me crash,” Yasutomo said awkwardly, fully sober in the light of a new day, “but I should really be going now.”
Sousuke was ridiculously disappointed. He didn’t want to push it with Yasutomo, but it had just been so quiet in the apartment lately. And Rin was at a training camp and hadn’t been able to talk. Besides, it felt like there was more that they needed to say to each other, but who was Sousuke kidding. He’d pushed his luck enough. Yasutomo shouldn’t be around him right now, he didn’t want to make whatever inexplicable mad thing Yasutomo was suffering even worse.

But the thought of spending the rest of the Obon holidays alone, without the distraction of work or his studio, well it was pretty depressing. He wasn’t as strong as he used to be, he had grown so soft and weak since he’d drifted back into his life.

A year ago Sousuke would have punched present Sousuke right in the dick and told him to get over himself, he didn’t deserve better. But present Sousuke would laugh in past Sousuke’s face, telling him how completely wrong he was.

Oh well.

He wanted to keep Yasutomo as a friend, so he wasn’t going to push him.

He’d just have to suck it up and wait for the empty apartment to be filled with the sound of the Skype ringtone.

“Right,” Sousuke said, trying his best not to sound too disappointed, “I guess I’ll see you. Have a nice holiday.”

Sousuke was looking down at the kotatsu and Yasutomo could see him frown. Sousuke generally looked like a big German Shepherd, big and scary and a little dangerous, but for once, he looked like a sad, vulnerable little puppy.

The largest part of Yasutomo wanted to run away from the damn apartment and hide in his sauna of a room, nursing his wounds and trying to repair. But then there was the other part, the other part that recognized this other fellow, lonely soul and wanted to help.

Maybe it wasn’t the best idea, but Yasutomo’s conscious wouldn’t hear otherwise, no matter how much his broken heart yelled betrayal at him.
The way to Yasutomo’s house they were quiet, they didn’t so much as look at each other. But it wasn’t awkward; it was kind of pleasant. He would never admit it in a million years, but despite all that had happened in the last day, Sousuke was embarrassingly happy to be invited over for the rest of Obon. He hadn’t spent any kind of holiday with a family for a long time, (though he’d hung out with Haru and Makoto for New Years), and the idea of meeting Yasutomo’s parents and getting fed, it was very appealing.

It was good practice, for when he went home at New Years.

“Here we are,” Yasutomo said as he stopped in front of a prim, neat little house. They weren’t terribly rich, but everything was really well taken care of.

“It’s nice.” Sousuke said, not knowing what else would be appropriate.

Yasutomo didn’t say another word as he opened the gate and let Sousuke inside.

The living room, where Yasutomo left Sousuke in order to fetch his mother, was much the same – not expensive, but well taken care of. What stood out was a beautiful, beautiful cello, gleaming in the afternoon sun. It looked so out of place in the living room and it seemed to be positioned so you couldn’t help but look at it, like it was in some place of honor. Directly opposite the cello was the other remarkable feature, a small shrine with a handsome young man who looked something between Yasutomo and Rin, a stick of incense obscuring the guy’s face with smoke and an urn with ashes.

So he was dead then.

Based on how things were situated, it had to be the cellist.

Who was he?

“Hello Yamazaki-kun!” a warm, female voice greeted him, distracting him from the picture, “Welcome!”

Sousuke turned around to find a small, very friendly looking woman who obviously was Yasutomo’s mom. They had the same, bright green eyes and the same deep purple hair. Even their noses were similar.

“Thank you so much for letting me come,” Sousuke greeted, bowing politely.

Mrs. Matsuzaki twinkled, “Any friend of Tomo’s is welcome!”

She looked past Sousuke’s shoulder at the picture, then back to Sousuke, her smile turning sad. She must have seen Sousuke staring at the picture.

“That’s my eldest, Ichiro,” she explained, causing a violent shudder to go through Sousuke, “He died
climbing Mount Everest.”

Ichirou?

Mrs. Matsuzaki leveled a matronly look at Yasutomo, “But I suppose that isn’t something Tomo’s friends generally know.”

“For a reason, mother,” Tomo muttered. His mother smiled fondly at him.

“Well, I’ll see about some cold barley tea!” Mrs. Matsuzaki declared, “and some snacks!”

For a full five minutes after his mom left, Sousuke didn’t say anything to Yasutomo. What could he say? It was bad enough that Kisumi knew; Sousuke finding out hadn’t occurred to Yasutomo when the invitation had been given. The moment he’d walked into the living room and seen Ichiro staring back at him, he knew he’d been an idiot to listen to his conscious.

Too late now.

“Here’s the tea!” his mother called as she put a tray on the kotatsu, “Sousuke, I have a few errands to run, but tonight we will have a really lovely dinner in the garden, sounds good?”

Okay. It was worth every humiliation and inadvertently revealed secret to see the preciously awkward and excited look Sousuke gave his mom at the prospect of a meal made for him.

“Thank you, Mrs. Matsuzaki” was all the reply Sousuke had time for before his mom swept out of the living room to go do her shopping.

So now that all of Yasutomo’s secrets were revealed, he sat down completely bared and drank his tea. Sousuke eventually joined him and after a few moments’ awkward silence, Yasutomo felt like he said something.

“It happened a long time ago,” he explained, “I was in middle school.”

Sousuke put down his tea.

“I didn’t know…”

“Not a lot of people do, I don’t like to advertise it.”

“Kismui knows?”

“Yeah, Kisumi knows.”

“His name was Ichirou?”
“Ichiro, yeah. Kisumi told me that’s your brother’s name.”

“Yeah it is. Is that his cello?”

“No that’s my other brother’s cello, Mitsuki. He’s broken about Ichiro. If you want to see broken, go find Mitsuki and tell him we’d like to hear from him.”

“Oh.”

Later, they were sitting out on the porch, eating popsicles. At least, Sousuke was eating a popsicle, his eyes closed and his mouth curled up in a smile. Yasutomo was too distracted watching Sousuke eat his popsicle to eat his. In the sweltering heat, red, sticky sugar water dripped down Yasutomo’s hand as he tried desperately hard to not stare at Sousuke’s mouth as he licked and loved the frozen treat. But the harder Yasutomo tried, the harder he failed.

There was some noise out in the garden and Sousuke opened his eyes to see what it was. A bird, maybe, nothing Sousuke could see. Unfortunately, he chose the next moment to look over at Yasutomo, who had continued to stare at the phallic, dripping popsicle melting all over Sousuke’s big hand. It didn’t take long for Sousuke to put two and two together and he flushed violently with embarrassment. Quickly, he bit off the rest of the popsicle.

“Sorry,” Yasutomo muttered awkwardly, blushing redder than his popsicle, “I was…umm…”

Yeah, no way he was going to tell Sousuke about what he was fantasizing, though the look in Sousuke’s eyes told Yasutomo how transparent he was and his thoughts must be written all over his face. About that big mouth, bending into a smile as it was wrapped around something else, about those beautiful eyelashes splayed across the tops of his cheeks. About those big hands holding…

God this was such a mistake! He shouldn’t have invited Sousuke over for the holidays! They were friends, but it still didn’t change the fact that Yasutomo was having a hard time stopping the fantasies!

Suddenly conscious of the red sticky mess he’d made of his hand, Yasutomo mumbled an awkward excuse and fled into the house to wash his hands. His whole body felt like it was burning with shame.

As the water cleansed his hands of their sticky, shameful mess, Yasutomo began to despair. He’d been convincing himself he was over Sousuke for weeks now and last night, confessing his feelings and Sousuke still taking care of his drunk ass, well it had done a lot to help him move towards
friendship. And really, Yasutomo hadn’t known Sousuke for very long, there was no reason why he should be so damn attached to him…still…

But this was Rajin all over again, and the straight boys he’d befriended, fallen in love with, and been abandoned by once they knew of Yasutomo’s feelings…He just couldn’t help but get deeply attached to people and continue to want them, even when there wasn’t any hope left, hoping beyond hope that they wouldn’t leave him…

Yasutomo was pathetic like that.

He was deathly tired of being left, but it still never stopped him from attaching himself to the wrong people…At least Yasutomo seemed to have finally found a few right people. If only he’d stop wanting one of them!

As Yasutomo turned off the water, he heard a knock at the front door. His mother and father had gone on a nice long hike in the mountains and they weren’t expected back until later that afternoon. Could it be Mitsuki? Yasutomo hadn’t seen the brother left behind in ages and he suddenly grew extremely excited.

He crossed the living room to answer the door and looked at Mitsuki’s cello, remembering the deep, seductive tones that filled the house back when times were happier. He knew his mother and father missed hearing Mitsuki play as much as he did, but since Ichiro’s death, Mitsuki hadn’t touched his instrument and his skills, which had made him something of a child prodigy, must surely be rusted away to nothing by so many years of abandonment.

With Mitsuki’s cello and Ichiro’s shrine, the living room really did feel like a graveyard.

Yasutomo answered the door, hoping to see his surviving brother, but received quite the shock to find Rajin on the other side.

“Hi, Tomo,” Rajin greeted, smiling that smile of his.

Yasutomo was too surprised and confused to say anything and that confusion and surprise grew when Rajin wrapped Yasutomo in a very, very close hug that seemed to last forever.
“It’s good to see you,” Rajin whispered before letting him go.

Emotions of a bygone day flooded through Yasutomo and, so close on the tail of rejection, he felt himself wishing Rajin would hold him again. Rajin had always been good at translating the desperation in Yasutomo’s eyes and he smiled, that beautiful, angelic smile that had taken hold of Yasutomo’s heart years ago. Sousuke had temporarily distracted him from that smile and made him forget all about Rajin, made it possible for Yasutomo to let go for just a little while.

But seeing Rajin…now…after the disappointment from last night…

“Come in,” Yasutomo mumbled.

Rajin swept into the living room as though he owned the place, though in fact he’d only been to Yasutomo’s house once before, and sat down at the kotatsu. Yasutomo joined him. He felt Ichiro’s accusing gaze on the back of Rajin’s head, who in turn remained completely oblivious to his existence.

“How have you been?” Rajin asked, his pretty blue eyes taking in their fill of Yasutomo as though nothing had happened between them, as though Rajin hadn’t cheated and cast Yasutomo out.

“Okay,” Yasutomo answered, unsure of the contradiction between the truth his head was screaming at his heart, melting in the presence of the person it had once adored, “You?”

Rajin sighed theatrically and pouted in a way that, yes, Yasutomo was surprised to find still worked very well on him.

“I’ve been perfectly miserable, darling! I’ve been dating a few people and none of them have left me half as satisfied as you ever did. Heartbreaks galore for me!”

Yasutomo’s heart beat faster as Rajin’s gaze lowered on Yasutomo in that way…

“I know this is a pretty big surprise for me to show up at your place like this, after so many months of silence,” his mouth curled up in a smile that Yasutomo didn’t have to dig into the realm of his imagination but of memory in order to picture it curled around him, enjoying him…loving him…”but I have been wanting to see you for a while and I’m just going to come right out and say it. I want you back, Tomo,” Yasutomo forgot to breathe for just a second, “because I still love you and it
seems you are the best that I can do.”

The best that he can do…

And the cold harsh reality of Rajin doused the rekindled fire before it had a chance to blaze up into something real.

“The best that you can do?” a deep voice growled angrily from the porch before Yasutomo had time to respond to Rajin’s words, “That’s what you choose to say?”

Sousuke was standing in the doorway, his big, muscular body taking up the full frame. Yasutomo looked back to Rajin and saw that his smile had been replaced by an ugly scowl. Clearly, he remembered Sousuke from Kisumi’s birthday.

“Who the fuck are you, asshole?” Rajin demanded, then wheeled back towards Yasutomo, “Tomo, is this dick your new boyfriend or something?”

“Not boyfriend,” Yasutomo choked out painfully, “He has a boyfriend…”

Rajin, as usual, didn’t let Yasutomo finish. He began to laugh his cruelest, most mocking laugh. The intended effect was to hurt and belittle Sousuke, but really it reminded Yasutomo of all the times he’d heard it before, where he and not Sousuke was the laugh’s intended target.

“So this ‘not boyfriend’ has no say and doesn’t know what he’s talking about anyway!” Rajin spat, glaring angrily at Sousuke, “So maybe this ‘friend’ should just calm the fuck down and let us talk our reunion out! Now I was thinking you could come back to my apartment and…”

For the first time ever, Yasutomo was the one who interrupted Rajin.

“There isn’t going to be a reunion,” he said firmly.

Rajin’s face went blank and he stopped talking. While Yasutomo collected the painful words, his eyes flicked to Ichiro’s picture, giving him strength. His heart badly wanted to feel loved again and Rajin was offering it. But the kind of love he wanted was of the same variety of feeling that had
compelled Ichiro up mountains and had run Mitsuki’s bow across his cello strings before the music went silent. And it was the same variety that he could see in Sousuke since he had his Rin. And it was the same variety that he could see whenever Makoto and Haru were together. And when Haru talked about swimming. And when Kisumi talked about Hayato, his beloved baby brother.

He wanted to feel joy.

And Rajin’s words convinced him that he would never get that feeling of joy from him, no matter what Rajin promised.

“We aren’t getting back together,” Yasutomo said quietly, feeling both sets of eyes on him, “You don’t make me happy.”

For a long, long minute, all three of them were completely silent. It was Rajin who finally broke the silence, with sputtering, unbelieving, fury.

“You ungrateful ass!” Rajin spat, “I don’t make you happy!? You’ve been worshipping me for years; that’s how it works! Of course I make you happy! I’m the best you’ll ever do! You love me!”

“Not anymore,” Yasutomo said softly, feeling horribly guilty for the heartbreak that was spreading out across Rajin’s face. He’d always care about him, because he’d once loved him, but no, he wasn’t in love with him anymore. Seeing him like this, it was like a mirror image of the past, when every other time their positions had been reversed.

Rajin stood up in a huff.

“You’ll regret this, Tomo,” Rajin hissed, “Give it some time and you will regret this. I’m the best thing that’s ever going to happen to you and I’ll make sure we never see each other again. In a few days, you’ll get back to wanting me again but that’s it. I’m done with you, you ungrateful ass! Maybe this guy and the pink haired idiot are your new ‘friends’” here he gave Sousuke a venomous look, “but in the end it’s me you’ve always wanted but too bad for you, you won’t ever get me back and I’m going to find someone so much better than you, you boring, ugly, pathetic piece of shit! Rot in hell and go fuck yourself, Tomo! I hope you realize what you are giving up and that you won’t ever love anyone as much as you loved me!”

Sousuke made a move forward, most likely to hit Rajin, but Rajin fled before Sousuke could reach him.
The front door slammed behind Rajin, causing a violent shudder to go through Yasutomo. The silence Rajin left in his wake was heavy and lasted for a really long time.

“Yasutomo…” Sousuke finally broke it.

“I’m going to go lay down for a bit,” Yasutomo said, a bit shrilly, getting up to his feet, “Sorry, Sousuke, I’m not feeling very well all of a sudden.”

Sousuke gave Yasutomo an hour to himself. He had brought a book out and attempted to read it in the garden, but Rajin’s hateful words and the look on Yasutomo’s face kept distracting him.

Rajin was the absolute worst! What sort of evil cockroach would try to get back together with someone, then say such things to them the next second!? A hurt cockroach, sure, but a cockroach was still a cockroach. And he’d called Yasutomo, Tomo. He was never, ever going to call Yasutomo that again. Maybe he should talk to Kisumi…

Kisumi. He should be here now, not Sousuke. Sousuke wanted to go see how Yasutomo was doing, but he thought maybe his presence would make Yasutomo feel worse. He’d rejected Yasutomo, after all. Just yesterday.

So Sousuke stayed outside, too distracted by the heat and Yasutomo to concentrate on his book, until he couldn’t take it anymore. Yeah, he might hurt Yasutomo by being there, but Sousuke was determined to keep Yasutomo as a friend and friends didn’t let friends suffer without trying at least to help.

Kisumi should be the one to talk to Yasutomo, but without him it would have to be Sousuke.

A few moments later, Sousuke tapped on the door he knew to belong to Yasutomo. A noise came from inside and Sousuke took it as permission to enter.

The room was small and full of sunlight, but Yasutomo, curled up in a tight ball on the bed, seemed to be in shadows.
“Is it okay if I come in?” Sousuke asked.

“Sure,” Yasutomo said, uncurling himself so he could look over his shoulder, then unfold himself up into a seated position. Sousuke was glad he wasn’t crying. He could only deal with one person crying, and that’s because that one person cried about EVERYTHING.

Sousuke came inside.

Sousuke hadn’t been in Yasutomo’s room yet and he looked around, studying it. For the most part, it was pretty plain. Squeezed into the space was a bookshelf, with books organized nice and neatly, a small desk that had neat stacks of papers and books, a dresser, and his bed, which still had smooth covers even though Yasutomo had been laying on the bed. There was a small jade plant on the dresser and a few photographs pinned to the wall behind the desk, but other than that there wasn’t anything decorative or colorful or personal in the room.

He walked over to the desk and looked more closely at the photographs. A few of them were of Yasutomo and Kisumi, making dumb faces at the camera and striking really ridiculous poses. Sousuke remembered taking a few of them and there was one with Makoto, Haru, Kisumi, and Sousuke posing at the beach. This was the weekend before Rin came back into his life and Sousuke, who remembered being so happy that weekend, was shocked to see how different he looked when he was happy than what he was used to seeing.

Sousuke’s eyes slid to a few of the other pictures that featured Rajin and he frowned. After today’s little episode, he felt like tearing them off the wall and into a thousand pieces. But that was for Yasutomo to do, not him.

Front and center and the picture Sousuke saved for last was one of a much younger version of Yasutomo, along with his Ichiro and another purple-haired guy, probably the cellist brother, Mitsuki. The two older brothers both had their arms draped across Yasutomo, who was beaming brighter than Sousuke had ever seen him. They were outside and behind them was a beautiful expanse; they were probably on a mountain.

Of all the pictures that Yasutomo had with himself included, this was the one that he looked the happiest in.

Ichiro. Even in this frozen moment, Sousuke could see that Ichiro had been a golden boy, just like his Ichirou and just like Rin. And it was his sunshine that the younger brothers’ basked in. Taking away the sun, well Sousuke could understood how that had changed the younger brothers.
“We were on Mt. Fuji in that picture,” Yasutomo explained. Sousuke turned to find Yasutomo watching him, his face beautiful in its tragedy.

He really wasn’t a bad looking guy.

Sousuke walked over and sat down on the bed, far enough away so they couldn’t possibly touch on accident, but close enough so Yasutomo felt him near.

“It was the single most perfect weekend the three of us spent together before Ichiro died,” Yasutomo explained, his mouth curling into a sad, sad smile, “Ichiro loved Mt. Fuji more than any other mountain and I was finally big enough to go with them.”

Sousuke didn’t know what to say and for a moment, neither did Yasutomo.

“I’m sorry you were here for that, Sousuke,” said Yasutomo finally, “I wish Rajin hadn’t come over when you were here. It would have been easier for him if I was alone.” Yasutomo frowned again, “Of course if you hadn’t been here, he probably could have convinced me to go back to him.”

“Would you really have wanted to?” Sousuke asked, shocked.

Yasutomo shook his head.

“Not really, he cheated on me and was kind of terrible in the end. His charm is wasted on me now because all I can see is his insecurities. He was my roommate in college and he was the one who started things between us. He dazzled me and I worshipped him, but the dazzle is gone and all he wants me for is that same, slave-like worship. He doesn’t really love me; he loves how pathetically in love with him I was and I can’t do it anymore. But…”

Yasutomo paused.

“But what?” Sousuke pressed. He was bursting with pride and sympathy for Yasutomo. He’d been afraid that Yasutomo would want to run after him, to be with him. Especially after last night….

“But I still don’t want to let him go,” Yasutomo explained, running his hands through his hair in frustration, “Even now I want to call him and make him take back that we will never see each other again. He was still so important to me and I’d forgotten how important he was, since Kisumi and… you…have distracted me. It’s like he always had a way to remind me that he was there, like at Kisumi’s birthday and making sure rumors of his love life reached me. I’m not in love with him
anymore, but crazy as it sounds, I still don’t want to let him go. He’s horrible, but I can’t help but care about him and I don’t want him to leave me completely.”

Yasutomo sighed heavily and crunched himself up together.

“I’m pathetic, I know.”

“You’re not pathetic,” Sousuke argued, “Far from it.”

Yasutomo turned to look at him. He was listening.

Sousuke continued:

“Your brother died. You’ve known loss. It makes perfect sense that you don’t want to lose anyone else. Rin…”

He looked at Yasutomo, not knowing whether or not it would be okay for him to talk about Rin with Yasutomo. But Yasutomo nodded at him, asking him to continue. So Sousuke did:

“Rin’s dad died when we were like seven. I’ve often wondered how we would have been, if Mr. Matsuoka hadn’t drowned. See, after he died, Rin clung to me pretty fiercely and even if we fought or weren’t physically together or even talking to each other, every time I saw him again, it felt like he was clinging even closer to me. Because I’d been there from the beginning. And I’m a lot like his dad too; we look the same and, what I remember of him, he was quiet and kind of shy like me. I have wondered that, if I looked less like his dad, he would still love me. I try not to think about it, but I still wonder…”

“Anyways, me being gone, there hasn’t been any fallout about it yet, and I really, really hope there isn’t because I’m so fucking in love with him and I’m happier than I’ve ever been. But I’m sure in his head the fact remains - I left him when I was the one who was always supposed to be there for him, no matter what he did. I had my reasons and he understands them, but knowing him, it wouldn’t surprise me if there is some explosion in the future because I left. He explodes, you see, that’s the way he knows how to deal with strong emotions and he can get really defensive. Like he’s protecting himself. I guess my point is that loss does things to people and it’s not pathetic at all if you want to keep people close that don’t deserve to be kept close. It means you’ve been through stuff.”

Yasutomo blinked a few times.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that before,” he mumbled, “It’s Mitsuki who is broken because of Ichiro, not me.”

“Just because you aren’t broken, doesn’t mean you haven’t been affected and you don’t hurt.” Sousuke replied.

Finally, Yasutomo smiled.
“I guess that’s true.”

“Look, Yasutomo, I’m sorry for bringing up Rin. I’m sure he’s the last person you want to be hearing about.”

“No it’s okay,” Yasutomo said quickly, “I mean, Kisumi has told me some stuff about you two and your story because I asked him and you can’t talk about him without smiling, so I’m happy for you. From what Kisumi has told me about him, I’ll be really interested to see how he effects Haru and Makoto when he comes too.”

Sousuke laughed, “Yeah, I’m wondering how Rin and Haru will get along as well. They have a weird relationship too. Only time will tell, I guess.”

After that, they fell into an amicable silence and Sousuke could feel the tension gone between them.

“Yasutomo,” Sousuke whispered, “Rin is my soul mate, I’m convinced of it. He’s a gorgeous disaster I’ll love forever. But I do want you as my friend. So long as you want me around, I won’t leave you. If it’s too much, I get it, but I’m here for you. Like I know Kisumi is too. You don’t need to settle for assholes like Rajin, you’ll find someone awesome, I know it.”

“Thanks Sousuke,” Yasutomo said, though Sousuke could hear the doubt in his voice, “That means a lot. Um, so I kind of would like to make my parents dinner, if you don’t mind hanging out. Then tonight we can find somewhere to go see the lights.”

Sousuke smiled, “Sounds perfect. And obviously I’ll help you cook.”

Yasutomo couldn’t remember the last time his family had spent a holiday so pleasantly, not since Ichiro had died anyways. His parents fell madly in love with Sousuke, who had spent years away from his own family and, consequently, was eager to feel filial approval once more. And his parents, well it had been a really long time since they’d had an energetic young man that wasn’t effected by the shadow of Ichiro’s death around. His mother had never had such an eager helper in the kitchen and they spent a long time in the garden together, cutting his mother’s beloved flowers and arranging them into breathtaking arrangements that nearly made his mother weep. He was an artist, after all. Sousuke was a very hand guy and he helped Yasutomo’s father fix the roof, which had been damaged in a windstorm earlier in the spring. And his parents, who’d never been outside of Japan, listened to Sousuke’s travel tales just as eagerly as Yasutomo did. The house was full of energy in a way it hadn’t been since Ichiro’s death and for everyone, Sousuke, his parents, and Yasutomo, the Obon holiday could only be described as therapeutic.
But at last, it was time for Sousuke to go. Though the others weren’t back at the apartment yet, Sousuke insisted on going home so he could clean the place up for their return. So Yasutomo walked with him to the train station to say goodbye.

The afternoon was hot, but a breeze made the heat less suffocating. While they walked silently, Yasutomo observed that he’d never seen Sousuke so relaxed before. Out of the corner of his eye, Sousuke caught Yasutomo watching him and gave him a questioning look.

Yasutomo smiled, “You look at ease, Sousuke. You are usually so guarded.”

Sousuke smiled the sweetest smile and feelings stirred in Yasutomo. But it was alright, it really was.

“Your parents are very nice,” Yasutomo said, “I think I needed something like this week. Thanks, again, for letting me come, it was really nice of you.”

Yasutomo laughed off the dull ache, “Well I couldn’t just leave you alone! You looked like such a sad puppy!”

Sousuke frowned and his face fell into a pretty adorable pout, “I would have been fine on my own.”

Yasutomo laughed again, this time straight from his belly, “I’m just teasing! No need to be so serious!”

Sousuke cracked a beautiful, uninhibited smile and in a friendly silence, they continued their journey to the train station.

Outside of the train station, packed full of people coming home after the holiday, Sousuke turned back to Yasutomo.

“Hey Yasutomo, are we good?” he asked, his face once more serious.

Yasutomo nodded.

“Yeah we’re good, Sou.”

Yasutomo smiled at Sousuke because yes, he really, really meant it. Sousuke smiled back.

“Alright, I’ll be seeing you. And thanks again for the invitation. I really, really appreciated it.”

“Alright, I’ll see you later this week.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Later this week then.”

Watching him go was, of course, a bit bittersweet, but the bitter was not nearly as strong as the sweet. Sousuke had said he liked having Yasutomo around because he had a way of seeing through Sousuke. But it went the other way around too and Sousuke had left Yasutomo with a lot to think
about, especially about Ichiro. He didn’t know what it was going to be like for him when Rin came back from Australia and was living at that apartment, but Yasutomo was feeling well and truly happy with how things were with him and Sousuke. They really were friends now.

Kisumi would probably be pretty happy to hear it, so on the way home, Yasutomo began texting Kisumi about his time with Sousuke. By the time he got home, the whole story was told and Yasutomo ended his texts with a picture of him and Sousuke at the lights. With a smile, he went inside his house, feeling confident that now, they could all hang out again and it would be back to how it was before.

Kisumi was sitting in his father’s car as he drove him to the train station, looking at the picture Tomo had sent him of Yasutomo and Sousuke at the Obon lights, smiling and looking so happy.

The sight made him nearly sick with jealousy and despair and he hated himself for reacting like this!

He’d been reading Tomo’s narration over and over since he’d received it yesterday and yes, he was glad they seemed to have patched things up. But every time he reread Tomo’s texts, he came further and further to the conclusion that he’d lost Tomo to Sousuke. With Rin as his boyfriend, not just his friend, Sousuke was in the market for a new friend and Yasutomo was, after all, well suited to fill that role. They’d become best friends and, once again, Kisumi would be left out. Why the hell did this always happen to him? He’d really, really hoped Tomo was the one, the friend he’d been waiting for his whole life.

But apparently not.

“Kisumi, we’re here!” Hayato peeped next to him, pulling Kisumi out of his despair if only for a moment.

Kisumi looked down at his baby brother, who was going to be starting middle school next year, and pulled himself together enough to smile.

“Too bad, squirt! Wish I could bring you along!”

Goodbyes were said and bags were deposited on the sidewalk. Kisumi stood and watched his family drive away. Their absence he could feel immediately and, reluctantly, he turned to the train station that would take him to the airport that would take him back to what promised to be a lonely existence back in Tokyo.

Every step of the way, Kisumi contemplated turning around, running back home, and never stepping foot in Tokyo again.
No one would probably really care except his family.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone!!!! Thanks for reading this whopper of a chapter :S....how did it even get sooo long!!!! I just wanted Sousuke and Yasutomo to really bond :)

So SouRin drama begins next chapter but, fyi it will have a happy and really awesome ending :)

Thanks again everyone for reading, I appreciate it a ton!

http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

Also, please feel free to chat my up about SouRin/ HaruMako/ life/ anything at anytime on tumblr or the comments here :D

Until next time, lovely people!
"When did you know you loved me, big guy?"

Lying on his back on top of his bed, Sousuke turned his head lazily to the side to look at his laptop’s screen. There was Rin’s beautiful face, arranged with a very particular angle of his eyebrows and his cheeks slightly flushed. Maybe it was because he’d known Rin for so long or maybe it was because Rin was nearly incapable of hiding any emotion, but Sousuke could tell Rin was nervous and he’d had to work up the courage to ask Sousuke this question.

Sousuke smiled sideways at his lover and rolled over on his side to give Rin his full attention. Of course Rin always had had Sousuke’s full attention.

Over the past week, their conversations had shifted. During the first three weeks they’d been back in each others’ lives, all their conversations had been about catching up and excitedly imagining what a future life shared together could offer. But in this past week, Rin had begun asking such probing questions, meant to explore Sousuke’s feelings because apparently Sousuke’s heart was mostly terra incognita. Rin had never been timid about anything involving Sousuke, but it was somewhat distressing to find him so now. Sousuke knew he had a bad habit of not saying what he was feeling, but Rin acted like he was intruding on something and felt guilty for doing so. Though he didn’t like this timorousness in Rin, his golden boy, Sousuke didn’t complain. Hopefully in time, when Rin become more comfortable with Sousuke again, it would pass. To be with the one he loved with all his heart, Sousuke had resolved to hide nothing from Rin and hopefully that would be good enough.

“After you left for Australia when we were kids,” Sousuke answered truthfully, his voice quiet as if he were in a confessional.

“That long?” Rin asked, his voice full of amazement.

Sousuke nodded. Of course it had been that long and Sousuke had always worried he’d been painfully obvious about his feelings. Apparently not.

“We were so young, though!” Rin replied, “How could you know what to call your feelings so young?”

Sousuke laughed. Rin may as well asked him how he knew he existed or how he knew he needed to breathe to live.
“I’m not you, Rin,” he answered with a chuckle, “You’ve always experienced emotions so intensely, they’ve often confused you because they are too much to take in all at once. For important things, you’ve always needed some time to digest. But that’s not how it was for me. Maybe I’m just not as emotional as you or don’t experience things as intensely, but I think I’ve more or less been able to understand the things I’m feeling, even if I’ve tried to deny them or pretend they aren’t there. And the way I’ve felt about you since pretty much the very beginning…well it wasn’t a huge revelation when my head put a name on it. I didn’t call it ‘love’, but I did know that the happiness your smile gave me was a gift only you could give me and I knew the ache I felt when you were gone wouldn’t go away until I saw you again. And no one else could leave behind the same kind of ache.”

Rin’s face turned scarlet with equal parts pleasure and embarrassment and Sousuke smiled inwardly. So long as his romantic fool of a boyfriend continued to react so adorably, Sousuke would never tire of professing his love to him. For a long time, Rin took in what Sousuke said. His eyebrows angled slowly inward and his pretty little mouth drooped down in a frown. Sousuke turned back onto his back and waited for Rin to continue, smiling up at the ceiling.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything, then?” Rin finally asked in a whisper, “My feelings for you took such a long time to make sense to me; things could have started sooner and turned out so much different if you’d told me how you felt.”

Sousuke’s smile fell into a frown, still aimed up at the ceiling so Rin couldn’t see. In the corners of his bedroom, he could feel the ghost of his old, intense jealousy he’d felt for Haru, the sorrow of being abandoned again and again, the hopelessness of listening to Rin sleeping beneath him at Samezuka, knowing Rin was leaving again without him. The hatred he’d poured on himself, partly because of his father’s narrow view of the world, partly from his own, inner voice telling him he’d never be good enough for Rin to love him back. The reasons Sousuke had resolved to take his feelings to his grave, even while he suffered from them so profoundly. Even now they tugged at the corners of his mind, whispering that this euphoria wouldn’t, couldn’t last. It was all too good to be true. When would these feelings stop haunting him? Would he ever be completely rid of them?

“I’d hoped you could get there on your own,” was the only reply Sousuke gave Rin.

Through the computer screen, Rin watched in a state of panic as Sousuke contracted into himself and began to brood melancholy thoughts of darker times.

‘Don’t leave me!’ he screamed in his head. Sousuke wasn’t watching and couldn’t hear.

Instead of begging Sousuke to stay with him, to not leave him again, he decided the best approach would be to laugh it off.
“Of course I got there in the end, Sou!” he giggled falsely, forcing a smile. Sousuke turned his grave face back to Rin and Rin’s heart leapt as he looked into those teal eyes, even if only through a computer screen. Sousuke had always been handsome, Rin had never disputed the fact, but now, Rin found that face nothing short of breathtaking. And those sharp angles cut open old wounds on his heart when Rin remembered that face could vanish into thin air again. So he would be cheerful and happy to entice that face to stay and smile.

“Looking back now,” Rin continued, turning serious again, “I don’t see any other destination my heart could have taken! It took some twists and turns through murky waters, but in the end it arrived just where it was always heading towards.”

The darkness evaporated out of Sousuke and Rin relaxed.

It’s possible Rin had been thinking up those words for quite some time to use for just such an occasion and seeing the smile they produced made him glad he’d saved them. Good thing Sousuke was such a romantic at heart. There were a few other such strings of sentiment he’d put together for Sousuke, to tell him how much he loved him, but he’d decided to use them sparingly, for times when he was afraid of losing Sousuke.

“Such a romantic.” Sousuke grumbled, though Rin could tell he wasn’t actually complaining. Rin’s smile turned into something genuine.

“You’re one to talk!” he teased, glad the darkness and hence his fear had momentarily passed, “When it comes down to it, I think you are way, WAY more romantic than I am. And that’s complete bull shit about you being less emotional than me.”

Sousuke didn’t pursue the topic further, but chose instead to look down, away from Rin, and smile that small, sweet smile of his that Sousuke was probably completely unaware of. It was a rare sight and it meant he was genuinely happy. Rin stared at him through the computer screen, his heart all of a sudden beating rapidly against his chest.

“I wish you were here,” Rin blurted out.

Sousuke looked up and this time, a faint blush tinged his cheeks. Seeing that blush made Rin’s whole body ache for Sousuke. Who was so, so far away.

“Why’s that?” Sousuke asked, a bit coyly.

Rin grunted in frustration.

“So I can touch you, obviously!” cried Rin.
Sousuke’s smile broadened.

“And kiss you!” Rin added, earning him an even bigger smile.

“I like the direction you are going, Rin,” Sousuke said in a low voice that made Rin’s toes curl, “keep going.”

Once before, Sousuke had tried to talk Rin off, but it had not worked out very well at all. That embarrassing failure was completely Rin’s fault. But maybe, a role reversal, where Rin was the one doing the talking, would work out better.

“If we were together, Sou,” Rin continued, “I’d have you lay on your stomach and I’d sit on top of you, on your thighs.”

Sousuke flipped over so he was laying on his stomach. For a moment, he buried his head into the blankets then, ever so slightly, he tilted his head enough to peek at Rin.

“Like this?” he asked. A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth that was visible.

“Yeah, just like that,” Rin said, feeling his body begin to rouse. Fuck! That smile would kill him in the end.

“What then?”

Rin swallowed hard. He could feel the heat building in his cheeks.

“I’d give you a massage I think,” Rin continued, “I’ve been told I’m really good at massages so I’d want to do that. I’d work on your shoulders and keep going until you were relaxed. We’d listen to some really nice music. Maybe I’d…uh…have some…um…candles….or….something….”

The heat in Rin’s cheeks grew hotter and he was having a hard time looking at Sousuke. Why did this have to be so embarrassing!? He’d definitely talked people off before, but he’d never had such a hard time as with Sousuke!

“What then, Rin?” Sousuke asked so quietly, it was practically a whisper. Rin looked back at the screen to find Sousuke, watching him out of the corner of his eye. His expression had turned serious and his smile had faded. Rin could tell that for Sou, this had stopped being some silly whatever. Well if Sousuke wanted to take this seriously, Rin could get himself together.

“When you were really relaxed, I’d start kissing you,” he said, keeping his voice low and, hopefully, sexy, “First, I’d kiss your ear, then I’d go down your neck. Really slowly and lightly. Your skin would get goosebumps all over it where my mouth touched your skin.”

Sousuke made a throaty noise and turned his head back down into his bed. His hair had been ruffled somewhere along the way and, for some reason, that silly little detail Rin found almost unbearably sexy. Maybe because it looked like he’d just run his hands through Sousuke’s hair. Maybe even pulled it a little.
“When I got to your shoulders, I would start kissing you, slowly, towards the middle of your back, in between your shoulder blades. I’d, uh, stop kissing you then and…um…start licking you.”

Sousuke made another noise, louder this time, almost a growl. He didn’t look up again, but Rin could see his hand, balling up the blanket upon which he was lying and his hips bucking down into the bed.

This was encouraging.

“I’d put an ice cube in my mouth before I started, so my tongue would be really wet and cold. When I touched your skin with my tongue, you’d shiver…”

Obediently, a violent shiver went through Sousuke.

“With my tongue I would go straight down your spine until I reached the part of your back, right before the curve of your ass. I’d stop there and kiss you while I lubed up a finger and started going towards your hole. The lube would be cold and wet too and when I started to play at your hole, starting to loosen you up, you’d….”

“Stop!” Sousuke shouted as he jerked himself up to a sitting position. His face, which had been so seductive seconds before, was suddenly contorted with rage.

“Fucking stop!”

Blood was rushing in Sousuke’s ears, his heart was beating a thousand times per second, not in a good way, and his entire body was tensed up, deciding whether it was better to fly or fight. Such a horrible contrast to only moments before, when his body had been so relaxed and wonderful feeling as his mind conjured up the sensations Rin was narrating.

But then…then…he realized what Rin was really saying….how he wanted to….

God!!

Sousuke couldn’t even think of it!

“Stop!” he shouted as he sat up abruptly, “Fucking stop!”
His breath came, rapid and ragged with rage.

The fuck was Rin thinking!!???

“What the hell?” Rin burst angrily.

“I should ask you the same thing,” Sousuke retorted, conscious that he was probably shouting, “What the hell were you doing!!??”

“You wanted me to!” Rin shouted.

His face was becoming red now too, only not in the adorably, blushy way like before, but in the pissed, defensive way he got.

‘Calm down!’ Sousuke yelled at himself internally. He didn’t like to see Rin upset.

But then Sousuke thought of where Rin’s mind was going and a fresh swell of rage made him forget himself for one, terrible, fateful moment that he would bitterly, bitterly regret minutes later.

“Dude, I’m a guy and you’re the bottom, so why the hell did you start talking like that, like you wanted to shove your dick up my ass!!??”

Rin’s face instantly turned so dark with anger, he nearly matched his hair.

“What! The! Fuck!” Rin bellowed, flying into survival mode and snapping Sousuke out of his, “I’m a fucking guy too, asshole! You think because we’ve only had sex with you on top, I’m your fucking GIRLFRIEND or something!!???”

“No, Rin…”

“I’m not a girl and I don’t fucking want to be one! Just because we’ve only had sex with you on top does NOT mean you are the man and I’m the woman, you dick! That’s not how it works! The whole point is we are both dudes!!!! With dicks!!!!!!!”

“I know you aren’t a girl, that’s not what I’m saying!” Sousuke shouted defensively. Rin was too pissed….

“Then what are you saying?” Rin screeched, his eyes wild.
God, Rin could be *fucking* scary.

“You’re not a girl, but you’re the bottom! I’ve not ever been the bottom and I’m not ever going to be the bottom.” Sousuke explained. He could hear his voice rising in anger at the thought of it. Letting anyone – even his beloved Rin – do that…to him.

Rin was the smaller one and definitely the more emotional one – it made sense that he would be the receiving end and not the other way around. And no way in HELL was Sousuke going to let any dick up his ass, even if it was Rin’s. Not any dick, not ever.

“So that’s it!?” Rin sputtered angrily, “That’s the final word? You won’t even consider it!? Not even if I want to try?”

Sousuke nodded his head gravely.

For a really painful minute, Rin just stared at Sousuke, fuming. Sousuke had never felt so perfectly balanced between the primal flight of fight instinct that governed even the lowest beast. He wanted to fly, because Rin, beautiful, wonderful, amazing Rin, whom Sousuke had loved forever, was staring at him as though he didn’t know him and, worse, didn’t want to know him. He wanted to fight, because this was really, really personal – the act of putting something up his ass. He’d never done it because it was such a…violation…Sousuke hadn’t spent years of isolation in vain; he knew how to protect himself and this…it was such an *intrusion*…Rin had to see that…He had to understand…

Finally, Rin turned away and his hand reached for the computer screen.

“I can’t even fucking look at you right now,” he growled.

The screen went dark.

Rin was gone.

Sousuke stared at the blank screen, solid frozen, until finally, he heard the front door open and close,

FUCK!
What had just happened!?

WHAT THE FUCK HAD HE DONE!!?!!??

In a burst of energy brought on by panic, Sousuke jumped off his bed and went to his closet, grabbing the duffle bag that had travelled the world with him and stuffing a few pieces of clothing inside. Then he fled the scene of the crime as fast as his legs could take him.

His phone, he forgot on the bedside table.

Makoto said goodbye to his Rec League teammates as they left the locker room, basking in the glow a good workout in the water gave him. He wondered if this was the physical sensation Haru experienced after he got out of the pool. As embarrassing as it was to admit, Makoto often wished he knew exactly how Haru felt – not emotionally, but physically. It would probably be pretty interesting to find out, it was really the only thing they couldn’t ever share with each other. And it was bound to be interesting!

Makoto’s glow went down a few watts. But would he really want to feel how Haru felt – when they were having sex? The thought was extremely depressing. If Makoto could feel what Haru felt, he would probably find that the sensations he experienced with Makoto were – unpleasant. Maybe, maybe even disgusting and unwanted, something with which he had to put up for Makoto’s sake.

They’d been together for nearly three years now and had been having sex for two. With everything else, they were perfectly aligned and in sync. But sex…Haru hadn’t seemed to warm up to it. And if he hadn’t started to enjoy being intimate with Makoto by now…would he…would he ever?

Inside Makoto’s bag, his phone rang, yanking him out of another depressing guessing game he wasn’t ever brave enough to win. Clumsily, he fumbled through his bag for his phone, but by the time he retrieved it, the person had hung up. Checking his call log, Makoto was stunned to see some unknown number had called him…12 times! While he gaped at the screen, the phone began to ring again and Makoto answered it, suddenly feeling how empty the locker room was.

“Hello?” he said nervously.

“Makoto, finally!” a familiar, deep voice sighed in shocking relief.

“Sousuke!” Makoto peeped in surprise. He hadn’t seen Sousuke in a few days and calling his phone,
let alone calling his phone 12 times in a row from an unknown number, was definitely not usual Sousuke behavior. Usually Makoto was excited if Sousuke texted back an ‘ok’.

Makoto’s instincts told him something was very, very wrong. To compound his fear, Sousuke wasn’t saying anything.

“Are you alright, Sousuke?” Makoto finally asked.

Makoto felt panic creeping up his spine.

Something was very, very wrong.

“Sousuke, whatever it is, I want to help. Just tell me, are you alright?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke said flatly, though Makoto could hear how hard Sousuke was struggling to make himself sound so flat.

“Where are you?” Makoto asked.

“At my studio,” Sousuke mumbled, “Can we meet up? I really need to talk to someone and I don’t think I could trust anyone else with this.”

“Yeah of course, of course! Where do you want to meet?”

Makoto arrived at the bar Sousuke suggested first and while he waited, he looked around nervously. It was just the sort of place Sousuke would pick, grungy and full of shifty characters. Had Makoto not been so worried about whatever the hell was going on with Sousuke, he would have probably been freaking out about getting stabbed. Still slightly pudgy from when his appendix was taken out and looking so clean cut, Makoto definitely did not belong here. Luckily, Sousuke didn’t make him wait too long.

Seeing him walk through the door towards Makoto’s booth, Makoto breathed a sigh of relief. He didn’t look physically hurt. He was walking and he couldn’t find any other abnormality. But then Sousuke looked up and the panic returned. Dark circles rimmed Sousuke’s bloodshot eyes and even though it was the height of summer, Sousuke looked pale. Like he was sick.
Or on drugs.

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no.

What little Sousuke had told Makoto about his dark times had planted a fear in the back of Makoto’s mind that Sousuke, as emotional and down as he was, might one day start down a slippery slope that could lead to death by overdose at a tragically early age. Seeing him like this seemed to confirm that fear and Makoto’s instinct was to wrap him in a hug and take him somewhere safe and warm where he could take care of him. But Sousuke would never, ever let that happen.

“Thanks for meeting me,” Sousuke said hoarsely, “I didn’t really know who else to call.”

“What’s going on Sousuke?”

Sousuke frowned but didn’t say anything. He looked away, as though looking at Makoto was too much for him.

Was it shame? Was it anger?

Makoto got up from his seat and grabbed Sousuke around his biceps, shaking him without realizing it.

“Sousuke, please!”

“Rin and I got into a fight,” Sousuke explained, still unable to look Makoto in the eyes, “and I’m sure I’ve ruined everything.”

“A fight?” Makoto asked, still clutching his arms. Sousuke nodded down to the ground, because he wouldn’t look Makoto in the eyes.

“Yeah. I…I would really like to ask you…something.” Sousuke said, “but it’s super personal.”

“What is it?”

“It’s…um…it’s about….well….sex.”

Instantly Makoto’s whole body flushed.
“Sex?” he whispered.

Sousuke’s own cheeks turned bright red as he nodded again. He still wouldn’t meet Makoto’s eyes.

“I just really need to ask someone and, um, you and I are kind of…well…both with…guys and I thought maybe you could help me because you and Haru…do…you know…”

Sousuke’s obvious unease allowed Makoto to relax somewhat. He was lucid and he had obviously been thinking hard about this. Whatever he’d been doing, it didn’t seem likely that drugs were involved. People on drugs wouldn’t be so coherent or together, right? Well that was good, that was something…

But…

He’d never talked with anyone about sex before – not even really Haru beyond the most basic, practical things and even then, any discussion – no matter how brief – inevitably left them both extremely embarrassed. And to think of talking about it with someone else, someone who wasn’t even Haru!? That felt like betrayal of some kind because sex was really…private.

But…

Sousuke looked up at Makoto and his eyes were full of desperation and Makoto was frightened. He hadn’t ever looked this bad, not even when Makoto had run into him at the train station and brought him home. He’d been feral back then, and in need of a friend. But now, he looked worse. Like all the light had gone out of him. Was this how Sousuke had been before, when he was travelling the world, trapped in insolation? Why, when Sousuke had first come to stay with him and Haru, he actually hadn’t been so bad. Comparatively.

Well if opening up about something so private would help Sousuke – who Makoto admired greatly – well he couldn’t just let Sousuke suffer.

“I’ll tell you anything you want, only if you promise that this stays between us,” Makoto said, “I don’t even want you talking about this with Rin.”

Sousuke scoffed bitterly.

“As if I would ever want to get Rin’s imagination going with what Haru liked to do in bed. No, I’ll never tell a soul anything.”
Momentarily stunned by the force of emotion with which Sousuke had uttered those words, Makoto sat down in the booth again. Jealousy. About Haru…and Rin…

About the special something they shared that even now, Makoto wished he could be apart of. For Haru.

While Sousuke took his seat, a dread that was completely foreign settled into his heart. Sousuke felt it too, in a different way and for a different reason, but when it came down to it, Sousuke felt it too.

Rin and Haru were going to be together again and there was something between them. Not that Makoto was worried that Haru would ever actually do anything with Rin or that he had any sort of romantic feelings for Rin, but Rin was coming and Haru would share things with Rin that he couldn’t share with Makoto. Makoto hated feeling jealous and he’d only ever felt jealous of Rin because of that thing they shared. He’d been avoiding thinking about it, but hearing Sousuke voice the old jealousy again forced Makoto to accept that Rin was coming.

“I was wondering,” Sousuke interrupted Makoto’s thoughts, “what you do if Haru tries to be the one on top? How do you put him off?”

Makoto gave Sousuke a confused look.

“What do you mean?” Makoto asked.

“Like, does he ever want you to be the receiving end when you two have sex and what do you do to put him off?”

Makoto smiled, still not quite understanding the question.

“Well, uh, usually Haru wants to be the one doing that to me, so I don’t put him off?” Makoto answered honestly.

Makoto may as well have told Sousuke that Haru actually was an alien, disguised as a human for the purpose of espionage.
“Wait, you let him be the top?” Sousuke asked in disbelief.

Makoto nodded, feeling his ears turn pink. Maybe talking about this with Sousuke wasn’t the best idea. But Makoto had committed, and from Sousuke’s reaction, what Makoto had to say was probably pretty important for Sousuke to hear.

“Yeah, well, for a long time I didn’t think Haru was interested in sex, so instead of forcing him into something, I let him take the lead for all the physical stuff we’ve ever done together. Like I wanted to kiss him so bad, for so long, but I waited until he kissed me first before I dared to kiss him back. I didn’t want to scare him away because, if Haru didn’t want a physical relationship with me, I didn’t want to make him feel like he had to have one.

“So I let Haru take the lead with sex because he was so uncomfortable with such close contact, even with me. I was the receiving end, probably for the whole first year we were having sex because that’s what Haru felt comfortable with. Then one day, he asked if we could switch positions and since then, we take turns.”

Makoto smiled at the memory of the first time Haru had let him be on top and the anxieties that had been plaguing him all day melted away. They’d been kissing on their bed, Makoto laying on top of Haru, one of his hands twined all through Haru’s beautiful, silky hair, the other cupping Haru’s neck. Haru’s breath came ragged in Makoto’s ear as Makoto kissed the other side of Haru’s soft neck. Rain had been beating against the window of their old apartment, making the world outside gloomier than usual. Beneath him, Haru glowed in the faint light coming in from the window and he was utterly, utterly beautiful.

Something had happened that day – Makoto couldn’t remember what – but he’d been upset about something with school and he’d come home, to find Haru waiting for him, cooking a green curry because he knew it was Makoto’s favorite. Seeing his smile after an upsetting day was too much for Makoto so he walked over and kissed his beloved more forcefully than he ever had before. Haru turned the heat off of the curry and wrapped his arms around Makoto, letting Makoto carry him over to their bed, pressing his leg in between Makoto’s so Makoto could use him for friction. Haru’s hands explored the ridges and crevices of Makoto’s back.

“Makoto,” Haru had whispered. Instantly, Makoto stopped, fearing he’d been too aggressive and that Haru didn’t want to go any further tonight. He propped himself up and looked down at Haru, who was blushing and not meeting Makoto’s eyes.

Well, it had been fun while it lasted. He really, really wanted some release, but he would just have to be happy doing it alone in the bathroom. It wouldn’t have been the first time.
“It’s fine, I’ll stop,” Makoto sighed, beginning to move off of Haru. But then, Haru grabbed him, preventing him from leaving. Surprised, Makoto looked down and saw those big, beautiful blue eyes looking up at him with an expression Makoto couldn’t recognize.

“Don’t stop,” Haru said quietly, “No I just wanted to ask….if you wanted to be inside me tonight.”

Makoto stared down at Haru, not quite believing what he was hearing. Of course he’d been dying to switch positions for ages, but he hadn’t wanted to spook Haru out of sex. But Haru wanted it too!? “Yeah, we could do it that way if you want,” Makoto said excitedly, “Do you want to lay on your stomach, like when you do it?”

Haru shook his head.

“Can we be like this? So I can look at you?”

Every groan, every gasp, every tiny movement Haru made that night was imprinted in Makoto’s memory, along with the blindingly wonderful sensation when he first found himself completely inside his dearly loved Haru-chan. Makoto loved to think about that night, because he took that night as concrete proof that Haru really did love Makoto and that he wanted a physical relationship with him.

And sometimes, Makoto really needed that reminder.

“But you’re bigger than him,” Sousuke insisted, obviously still confused, “so you should be on top, right?”

Makoto shrugged, still basking in the glow of memory.

“It shouldn’t matter whose bigger – for any couple, not just gay couples. It’s about how much trust you have in the other person to take care of you and not hurt you. At least that’s what it is like in my experience. Haru was really freaked out by the idea of sex, so I waited until he was comfortable enough to do things with me that he wouldn’t trust anyone else with. For us, sex is fun and feels amazing, but it is mostly just a way for us to show each other how much we love and trust each other. Besides, it feels really, really good when Haru is on top and even sex outside of relationships is supposed to make you feel good, right?”

Sousuke stood up abruptly.
“I have to go,” he announced.

“Are you going home?” Makoto asked in surprise as he too stood up, “I’ll go with you!”

Makoto suddenly felt a very strong desire to be with Haru.

“No,” Sousuke told him, “I need to take a walk. I’ll be home later tonight.”

Before Makoto even had a chance to say goodbye, Sousuke was out the door.

All Sousuke was aware of was the slap of his feet against the cement. He was walking along a familiar road, because he didn’t want to get lost, but his thoughts prevented him from really taking in his surroundings.

Was Makoto right? Was that what it came down to?

No, it couldn’t be. Sousuke just really didn’t want anything up his ass.

But then, Sousuke had to ask himself ‘Why not?’

He didn’t want anything up his ass because it was a violation and it would make him weak.

Makoto was fine with it; he said it felt good. Makoto wasn’t weak, he was a good, caring, sweet person and loving someone as difficult as Haru as intensely as he did took a type of strength Sousuke admired.

So why did the idea send Sousuke into a panic? Didn’t he trust Rin, like Haru and Makoto trusted each other?

Sousuke sighed as he turned back towards home, because he could feel the truth in the bottom of his heart.

He didn’t.

He didn’t trust anyone enough for that, not Rin, not anyone.

Because for Sousuke, submitting to someone else meant he’d have to completely lower his defenses, defenses he’d had to build up for the sake of survival while he was on his own. He just wasn’t ready to share himself so completely and really, would he ever be able to?
It wasn’t that he didn’t love Rin. He loved Rin more than he could ever possibly love anyone and he wanted Rin to be happy.

But Sousuke couldn’t submit to someone so fully. Not yet anyway.

Surely, Rin would understand if he explained. He’d of course apologize because he’d freaked out so bad. He would have to assure Rin that Sousuke wanted him just as he was – being a dude and everything – because Sousuke was so, so madly in love with the beautiful disaster that was his Rin. Penis and all. But his instincts for survival were strong and he needed time to get comfortable with Rin, build that trust Makoto talked about, before he could even begin to think about it.

Giving himself to Rin would be the biggest exercise in trust for Sousuke and he just couldn’t do it yet.

He had to make Rin understand that.

At home, Sousuke took a nice, long shower, to wash away the dirt and grime of the studio – where he’d been living for the past few days. Then, he went down to a noodle shop nearby and ate the first, full meal he’d had in days. He only ordered one bowl, though his stomach demanded three. From experience he knew that eating too much after barely eating for a few days was never a good idea. He’d just have to get more food later…after he talked to Rin. This would be a hard conversation.

Finally feeling a bit better, Sousuke went back to his room and found his phone, still sitting on the bedside table. Flipping it open, he was shocked to find he had 53 missed calls – all from Rin.

53 calls.

This wasn’t a good sign.

Panicking, Sousuke got out his laptop and opened it. There were 29 new messages on Skype, all from Rin and written while Sousuke was offline. The majority of them were simply ‘Where R You?’ but there were two that were extremely worrying:
Where the hell are you, Sou!? Please tell me you are still in Tokyo

Why won’t you answer anything? Sou, please, please, please just answer me, I’m begging you!

The last one had been written about twenty minutes before, while Sousuke was eating his noodles.

As Sousuke wondered what he should do next, the little circle that signaled Rin’s status became green and two seconds after logging on, a new message appeared from Sharknado:

Sou! You there?

Relieved, Sousuke quickly typed back ‘yeah’. He began typing out an apology, but before Sousuke could get further than ‘I’m so sorry…’, the video chat screen came on. Sousuke accepted the call invitation and moments later, he was once more looking at Rin.

And seeing Rin, Sousuke wished he had stayed far, far away…

Rin looked terrible. He’d not been sleeping, Sousuke could plainly see that, and his hair looked unwashed. That meant he probably hadn’t been swimming since their fight either. Worst of all, the moment their eyes locked, Sousuke only had a split second to look at Rin before Rin dissolved into hysterics.

Truthfully, Sousuke hated to see Rin cry. Ever since Rin’s father died and Rin had sobbed uncontrollably to let out the pain that was tearing him apart inside in the only way he knew how, Sousuke had done whatever he could to stop Rin from crying. Or see him in any kind of pain at all.

And Rin…he was in pain.

Because of Sousuke.

Frozen in horror, Sousuke watched, not knowing what to say or how to comfort Rin. Just like after that 100 free during their second year of high school, when Sousuke had listened to Rin freak out
about quitting swimming from the shadows, his voice useless to help the person he loved most in the
world, even back then.

Sousuke had never been the cause of Rin’s pain before.

What kind of monster was he, to hurt Rin like this!?

Sousuke was too horrified to notice Rin had gotten enough control at least to say a few words in
between sobs. Rin spoke for probably a full minute before Sousuke began to comprehend that words
were coming out of Rin’s mouth and what those words meant, was not good.

“…that’s why we shouldn’t talk until you come to Australia.”

The impact of those words knocked the wind right out of Sousuke.

Not talk…

Until Sousuke came to Australia.

That was a whole month away still.

Rin didn’t want him.

Rin didn’t want him. Again.

“You have your tickets and you have that e-mail I sent you, about what my normal schedule looks
like right?” Rin asked, his voice sniffly from crying. He was trying to wipe away his tears.

Sousuke nodded.

“So we shouldn’t talk until you come. I’ll see you when you come.”
Sousuke looked up to catch one last glimpse of Rin before Rin disconnected the call.

Then he was gone…

For ten minutes, Sousuke sat, staring at the screen.

Rin didn’t want him again, because Sousuke had been such a terrific ass. If only he knew what Rin had said! But Sousuke really didn’t need to know Rin’s explanation because he knew what this was about, he’d known it was coming. His punishment.

Rin didn’t want him. He wanted to punish him for leaving.

“I’m sorry,” he told the empty screen before he broke down and fled from the room because his room, where Rin was supposed to live with him, was unbearable to be in while his heart shattered into a million pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Lovely Readers!!!!! It has been ages since my last update and it will probably be quite a while until my next one :( I've got a lot going on at the moment, including looking for a new job since my contract is over at the end of July and I really need to focus on other things for a while. But don't worry, I will still update!!!! Can't just leave these boys depressed!!!!!

Follow me on tumblr!!!: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

As always, thanks sooo sooo much for reading :)
Looking for Sousuke

Chapter Summary

Sousuke's friends rally to help him after the fight with Rin. Enter Gou!!!!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was sweltering hot and Kisumi was bored. Combined, these two factors made him about as grumpy as it was possible for him to be. Tomo would be coming over soon and Tomo would rescue Kisumi from this infernal heat. Maybe they’d go swimming – without the swimmers, of course, so it would actually be fun for them.

God, where was Tomo! He needed to get here now!

Rolling over on his bed, Kisumi licked his parched lips. He really wanted a popsicle but for the first time since they’d moved into the apartment, there were no popsicles in the house. And why the hell were there no popsicles in the house? Haru and Makoto loved popsicles; they were always splitting them. There should be popsicles! Kisumi had already scoured the freezer to no avail. And now he was angry at Makoto and Haru for not having popsicles for the one time he actually really wanted one!

Annoyed with the world, Kisumi rolled over on his side, then rolled over onto his other side. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and he wished he wasn’t wearing his boxers too. His bed was so hot, he really should get off it. Maybe he should go take a shower….a really really cold one.

A light tap on his door interrupted his internal whining. Tomo! But he wanted Tomo to know just how miserable he was so he would know he had to save poor Kisumi from this hell. Instead of asking Tomo to come in nicely, Kisumi growled out noises that were supposed to get across the same idea – but angrier. The door opened slightly.

“Sorry to intrude, Kisumi,” Makoto’s voice broke the silence of the room, “I thought you might be home.”

Not Tomo.
Kisumi was severely disappointed, but his disappointment only lasted a second because seeing Makoto, who was hovering nervously in the doorway, always made him happy. And how could it not? Makoto was the sweetest, kindest person Kisumi had ever known and his already high standing with his baby brother had skyrocketed even further when Hayato had found out that the legendary Coach Tachibana was Kisumi’s roommate. He couldn’t wait until Hayato came to visit later in the year because hanging out with Makoto would make Hayato so happy! The thought made Kisumi a little less grouchy. Because it was Makoto, he decided not to be a royal ass.

To give Makoto his full attention, Kisumi rolled over to face Makoto.

“I’m home,” Kisumi confirmed, “everything alright, Makoto?”

For a second Makoto continued to linger indecisively at the door. This was not very Makoto like behavior and Kisumi felt a pinprick of worry. When Makoto finally decided to come in and shut the door, Kisumi sat up and pulled on his T-Shirt. Makoto joined him on his bed.

“Kisumi,” Makoto said quietly, “I’m worried about Sousuke.”

Kisumi suppressed a groan and rolled back onto his back. Fucking Sousuke. When did he become everyone’s favorite? Makoto and Haru didn’t count because those two barely registered other people existed outside their perfect relationship most of the time. Rin liked Sousuke the most, obviously. And now Yasutomo and Sousuke were going to become best friends and Kisumi would be invited along with them, if he were lucky.

“Sousuke can take care of himself,” Kisumi huffed without asking any further questions. It was partially true, Sousuke was good at taking care of himself. Except when he wasn’t.

“I haven’t seen him in a week and a half,” Makoto went on, ignoring Kisumi’s sudden mood change, “and the last time I did, we had a really weird conversation that made me think things weren’t going well with Rin. I just have a really bad feeling about him and he won’t answer his phone, I’ve tried calling him all week and nothing.”

Now that Makoto was mentioning it, Kisumi couldn’t really remember the last time he’d seen Sousuke. As much as Kisumi was enjoying being grumpy at the whole world, especially the whole world that seemed to revolve around Sousuke, he couldn’t deny that a prolonged, unexplained absence was not a good sign.
While Kisumi the Good Friend took over the wheel from Kisumi the Grumpy Dick, a memory from back when Sousuke had first run away popped into Kisumi’s head. It was the night he’d come to Kisumi’s house and Kisumi had shown him the guest room his mom prepared for Sousuke. They’d just eaten dinner and Kisumi was showing Sousuke where he could find extra blankets or pillows if he needed them. Kisumi turned around and was horrified to see the look on Sousuke’s face, staring at him without seeing him. Well it hadn’t been so much the look, because he was expressionless, but rather his eyes.

There had been absolutely no life in them.

Kisumi had stepped aside and watched as Sousuke walked to the futon and collapsed onto the ground, like the whole weight of the world was bearing down on him and Kisumi was terrified. The next morning, those eyes took on the aspect of a wild, wounded beast, but for that first night….Sousuke had really been dead inside. For years after, when it was about time for the monthly postcard to arrive, Kisumi couldn’t help thinking of Sousuke’s eyes that night and hoping that wherever he was, Sousuke’s eyes didn’t look like that. Anything was preferable to that.

Maybe Sousuke had become better friends with Yasutomo and that was annoying as hell, but Kisumi didn’t ever want to see Sousuke’s eyes so devoid of life again. And what Makoto was saying sounded like unsettlingly familiar behavior for Sousuke. The pinprick of worry grew to the first stage of panic as Kisumi considered the possibility that somewhere, for some bad reason, Sousuke was looking out at the world with dead eyes again.

“Have you looked in his room, to see if he’s packed a bag or anything?” Kisumi asked, trying to suppress the unwelcome memories of Sousuke at his worst.

Makoto said he hadn’t. “It feels weird going into his room,” he explained, “especially if he’s not here. I’ve only been in there like three times before. Going in there would feel like we were violating something.”

“I know what you mean, Makoto,” Kisumi agreed, “but if he’s in trouble, we need to take a look.”

Unlike Makoto, Kisumi hadn’t ever been in Sousuke’s room and what he found was the furthest thing from the stark, bare, sterile room he’d envisioned.

The dark, rich colors, the dramatic, pensive decorative touches that adorned every single surface… Kisumi had never been in a room that was so completely a work of art. Everything, absolutely everything had been thought about and was well cared for. This wasn’t just a room – it was the
museum of Sousuke and it was very much a private collection. Kisumi’s own, very bare and boring room paled in comparison.

“I really don’t like being in here,” Makoto repeated from the doorway, watching as Kisumi began his exploration of this unknown place. Kisumi partly agreed, this place felt sacred and so thoroughly private, but it was pretty exciting seeing inside. Makoto had been inside a few times, when Mamakoto just had to check on suffering Sousuke, but he’d been the only one allowed in besides Rin. It had kind of amused Kisumi to see the extreme lengths Sousuke had gone through to keep people out of his room. For example, he’d jerry rigged a massive dolly when he’d moved his furniture in so he could do it all himself, without anyone’s help and without anyone seeing the final outcome. How he managed the stairs, Kisumi had never figured out but if anyone was capable of some mysterious feat of ingenuity and strength, it was definitely Sousuke.

Kisumi stepped further in, drinking in the details. Sousuke was a private person to the extreme – often to his detriment. There were a lot of secrets he kept, inconsequential and meaningless secrets, but Sousuke needed things just for himself. He’d always been like, even when they were kids, and Kisumi knew that had caused Sousuke a lot of problems before – especially with Rin. Seeing his room was like peeking into Sousuke’s head. Kisumi hadn’t expected to find it so beautiful. He didn’t know Sousuke was at all interested in art, but obviously he was. Seeing his room allowed Kisumi to understand Sousuke a bit better, but it made him sad to see such beauty so carefully hidden from the world.

“His cell phone’s here,” Makoto announced unhappily from the desk. Kisumi turned to find Makoto, standing before the desk, staring down at the dead cell phone. Makoto sighed and put the phone back on the desk. He was about to turn away, but something caught his eye at the desk and he picked up a piece of paper, heavy with characters. Makoto gasped and his expression grew even more worried.

“What is it?” Kisumi asked curiously as he went over to join Makoto. He reached out to take the paper out of Makoto’s hand, but Makoto turned away from Kisumi so that Kisumi couldn’t take it.

Now Kisumi had to know what that piece of paper said.

“Come on Makoto,” he whined, trying to worm his arm around Makoto to grab it.

From being the elder brother of a pair of twins quite younger than himself, Makoto was an expert at keeping contraband items out of people’s grasps. Plus his arms were just as long as Kisumi’s so Kisumi’s usual advantages were rendered moot. It was usually awesome living with so many guys who were his size or taller, but not in this case. Kisumi grunted with frustration as his attempt to see the paper was again thwarted.
“Don’t read it,” Makoto pleaded, “It’s to Rin and it’s not good.”

Kisumi froze.

“What do you mean it’s not good? Aren’t those two supposed to be madly in love or something?”

Makoto folded the piece of paper neatly and put it in his shirt pocket, then turned to look at Kisumi with a perfectly miserable expression.

“That’s what I thought too. But there was that weird conversation Sousuke and I had about sex and even in the first line of this letter, it’s clear that something really bad happened between them. Maybe it has to do with sex.”

“He asked you about sex?” Kisumi asked in disbelief. That was the most un-Sousuke like thing Kisumi had ever heard. Sousuke did not talk about sex with people. That was way, way too personal. “What did you guys talk about?”

Makoto’s face flushed red with embarrassment. Kisumi asked him again, growing impatient.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Makoto peeped, his face scarlet with mortification.

“Come ON!” Kisumi snapped, “I know what sex is!”

Makoto looked away and bit his lip nervously. Kisumi could tell he was upsetting Makoto and he suddenly wished he hadn’t snapped. The last thing he’d ever want to do was upset Makoto.

“You still won’t understand,” Makoto whispered, not daring to look at Kisumi, “because you don’t have sex with guys.”

Kisumi smiled at the tint of Makoto’s ears, much more red than usual. Obviously if Sousuke wanted to talk about sex, he would want to talk about sex between two dudes because he was a big old homosexual.

“Of course he would talk about sex between guys if he was going to talk about sex,” Kisumi said as nicely as he could manage, so Makoto would feel a bit more at ease, “But I get the general mechanics of how it works, even if I’ve never tried. Just give me the general idea then. Maybe it will make things clearer.”
For a full minute, Makoto debated on what he should say. Kisumi didn’t rush him because talking about sex was just as un-Makoto like as it was un-Sousuke like. For different reasons of course, because Makoto would get way too embarrassed about anything like that and he didn’t talk about Haru with anyone, but still.

“Well it was about positions,” Makoto finally mumbled out an answer, “and he wanted my advice about it.”

Kisumi smirked. He didn’t have to ask Makoto anymore to fill in the gaps. Fighting over positions was so something Rin and Sousuke would do. He could just picture the two of them, arguing about who would be on top and who would be on bottom. Sousuke was bigger and he had issues with being gay – Kisumi could see him not wanting to be on the bottom, But in their dynamic, he was always following Rin and Rin loved being followed. Rin was adventurous and got bored really easily, Kisumi could imagine him wanting to take the lead and do some crazy shit with Sousuke. Sex wise. And he could equally see Sousuke not being okay with that, even though he’d slept with so many people.

“Okay, thanks. I think I can figure out the rest on my own” Kisumi said, much to Makoto’s visible relief. Kisumi smiled. Any more questions would probably hit too close to home about Makoto’s own sexual life and Kisumi was not prepared to get tangled up in anything between Haru and Makoto. He liked them both immensely, but he’d learned long ago that third parties were not welcome in their dynamic.

“Does the letter talk about the fight?” Kisumi asked. Makoto shook his head.

“I only read the first few lines, but I don’t want to read farther to find out. What I read was really, really angry and hurt and it seemed to be more than just what him and I talked about. I don’t think any of us should read anymore, that would be going too far.”

Kisumi frowned but he didn’t protest. A lump was developing in the back of his throat.

Angry and hurt. Not about sex.

Something else really bad must have happened between them.

Those two fought. They always had and they always would. Kisumi had patched things up between them on more than one occasion. But they were beyond the point of a referee and they were both
such hot headed idiots when they got upset. With things being so new with them after such a long
time of not seeing each other, could they handle a fight like they used to be able to?

Flashes of old memories, from the time when Sousuke came to stay at Kisumi’s house before
disappearing, made the lump in Kisumi’s throat grow even larger and he felt a panic settle inside his
chest. If they couldn’t weather a fight, Sousuke would be even worse than he’d been back then.

And Sousuke had been doing so well! He’d been smiling and laughing and so, so, so happy! Even
before he’d been reunited with Rin, he’d been doing so much better! As much of a jerk as he could
be sometimes, it was really wonderful to see Sousuke – who always seemed to have such a hard time
of everything – doing so well for once. And now he had vanished and all he’d left behind was this
letter that hinted of some catastrophe with Rin!?

No, not good at all!

“What are you guys doing?”

Kisumi wheeled around to find Yasutomo standing in the doorway, peering in curiously at
Sousuke’s room.

“We wanted to check on him,” Makoto explained hurriedly, like he was a kid who’d been caught
doing something naughty, “neither of us have seen him for a few days and we were getting worried.”

Tomo took a few steps in and looked around. Kisumi’s jaw clenched tighter because clearly,
Sousuke’s room was having the same effect on Tomo as it had for Kisumi.

“Did you find anything out?” he asked distractedly as he walked over to the bookshelf and began
looking over the titles.

Kisumi looked to Makoto and mentally begged him not to say anything about Rin. Tomo didn’t need
to go get his hopes up that Rin was not going to be in the picture for long. Those hopes would only
be crushed because Rin held Sousuke’s heart – just as he always had – and if whatever was going on
meant that Rin wasn’t going to be in the picture….

Well Kisumi knew Sousuke well enough that such a loss wasn’t going to be recovered from for a
very, very long time. Based on his ‘healing’ methods from the break with his family, a break from
Rin was going to be a very ugly, painful thing to witness. And Kisumi had a horrible feeling that
Sousuke – fragile, sensitive Sousuke who tried so hard to act like he never felt a thing and was so in
love with Rin – well Sousuke may not be able to survive such a loss.

“It seems Rin and Sousuke are in a pretty terrible fight. It looks like Sousuke’s run away.” Makoto explained sadly.

Cursing to himself, Kisumi wheeled around, to make sure Tomo took the news the right way. He looked genuinely upset and Kisumi was really grateful to find no hint of secret hope.

“Oh no!” Tomo exclaimed, “That’s no good! Isn’t he supposed to be going to Australia in a few weeks to see Rin and bring him back?”

“That was the plan,” Makoto confirmed, completely oblivious about the feelings Tomo had had – and maybe still had – for Sousuke, “but I don’t know if anything’s changed. Guys, let’s get out of here, it doesn’t feel right being in here.”

Kisumi agreed and followed Makoto out. Tomo lingered in the room longer than Kisumi liked, but he too followed Makoto out of the room and closed the door behind him. Silently, they gathered around the kotatsu. They had only been sitting there for a second before Makoto jumped up and went to the kitchen sink, where he proceeded to fill up a glass of water. Kisumi watched curiously as Makoto crossed back over to Sousuke’s room and disappeared inside. A minute later, Makoto reemerged, his glass empty.

“I don’t want him coming home to a room full of dead plants,” Makoto explained as he sat back down, “they were looking really dry.”

Kisumi nodded gratefully at Makoto. Makoto really was an angel.

“So how are we going to find him?” Tomo asked, much to Kisumi’s dismay.

“I’m not sure,” Makoto said, “I guess we could try finding the shipyard he works for. I don’t know the name of it, but how many places could there be?”

Tomo was wagging his head in agreement. *Don’t get your hopes up*, Kisumi warned Tomo silently in his head, *he loves Rin.*
Out loud, his tone to Tomo was much harsher.

“Before going on some wild goose chase,” Kisumi spat out angrily, “What we need to do is talk to Rin, see what he says. Has Haru talked to him recently?”

Makoto frowned deeply, his sudden sadness instantaneously dampening Kisumi’s already low spirits.

“I don’t think so,” he sighed heavily, “Haru started that design internship last week and he barely has any time to be at home, let alone call people. He’s so busy with swimming and the internship, I don’t know what he’s going to do when his classes start again. I don’t know how much I’ll be able to see him until after the internship is over.”

Tomo and Kisumi exchanged a surprised and very concerned look. The sudden appearance of Sad Makoto wasn’t a welcome sight and the unexpected discussion of anything related to Haru was even worse. Not for the first time, Kisumi wondered about Haru and Makoto. Stupid as the analogy was, Kisumi thought that their relationship was like a deep pond. On the surface it was calm and smooth and peaceful, but there was a lot going on that he couldn’t see, that no one was ever invited to see. Makoto must be pretty upset if he was talking so openly about Haru.

Makoto should not ever be unhappy.

“Of course you’ll see Haru!” Kisumi blurted out, making both Tomo and Makoto jump with the unintended volume of his voice, “Do you honestly think Haru is going to let you out of his sight for too long?”

Makoto blinked a few times and looked at Kisumi as though he only just realized Kisumi was there. His whole face then flushed adorably and he gave Kisumi a sheepish little smile.

“No sorry, you are right. I’m just worrying over nothing! I shouldn’t have said anything,” Makoto said dismissively. Kisumi felt that he was probably embarrassed for having voiced his thoughts aloud and that made Kisumi want to run over and hug Makoto tightly. But knowing Kisumi’s luck, Haru would appear just at that moment and Kisumi would never be free of accusatory stares and his icy attitude. It hadn’t thawed too much since middle school, no matter what Kisumi tried, and Kisumi definitely didn’t want to make it worse.

“Well you are friends with Rin too,” Tomo broke in, interrupting Kisumi’s Makoto appreciation
moment, “can’t you call him too?”

Makoto’s whole face lit up with the sudden realization that Tomo was 100% right.

“I hadn’t even thought of that! I could call Gou too!” he said excitedly as he jumped up and ran to his room, “Maybe she’s heard something from Sousuke too, if Rin hasn’t!”

“You’re Gou?” Tomo asked.

“Rin’s little sister,” Kisumi explained with a bit of smug satisfaction, “I knew her in elementary school and she went to the same high school as Haru and Makoto. I think she went to middle school the same place as Sousuke too.”

“Oh wow!” Tomo said, his whole face lighting up for a moment, “I don’t talk to anyone from high school even, but it’s really cool that you all stayed friends.”

Kisumi couldn’t help but smile at Tomo. When Tomo lit up like that, he just had that effect on Kisumi.

A few minutes later, Kisumi and Tomo were sitting slightly behind Makoto, flanking him closely so they could see the computer screen. Makoto clicked on the little green button next to the name Sharknado – Sharknado, really? – and they all anxiously waited.

Rin did not pick up.

“Hmm,” Makoto said thoughtfully, “Guess he’s not there. But look! Gou is online! Let’s call her! I haven’t talked to her in a super long time!”

Makoto clicked the little green phone icon and a few seconds later, a lovely, lady voice – the first really that Kisumi had heard in a long time – came out of the computer’s speakers. God, girls sounded so pretty!

“Makoto!!! Hi!!! You haven’t called me in months and months and months! Like almost a year!!”

Kisumi had not seen Gou since elementary school and it was a bit jarring to see the grown-up version. It was insane how much she looked like Rin. But a really cute, female version of Rin.
“Hi Gou!” Makoto greeted, “Yeah, I’m sorry it’s been a really long time but it’s nice to see you!”

Gou’s eyes suddenly grew very wide as she found Kisumi.

“Oh my God, is that Kisumi!?” she exclaimed, “Oh my God! You’re with Makoto in Tokyo!? Do you live there?”

Not knowing what else to do, Kisumi waved awkwardly

“He lives with us Gou,” Makoto laughed.

Gou settled back against the couch she was sitting on and smiled widely. A second later, she grabbed a wine glass from off screen and took a sip of red wine.

Okay, weird. Little Gou was drinking wine.

“And who is that?” she asked, tipping her wine glass at Yasutomo.

“He’s my friend, Yasutomo” Kisumi broke in before Makoto could answer. Tomo was his friend and he didn’t want Gou associating him with Makoto at all.

“Nice to meet you, Yasutomo,” Gou said pleasantly.

“Nice to meet you too,” Tomo answered politely.

“Ah I wish Chigusa was here! She will be so sad to miss all you handsome boys!” Gou slurred happily.

Oh God. Little Gou was drunk.

Kisumi blushed hard. Despite her inebriation, he was embarrassingly flattered. He hadn’t been called handsome in a long time and yeah, it was nice to hear. Even if it was coming from Rin’s little sister. Ugh, who’d grown up to be really really cute.

“Hey Gou, we were wondering if you’ve talked to your brother lately?” Makoto continued, “We’re trying to find Sousuke.”

Gou snorted and the wine glass tipped precariously in her hand.
“Yeah, aren’t we all.”

Oh no. She didn’t know about Sousuke being back. That meant she didn’t know about Sousuke and Rin.

“Makoto…” Kisumi said, trying to warn him.

“Yeah, but him and your brother got into a really big fight and now we can’t find Sousuke,” Makoto continued, oblivious to Gou’s ignorance, “they only have been together for a month and with Sousuke going to Australia next week to bring him back to Japan, things are pretty tense. Sousuke disappeared and we haven’t seen him for more than a week and we can’t get a hold of Rin. We think they got in a big fight and we are worried! We would really like to find Sousuke and help through whatever issues they have so they can have a really nice time together and come back home happy!”

Ah Makoto…poor Makoto. He was going to feel terrible about this, once he realized what he’d done.

As predicted, Gou’s mouth dropped open immediately.

“Wait, wait, wait” she sputtered, “hold on. Sousuke is in Japan?”

“Yeah, he lives with us too.” Makoto confirmed though Kisumi could hear his confusion. He still didn’t get it.

“Sousuke is BACK!? Like really!?"

Finally, the truth began to dawn on Makoto.

“Yeah, he’s back. Did Rin not tell you?” he asked warily.

“No he did not!” she cried, the wine glass tipping to the other side but, miraculously, none spilled, “Sousuke’s back and he and my brother are TOGETHER TOGETHER!? Life for real they are
finally a real couple!?” Gou’s voice was becoming very high pitched with excitement.

“Oh no.” Makoto exclaimed, clapping his hands on his cheeks, “Oh no, oh no, oh no! He didn’t tell you, did he!?”

“Of course he didn’t tell me!” Gou roared, suddenly very angry, “He never tells me anything! I have to go, Makoto. I have to call him right this second!”

Before Makoto could protest, Gou had disconnected the line. For two and a half seconds, they were completely silent. Then, Makoto spun around and grabbed Kisumi’s shoulders, shaking him hard.

“Oh MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD!!!!” he yelled, “OH MY GOD I DIDN’T MEAN TO OUT THEM TO GOU!!!!!! I THOUGHT HE WOULD HAVE TOLD HER BY NOW!!!!!”

Just at that moment, the front door opened and in walked Haru. As predicted, Haru took one look at Makoto shaking Kisumi’s shoulders and he gave Kisumi a dirty scowl.

Makoto didn’t notice, of course. One look at Haru and he flew towards Haru, shaking his shoulders instead.

“Oh Haru!!! We were looking for Sousuke and we called Rin, but he didn’t answer so then we called Gou and I didn’t know that Rin hadn’t told her about him and Sousuke yet and it all came spilling out and now I’ve outed them and I’m the worst friend in the world and Rin’s never going to forgive me for outing him and Sousuke to his sister and she’s going to call him and they are fighting and this is just the absolute worst!!!!”

On his part, Haru let Makoto shake him, his stony expression never once faltering while he waited for Makoto to finish. When finally Makoto did finish, Haru’s mouth twitched up in a tiny, smug ass smile.

“Serves him right for keeping secrets from Gou,” Haru mumbled before turning away towards their bedroom. Makoto followed him, his arms flapping wildly in agitation.

“Oh Haru, don’t say that! I should have known he wasn’t going to say anything to Gou! Of course he wouldn’t! I’m the worst friend ever and their relationship is so new and they are already fighting and the last thing they need….”

The door closing behind Makoto was what cut him off and even after he was safely handed off as Haru’s problem, Kisumi could still hear his muffled voice through the door.

“Well,” Tomo said, “I guess we have to wait for Makoto to calm down before we can continue our search. Want to go swimming? We can bring back popsicles for those guys.”
Kisumi beamed at Tomo.

“Sounds perfect!”

God, Tomo really was the best!

The search for Sousuke lost momentum over the course of the next day. After conferencing with Haru, Kisumi, Yasutomo, and Makoto had decided the best thing to do would be to go looking for him at the various shipyards. Haru didn’t join because Makoto was right, he had very little free time now that his internship was in full swing. But that was okay, because Kisumi and Makoto were Sousuke’s roommates, after all, and surely the secretaries or whomever could tell them if Sousuke worked there. But when they tried that at the first shipyard, they went to, they found that the search for Sousuke was not going to be that easy.

They were immediately turned down. They tried the same strategy at two other shipyards, with the same results. After their fourth let down, the three of them decided to call it quits for the day and went to a bar that Kisumi thought Sousuke would have very much approved of. It was near the shipyards, very shady, and they’d entertained the slim hope that maybe, just maybe Sousuke would be there. He wasn’t.

Without Sousuke there to protect them, Kisumi, Makoto, and Tomo stuck out painfully and, worst of all, bar goers who would have ignored them if tall, imposing Sousuke was there now were staring at the three outsiders menacingly.

“Guys,” Tomo whispered, “I, uh, don’t really want to stay here.”

“Much better!” Makoto smiled as the bartender at the bar they relocated to put a giant monstrosity of sugary drink in front of Makoto. It’s name had Sprinkles in it and it looked like Hello Kitty threw up all over it. Makoto was delighted.

Kisumi settled back and listened with mounting irritation as Tomo and Makoto discussed what their next move should be. He drank his own drink – a much less flamboyant beer – and tried to calm down his annoyance.
Sousuke didn’t want to be found, that much was certain. The previous night, Kisumi had snuck into his room while Haru and Makoto went to dinner at a noodle shop, and looked for any evidence as to where Sousuke worked – a pay stub, a letter, anything. But Sousuke was an expert at hiding and he knew very well how to cover his tracks. Most likely, he’d made sure not to leave any tracks to begin with so he wouldn’t have to clean up after himself in case he wanted to disappear again. Kisumi couldn’t imagine what it must be like to live a day in Sousuke’s shoes, always poised to flee if he needed to. That did not sound like a very fun way to live and it was depressing to think that Sousuke chose to live like that, like a fugitive on the run.

Kisumi was of course super worried about Sousuke - how could he not be? - but he knew Sousuke and he knew Sousuke needed time to lick his wounds. When he was ready, he would find them. Just like always. Even bumping into Makoto at the train station, Kisumi wasn't a hundred percent sure that Sousuke hadn't meant to do it.

So they should just leave him alone because Sousuke wasn’t going to be found unless he wanted to be found.

This was pointless. And what made it down right obnoxious was how adamant Tomo was being.

Makoto was in full on Mamakoto mode, so no chance he was going to let it go, but Tomo needed to just drop it. He didn’t know Sousuke well enough to see what was going on. There was no reason for him to waste his time on something so pointless for someone he really didn’t even know all that well…

“Well what about this studio?” Tomo was asking Makoto, “we haven’t even started to discuss that. Do you know what kind of studio he goes to?”

“Not a clue,” Makoto replied after he took a nice long gulp of his monstrosity of a drink, “it could be anything. Like a writing studio, maybe?”

“Guys,” Kisumi said quietly, but neither Makoto nor Tomo heard him. Kisumi’s cheeks grew hot and his stomach was clenching up in irritation.

“A writing studio would make sense,” Tomo agreed, “with his story published and everything. But do they even have writing studios people can just join? I’ve never heard about anything like that before.

“Tomo,” Kisumi said, this time a little louder, a little harsher. Damn it Tomo! Pay attention to me! Thought Kisumi.

“This is Tokyo,” Makoto continued, still not hearing Kisumi, “they have something for everything. I
Tomo laughed and the sound of his crystal clear voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard to Kisumi.

“TOMO!” Kisumi shouted, unable to suppress his mounting anger any longer. Makoto and Tomo both jumped and, bewildered, turned their heads to look at Kisumi.

“We aren’t going to find him, no matter if we search all the cat cafes in Tokyo. He doesn’t want to be found so we shouldn’t waste our time. You shouldn’t waste your time Tomo.”

Makoto looked like a kicked puppy but Tomo….Tomo’s nostrils flared out and his jaw was suddenly clenched tight…. 

“We just have to figure out a better strategy, Kisumi,” Tomo insisted, infuriating Kisumi further, “Wherever he is, we can find him and figure out what’s going on….”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Kisumi retorted angrily, “You can turn Tokyo over if you want, but you aren’t going to find him. He doesn’t want to be found and he knows how to hide! We should just leave him alone because he will stop hiding when he’s ready!”

“He’s our friend,” argued Tomo. He was starting to yell too, “and if he’s in some kind of trouble, we should try to help him!”

Kisumi flared at the word ‘friend’. Maybe Obon had seen them get closer, but Tomo was his friend, not Sousuke’s. Tomo shouldn’t be getting so upset about someone he had just become friends with. Unless there was more to it.

Fuck! Of course there was more to it!

He wouldn’t be like this for Kisumi. He was only worrying so much because he liked Sousuke. If it was Kisumi missing, he wouldn’t be going through so much trouble. Kisumi would go through any trouble for Tomo, but it wasn’t reciprocated.
“Leave him alone,” Kisumi heard himself shout. Tomo’s face looked absolutely furious, but Kisumi couldn’t stop himself from yelling, “Just leave Sousuke alone, Tomo! You don’t even really know him! Why the hell do you care so much!?”

That had probably crossed a line. Makoto didn’t know about Tomo’s feelings for Sousuke and what Kisumi had said, it had almost been a challenge for Tomo to reveal them.

All three fell silent, stunned for just a moment.

“Kisumi…” Makoto peeped.

“Look for him all you want,” Kisumi shouted louder than ever. He didn’t dare look at Tomo, “but you two do it on your own, I’m not helping Tomo with something so stupid!.”

Before either of them could argue, Kisumi ran out of the bar towards home, bitterly regretting the past five minutes and wanting savagely for Tomo to come after him. Tomo didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Hello Lovely Readers!!! Sorry it’s been such a long time since my last update! Been a bit crazy for me, but things are finally slowing down some, so I should be able to update more frequently :D The next chapter is almost done now and then, it's time for Australia!!!!!

Thanks so much for reading! Feel free to look me up on tumblr: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

And feel free to chat me up!!!!
It Is Awfully Hard Being Kisumi Sometimes

Chapter Summary

Kisumi talks on the phone and then he talks to Yasutomo. Poor Kisumi, it is sometimes very hard being him...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Deep, cool shadows greeted Kisumi as he walked into the library. It had been ten days since he’d blown up at Tomo and he’d spent every last second of those ten days alone. Many of those seconds he’d spent here, trying to review Organic Chemistry and other subjects before classes started again in a few weeks. From what he gathered from Makoto’s failed attempts to smooth things over with Kisumi, Makoto and Tomo had spent all Makoto’s free time trying to find stupid Sousuke. Knowing Tomo, the rest of his time he was also studying for their upcoming semester. And probably doing a fair bit of worrying over his new best friend, Sousuke.

All Kisumi could think about was Tomo.

God he’d fucked up.

Tomo would never want anything to do with him again. Sousuke had his boyfriend – well last thing any of them had heard from Sousuke and Rin, they were still together – so Tomo could fill in the role of best friend. Even worse still, Saint Makoto had been spending a lot of time with Tomo, looking for Sousuke, and anyone who ever spent time with Makoto was completely enamored with him, he was just too sweet and nice and adorable. Kisumi certainly was enamored with him. But that just meant that there was one more person that was pulling Tomo away from him.

Kisumi was alone. Again.

And it was all his own fault.

Amazing what a cool, air conditioned space could do to clear one’s head, see things clearly. See how badly he’d messed up. See how his fears had come true.

Kisumi felt a stab of homesickness so fierce, it nearly crippled him. He didn’t want to be in Tokyo. He wanted to see his parents. He wanted to see Hayato. At least his family would never leave him.

He was just so tired of being alone.

With his head hung low over the weight of his own stupidity and the inevitability of his solitude, he trudged over to the desk he’d been frequenting recently and unpacked his things. Not that it would do much good. He’d been too bummed to concentrate very well. Nevertheless, he cracked open last year’s Microbiology text book and began to skim. His brain only read every third word because it was too much engaged with having lost the best friend he’d ever had and they’d had the class together. Every chapter reminded him of one study day or another.
But still he tried. It was pointless, but he tried.

Kisumi had been in the library for an hour when his phone rang. No one had called him for a long time, so he’d forgotten to put it on silence. Under the scornful gaze of the old women who frequented the library during the daytime, Kisumi grabbed his phone and fumbled with the buttons until his obnoxious ring tone turned into a less obnoxious buzz. Annoyed and slightly excited that someone was calling him, Kisumi looked at the screen, hoping to find Tomo’s number. But it was one he didn’t recognize.

Wrong number.

Dejectedly, Kisumi tossed the vibrating phone down on the desk and watched it until it wore itself out and became still. He turned back down to his book, even more depressed than before.

Two minutes later, his phone went off again and, much to his great annoyance, he saw that it was the same, wrong number. He ignored it the second time around, but when the phone rang a third, a fourth, a fifth, and finally a sixth time, he couldn’t ignore it any longer. The old ladies looked like they wanted to murder Kisumi.

Cursing under his breath, Kisumi gathered his things and went out of the library, his phone ringing a seventh and eighth time while he made his way out.

Who the hell would ever call him so insistently?

As he walked to a nearby noodle shop, the terrifying thought crossed his mind that whoever was calling him might be calling so insistently because something really bad had happened. Sousuke was a likely candidate, given his past and his current absence, but what if the mystery number was his parents, calling from a hospital phone, because something had happened to Hayato? What if Hayato had had another asthma attack? Inside his bag, his phone vibrated against his side and this time, instead of ignoring it, he dove in and answered it.

“Hello? Hayato?” he said anxiously, willing his little brother’s voice to answer him, to ensure that Hayato was safe and nothing bad had happened.

“Not Hayato,” a deep, gruff voice replied, “It’s Sousuke.”

Kisumi was equal parts disappointment and relief. He should have guessed it was Sousuke.

“Sousuke!” he greeted, trying his best to sound more relieved than disappointed.

“Yeah, hi Kisumi.”

Momentarily lost for words, neither of them spoke for a long second – Sousuke because he was Sousuke and Kisumi because he was torn about how to react. He’d been worrying everyone for nearly three weeks now, but Sousuke was such a taciturn dude, Kisumi didn’t want to spook him. Besides, why would Sousuke be calling him of all people? Why not Rin or Makoto or…Tomo?

“Are you all right, Sousuke?” Kisumi asked dumbly. That was as good a place to start as any.

“I guess,” Sousuke answered honestly.

“Are you still in Tokyo?” Kisumi continued, trying to keep his tone as light as possible.

“For now. I’m going to Australia next week.”
Kisumi frowned. All this worry and Sousuke had probably been working night shifts of something! That’s why they hadn’t seen him! But then, there was the letter Makoto refused to show anyone that was apparently evidence that something bad had happened between Rin and Sousuke. And the left cell phone and Rin refusing to answer any of their calls. No, there was more to it than night shifts.

“Look, Kisumi, I need to tell someone about something.” Sousuke continued, interrupting Kisumi’s thoughts.

“Yeah, why don’t you tell Rin or your precious Tomo…” he sighed, annoyed with everyone and everything, “You two are best buds now, why bother calling me?”

Kisumi hoped Sousuke would argue with him, yell at him for being an ass or tell him he was being stupid because Tomo was Kisumi’s friend, not Sousuke’s. But he didn’t. In fact, Sousuke didn’t say anything for a very long time.

“Kisumi,” Sousuke finally said, “I thought you would listen…”

Sousuke’s voice was quiet and he sounded disappointed. Unless Kisumi was mistaken. God, he may not have said the actual words, but Sousuke made Kisumi feel like a huge, unsympathetic ass! Sousuke didn’t reach out to people often and Kisumi had no right putting his own shit on Sousuke when Sousuke did reach out, especially at a time like this!

“Sousuke?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry. I’ll listen if you need to say something.”

Sousuke didn’t respond and Kisumi feared he’d already ruined whatever was going on here.

“What’s going on, Sou?” he asked, his worry growing.

Still Sousuke didn’t say anything.

“Sousuke, come on,” Kisumi pleaded, “You called for a reason.”

“I fucked up, Kisumi.” Sousuke finally said with a heavy sigh.

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to say if that’s okay, but I fucked up so bad. Finally being with Rin was the happiest I think I’ve ever been and I fucked it all up.”

His voice sounded shaky, like he was just keeping himself together. Which, knowing Sousuke, he probably was.

“Ah come on, Sousuke,” Kisumi tried to console him, “I saw you two together, he was happy too. I’m sure if you talk to him and sort it out, you will be just fine.”

“No,” Sousuke exclaimed, startling Kisumi with the force with which he’d spoken, “No, I can’t talk to him. I fucked up and he doesn’t want to speak to me. Not until I go to Australia.”

“What? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sousuke sighed, his voice dripping with so much pain it was hard to listen to, “I just fucked up really bad. And now I’ve lost him.”
For a long time, neither of them said anything. What could he say? He hadn’t spent much time with Rin since elementary school, so he couldn’t really interpret Rin’s actions. All he knew was that he’d seen Rin and Sousuke together and they’d been sickeningly cute together. So how had they gone from that to this? Kisumi knew he wasn’t going to get anymore out of Sousuke though, so all he could really do was listen.

“Sousuke,” Kisumi said gently, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Yeah.”

“You alright Sousuke?”

“Well there’s something more.” Sousuke said after a long pause, “That’s really why I called you, not to whine about Rin.”

“What is it, Sou?”

“I, um, got hurt.” Sousuke explained, his tone becoming reluctantly confessional, “I got mugged a while back and the kid stabbed me. I was in the hospital for a week, had surgery and everything.”

“Holy shit, Sousuke!” cried Kisumi, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, now I am,” Sousuke mumbled.

“That’s not good, man! Did you press charges…”

“Kisumi I didn’t do it to myself!” Sousuke interrupted Kisumi, his voice full of sudden desperation, “I have hospital records and police reports and I’ll show you everything! Just I didn’t do it to myself!”

“Sousuke…”

“I swear I didn’t!” Sousuke was starting to sound hysterical, “I didn’t go looking for a fight and I didn’t want to hurt myself! Things aren’t good with Rin, but I promise I wasn’t thinking of doing anything to myself!”

He paused, panting.

Sousuke would get mugged and stabbed. Poor kid. Maybe it wasn’t intentional, but he just attracted trouble. Kisumi was alone and no one liked him, but poor Sou always seemed to have things harder, whether he made it that way for himself or not.

“Well say something, Kisumi!” Sousuke growled when Kisumi took too long to respond.

“It’s okay, champ,” Kisumi said, trying to sound soothing, “I believe you.”

Sousuke was quiet for a long time. No doubt thinking that Kisumi was lying.

“Man, even before you saw Rin,” Kisumi went on, “I wasn’t worried about you doing anything to yourself. I’m not in your head, but I remember what you were like, back when you did that shit and you aren’t like that anymore. I believe you.”

Still, Sousuke took a very long time to respond and when he did, Kisumi could hear the instantaneous relief in his voice.

“Thanks, Kisumi. I, uh…just thanks.”
Kisumi knew Sousuke couldn’t see him, but he smiled into the phone anyways. Being the confessor for Sousuke had cheered him up immensely. He didn’t understand why Sousuke put him in that role, but it was just the kind of thing he needed to remind himself that yeah, there was someone out there who was in worse shape than him. And that someone had come to Kisumi for help.

“Can I ask you something Sousuke?” asked Kisumi, feeling much better, less angry than he had been for a while. Kisumi guessed it was because Sousuke had kind of offered him

“Sure.”

“Why did you call me? Why not Makoto…or Tomo? They’ve been looking all over for you. I didn’t because you obviously didn’t want to be found. They’ve been worried.”

“They were worried?” asked Sousuke. Kisumi could just picture the look of bewilderment on his face. He clearly hadn’t been expecting that, though why Mamakoto worrying about him should surprise him, Kisumi couldn’t say.

“Yeah, of course! We all have been really. Haru has his internship, but Tomo and Makoto have been going around to all the shipyards, trying to find out where you work. Makoto has even been watering your plants.”

“Makoto’s been watering my plants?”

Unless Kisumi was very much mistaken, Sousuke was getting a little choked up at the idea. Ah Makoto!

“Ha!” Kisumi snorted in amusement, “Of course Makoto has been watering your plants! I think I saw him go in there with a duster the other day too! So why didn’t you call him, or Tomo?”

“Makoto would worry too much,” Sousuke said gravely, “and I didn’t want to upset him. But why would I call Yasutomo? I haven’t known him that long.”

“But you guys are such good friends now,” Kisumi insisted, “What did you say? He sees through your bullshit and you value him a lot? I thought you’d want to talk to him about this stuff.”

This is the kind of stuff Sousuke should want to tell his new best friend….not an insignificant nothing like Kisumi. The brief reprieve in his gloomy moody ended and Kisumi once more felt like he was alone.

“But your Kisumi,” said Sousuke, “You’re the one I go to for the worst stuff.”

Kisumi’s jaw dropped in surprise. The one Sousuke goes to for the worst stuff?

“It’s always been like that,” Sousuke continued when Kisumi didn’t respond, “You don’t ask questions and you don’t make me talk about hard things I can’t talk about. And when I can talk about hard things, you always have been the best one to talk to because you have always been good at putting things into perspective. That’s how it’s always been. Hell you’re the one who has helped me the most with Rin! Haru and Makoto helped bring us back together, but you’ve been listening to my problems regarding Rin forever! You’ve always been the friend for hard stuff.”

Kisumi didn’t know what to say. He was a huge mess of feelings. Sousuke…liked him? Most of the time he acted like Kisumi was the most annoying person on the planet, but he valued Kisumi? A lot? He was the friend for ‘hard stuff’?

“Look, Kisumi, I know I give you a hard time and I can be an asshole to you. But you’re my friend
and I’ve always been able to depend on you. Like when I get myself into trouble. When I ran away, your mom asked me to write you postcards because she knew you would be really upset if you didn’t hear from me and so I wrote to you and you were the lifeline that kept me tethered to my life. I stayed out a lot of bad shit because I didn’t want to disappoint you and not send you a postcard. I really appreciate that, Kisumi, you just being there for me when it didn’t feel like anyone else was and you’ve always been that friend for me. Um, not like in a sexual or romantic way or anything, because I super love Rin, but….um….I love you, man.”

“Wow…uh…yeah…” sputtered Kisumi, too overcome at the moment to really say anything.

Sousuke fell into an embarrassed silence. He must really be in a strange place if he was being so sentimental! But Sousuke had spoken so earnestly. Unexpected and completely surprising as it was, Kisumi was feeling a little choked up because….he believed Sousuke. Sousuke wouldn’t have said it if he didn’t mean it because shit like that, it wasn’t usual for Sousuke.

Kisumi smiled, feeling buoyant.

Sousuke was his friend. A really important friend.

Kisumi wasn’t alone, even if it felt like it.

“I love you too, Sousuke,” gushed Kisumi, immediately feeling awkward because that four letter word hadn’t been much a part of his vocabulary lately, especially not to a guy. “But yeah, not in some sexual way either because I’m not, you know, into guys.”

“If you are, it’s fine,” laughed Sousuke. It was such a welcome relief to hear him laugh, it took a while for the meaning of his words to sink in.

“Yeah, of course I’m not into guys!” Kisumi rebutted, once he understood what Sousuke was saying.

“You could tell me if you were,” Sousuke insisted, “I know a thing or two about denial in that department and I’m sure it would help to talk it out with someone.”

Kisumi wrinkled his brows together and frowned.

“Where is this coming from?” he asked, a little defensively.

“Well what about Yasutomo?”

Kisumi’s heart skipped a beat.

Yasutomo? And Kisumi? What a ridiculous idea! Yasutomo was his friend. Or Tomo had been his friend. Before Kisumi had screwed everything up.

“What about him?” Kisumi asked, warily.

“Look, I don’t mean anything by it if it’s not what’s going on with you two, but since Obon you’ve been acting way different when it comes to him. Did he tell you what happened between us then?”

“Yeah, of course,” huffed Kisumi, the damn text messages about Yasutomo’s magical weekend with Sousuke fresh in his mind, “I don’t get where you are going with this.”

“You just seem kind of fixated on the idea of us and it’s not going to happen. So I kind thought maybe…”
“Maybe what?” Kisumi asked, his voice beginning to shake.

“I don’t know, maybe that you were jealous because you had feelings for him.”

Jealous!? Feelings for Yasutomo!?

What the fuck!!!??

“Dude, I’m not gay!” Kisumi argued, his voice rising in volume, “Tomo is my friend and I’m not into dudes!”

“Right, right!” Sousuke jumped in before Kisumi yelled at him more, “But I mean, it would be fine if you did have feelings for him. He’s a good dude and he makes you happy and that’s all that really matters, right? And you can’t tell me you don’t care about him a shit load. You’ve been so fucking jealous, you are almost as bad as Haru is with Makoto. I don’t know much about shit, but having feelings for your best friend…that is something I know quite a lot about.”

Kisumi couldn’t believe this! Feelings for Tomo!? What an idea!

“And you know it’s fine. If you do or don’t, it’s fine. And if you want to talk about it, I’d be happy to listen.”

“Where are you, Sousuke?” demanded Kisumi, deciding he’d had enough of the subject.

Feelings for Tomo….

“I’m fine and I’m taking care of myself,” Sousuke said and Kisumi knew that was all the information he was going to get out of Sousuke, “I’m going to Australia next week. If you want, I’ll call you when I get there so you know I got there okay.”

Small concession to appease Kisumi for his outrageous idea, but it worked.

“Yeah man, I’d like that.” He said, though he knew he still sounded pretty grumpy.

“Okay,” Sousuke said cheerfully, “I’ll call you when I get to Australia.”

“Oh but your phone is at the apartment.” Kisumi said, “Do you need my number?”

“Nope. I know it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I know you and Makoto's phone numbers. I will call you when I get to Australia and I’ll call you once I figure out what’s going on with Rin, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

“Thanks for picking up, Kisumi.”

“Anytime, champ.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, you too. Would you tell everyone else that we talked, but just tell them that I’m fine and I’m
“going to Australia next week?”

“Sure thing. So I’ll talk to you soon?”

“Talk to you soon.”

“Okay, good luck and take care!”

“Bye, Kisumi.”

“Bye, Sousuke.”

“Tomo,” Makoto said as he looked down at a map of Tokyo. Makoto pointed a finger at a spot along the waterfront, “we didn’t try this shipyard yet. Should we go there after I get done with work tomorrow evening?”

Tomo peered at the point Makoto indicated. All around his fingers, Xs made with a Sharpie, indicating all the shipyards they had already checked. Sousuke, it turns out, was extremely difficult to find. He’d not told anyone where he worked, exactly, and none of them knew what kind of ‘studio’ he went to all the time, so they couldn’t even begin looking for him wherever that was.

The front door of Makoto’s/Kisumi’s/Sousuke’s/Haru’s apartment opened, admitting in Kisumi. Immediately, Tomo’s stomach clenched up at the sight of him. The last time he’d seen Kisumi, Kisumi had been yelling and so, so angry for no apparent reason. For the past 10 days, Tomo had thought of little else. How could he not? Since they’d first met, the majority of his time and attention had been Kisumi’s, in one capacity or another, and the sudden rupture really hit home how important the kid had become to him. To make matters worse, he really didn’t understand why Kisumi had been yelling at him and he certainly didn’t really think he deserved to be yelled at for being worried about Sousuke. Kisumi was worried about Sousuke, everyone was worried about Sousuke – why should Tomo be worried about Sousuke as well? He was relieved to see him again, but he couldn’t help but feel his blood begin to boil angrily at the sight of him.

Why had he been such a terrific dick!?

“Kisumi!” Makoto greeted, unaware of Tomo’s inner turmoil, “You’re here!”

Kisumi’s eyes found Tomo’s instantly and his whole body tensed up. From the tint of his cheeks, Tomo could tell Kisumi was getting angry too and that made Tomo even more upset.

Kisumi turned to Makoto, ignoring Tomo.

“Sousuke called me,” Kisumi said instead of a greeting, “he’s fine.”

“What!” Makoto cried, “Really!?”

Kisumi smiled at Makoto and nodded his head.

“Yeah, he called me and we had a long talk. He’s going to Australia next week and he’s fine.”

Makoto jumped up and immediately began barraging Kisumi with a million questions:
“Where has he been? Has he been taking care of himself? When are we going to see him? Are things okay with Rin?”…….

Kisumi smiled and patted Makoto on the shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, Tomo noticed Haru bristle with indignation. Haru did that, if anyone else touched Makoto in any way.

“We had a long chat and what he said to tell you all was that he was fine and he was going to Australia to see Rin next week. He said he’d call me when he gets there. He wouldn’t tell me where he’s been staying, but I trust him when he says he’s okay. So you guys can stop looking for him, he’s not going to let us find him.”

“That’s what I said,” Haru grumbled, loud enough so only Tomo heard. Haru had been less helpful than Kisumi in the search for Sousuke and the few times Tomo had seen him, including today, Haru had insisted that they all let Sousuke do what he wants because it was none of their business. He may have grumbled that Makoto was insufferably nosy, but Tomo thought he detected affection in the accusation. Makoto certainly hadn’t taken offense.

Sighing, Makoto came and sat down next to Haru and Tomo could tell Makoto was a little deflated at the news. No doubt he’d wanted to go bring Sousuke chicken soup or something. Haru gave him a quick peck on the cheek and that made Makoto perk up. While Kisumi had remained elusive over the past week and a half, Yasutomo had spent quite a bit of time with Makoto, looking for Sousuke. It was kind of hard not to love the kid, because he was just a big ball of sunshine. It had been really nice getting to know him better. Yasutomo just couldn’t see what Makoto saw in Haru, but he could definitely see what Haru saw in Makoto.

“Okay, talk to you guys later,” Kisumi said before retreating to his room.

Not one fucking word to Tomo.

After yelling at him and refusing to talk to him for more than a week, that was all Kisumi was going to give him.

For a long time, Tomo stared at Kisumi’s door, his jaw clenched tight and his hand in a fist.

That was it?

That was fucking it!?

Not fucking acceptable!

Unable to bear it anymore, Tomo stood up abruptly and ran over to Kisumi’s door.

“KISUMI!” he yelled, banging on the door, “WHAT THE FUCK!!?”

Sitting on top of his bed, Kisumi brought his knees in closer, trying to shield himself from Tomo’s anger pounding on his door. It was unbearable, but he couldn’t face it right now. He couldn’t face it and he was desperate to see Tomo.

Because what if Sousuke was right?

All afternoon, he’d wandered aimlessly around in confusion….thinking….

What if the feelings he had for Tomo meant more…
Kisumi squeezed his knees tighter and closed his eyes, wishing that Tomo would both go away and come in.

“OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR, KISUMI!!!” shouted Tomo.

“It’s open,” Kisumi whispered, though he knew Tomo couldn’t possibly hear him.

What if he was in love with Tomo?

What the hell was wrong with Kisumi!?

Why the hell was he acting like this!?

Why wouldn’t he let Tomo in?

Did he not want to be friends anymore?

The idea felt like a knife through his chest. Kisumi was his best friend! Losing him would be worse than losing Rajin!

Tomo had lost too many people to let go of Kisumi that easily! He was the best thing that had happened to Tomo in ages and he wasn’t going to give up without a fight!

Tomo banged on the door one more time with absolutely no results. Frustrated, he decided not to wait for permission. Harder than he meant to, he flung open the door.

He was angry, he was seething, he was livid – but coming inside Kisumi’s room and seeing Kisumi, curled up on his bed, looking at Tomo like some sad, precious puppy….this was so not Kisumi like behavior.

What was going on with him?

Seeing Kisumi in this state – it was immediately sobering and Tomo’s anger turned into concern.

To calm himself down, he took a few deep breaths. He didn’t want to make Kisumi look more miserable than he already did.

Because Tomo cared about him so, so much.

Carefully, he closed the door behind him and crossed the room so he could sit next to Tomo on the bed.

To hide, Kisumi buried his head in his arms and for a few minutes, Tomo waited to see if Kisumi would say anything. Finally concluding that he would have to take the first step, Kisumi nudged Tomo with his shoulder.

“What’s going on you with, dude?”

Kisumi turned his head to the side so he was looking at Tomo, his expression a great tangle of many different emotions.

“I’ve missed you, man.” Tomo let slip.
Kisumi sighed and buried his head back in his arms, scrunching into an even tighter ball. Again, Kisumi fell silent for a while before answering:

“I’ve missed you too, Tomo.”

His voice…it sounded….God, what was going on? He’d never sounded so sad or pathetic or hurt before!

Not knowing what else to do, Tomo put a hand on Kisumi’s shoulder and Kisumi instantly flinched. He flinched, but he didn’t pull away.

“Kisumi…” Tomo said quietly, “Whatever is going on with you, I want to help.”

Fuck!

Why was this so hard?

Kisumi could feel the heat from his face, could feel his heart racing, could feel the massive lump in his throat. Kisumi had asked plenty of girls out before, he’d broken up with plenty of girls too – but he’d never had such a strong reaction before. He knew, deep down, because he’d never cared for anyone as much as he did for Tomo. How he cared for Tomo, damn that Sousuke for confusing him so badly! This shouldn’t be a romantic situation! Tomo was his friend!

But what if…they could be…more?

As terrible as it was to admit, the idea had appeal. A lot of appeal. Honestly, what a fucking brilliant solution! Tomo would be great to date because they hung out all the time anyway and Kisumi always had fun. They always had lots to talk about and they had so many similar interests….

Kisumi’s imagination could run wild at that part because yeah, Tomo would be the perfect boyfriend…but when it came to the rest…the physical parts….Kisumi’s mind just went…blank….

A hand touched Kisumi’s shoulder, making Kisumi jump. But out of surprise. Not necessarily out of pleasure…at least he didn’t think it was out of pleasure…

“Kisumi. Whatever is going on with you, I want to help.”

So fucking hard…. Kisumi had never felt so awkward in his entire life. He wanted to just blurt out all the things he’d been thinking about this afternoon, tell Tomo how much he meant to him, make things better. But the words, when they began to formulate themselves into sentences in his head, sounded ridiculous.

But what if…

What if…

What if Tomo was interested?

In more…?
Kisumi looked back up and Tomo was shocked to see how scared he looked. What the hell of, Tomo couldn’t say.

Kisumi was really starting to scare Tomo.

“I talked to Sousuke today,” Kisumi began, but then fell quiet again.

“Yeah, you said. That’s a big relief, right? He’s doing okay?”

Kisumi nodded.

“Yeah it was a good talk. Really good. Him and I…it’s just nice to know where I stand with him and that I’m important to him.”

For a brief moment, a ghost of a smile lit up his face. Tomo smiled too. He knew Kisumi liked Sousuke a lot and, in his weird way, Sousuke liked Kisumi too. But they were usually such asses to each other so it was good if the conversation they’d had cleared some of the air between them. Seeing Tomo’s smile made Kisumi’s disappear almost immediately.

“Well yeah you’re important to him,” Tomo said, trying to encourage him to continue, “you’ve known him since elementary school, yeah?”

Kisumi nodded into his folded arms.

“Yeah I have. I don’t know, I guess I didn’t think we were really that good of friends though because he always seems way more concerned with Rin or Makoto or Haru or you. He, uh, we talked about that too….”

“How about you?”

“About you. And him.”

Tomo grunted in frustration. This, again?

Honestly! Since Sousuke disappeared, Tomo’s feelings had changed. He was hot and sexy as hell, but he was a high class drama queen. Rajin had been enough of a drama queen to last Tomo a lifetime!

“Look, man, I told you I get it. He’s into Rin and that’s fine. I accept that. I’m moving on. We’re friends now, so you don’t need to worry about me pining after him anymore!”

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

“What did you mean?” demanded Tomo. He was getting angry again.

“Well we talked about the thing with you and him,” Kisumi explained, “but mostly how I’ve reacted to the whole thing, I guess.”

Tomo raised an eyebrow.

“I’m glad you and him are friends and everything, but at the same time, it’s been fucking killing me. To think of you guys as friends. Because you and him get along so well, I just thought…..I just thought you liked him more than me. And I guess I’ve been really, really jealous.”

Kisumi crunched up tighter and Tomo stared at him, not knowing what he should say.
That explained a lot, but what a stupid fucking thing to be jealous of! Him and Sousuke were friends, yeah, but it wasn’t like Tomo wanted to replace Kisumi with Sousuke. No one could replace Kisumi, Tomo didn’t want anyone to replace Kisumi! Not for the world! Sousuke didn’t study with him, he couldn’t whine about professors and their Organic Chemistry classes, he didn’t marvel at the intricacies of the human respiratory system with him, he didn’t make him laugh with stupid impressions….he didn’t make him feel like he was someone vital and important and appreciated. Sousuke could never give Tomo the things Kisumi gave him, because he just wasn’t Kisumi. And Kisumi…he was so fucking important.

“Kiusmi, that’s dumb,” Tomo said, trying to hide his desperation with sarcasm, “You’re my best friend. You’ve been the first best friend I think I’ve ever really had. I like Sousuke, but come on. You’re Kisumi.”

Kisumi smiled briefly again, but only for just a second.

“That’s what Sousuke said,” he explained, “but then we were talking more about….why I was feeling that way. I don’t get so crazy jealous over Makoto or even of Sousuke, I guess. Sousuke asked…”

Tomo noticed that his heart was suddenly beating much faster than normal.

“He thinks maybe I have feelings for you. Like as more than a friend.”

Tomo looked as though a nuclear bomb had just gone off in his brain. Fuck. What a stupid idea! He shouldn’t have said anything! God, now things were going to be even worse between them. Kisumi couldn’t bear to look at Tomo. Because once the dust cleared, there would only be disgust….Tomo had never thought of Kisumi like that…

Damn it!

He shouldn’t have listened to Sousuke!

But if Sousuke was completely wrong, why was Tomo feeling like this? Feeling so…confused…and scared…and excited…?

“What do you think, Kisumi?” Tomo asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Kisumi dared to look over at him.

“I don’t know,” Kisumi admitted, “That wasn’t something I’d ever considered before. But, the way Sousuke put it, there’s some sense to it…

He fell silent. They were both silent. Looking at each other. Kisumi prayed he wasn’t seeing their friendship fracture before his eyes because the idea of them, together…it was crazy and impossible, right?

Tomo didn’t know what to say. What could he possibly say? If Kisumi did….if they could be together….if it could work out…God, that would be perfect!
Kisumi would be a pretty perfect boyfriend. He was physically just Kisumi’s type – tall, lanky… pretty. From the first time Tomo had seen Kisumi, he had found him a pretty excellent specimen. And they got along so well. Tomo had never felt so completely himself, so accepted by anyone before…

Come on! But this was Kisumi! Kisumi, who was constantly checking out girls and lit up in a special way when Minami and Myashi paid attention to him. He’d never light up like that for Tomo for the simple reason that Tomo lacked physical features Kisumi liked…

No, it was too perfect, too easy, too simple a solution.

But…

God, the way Kisumi was looking at him. He was being serious. No way was he not serious. He looked like his whole world depended on Tomo.

So, logically, Tomo did him a great disservice if he didn’t take him seriously.

“Kisumi…” Tomo said, uncertain of what he should say.

“Yeah?” Kisumi’s voice quavered.

“Really?” was all Tomo could choke out.

Kisumi sighed and rest his chin on his knees.

“I don’t know. I’m fucking confused. I never, ever would have come up with that if Sousuke hadn’t said something. But he did and I’m wondering if maybe…”

He trailed off.

“Kisumi,” Tomo said, Kisumi turned to face him “if you want to find out.”

“Yeah?”

His voice was both eager and restrained. Ready and not.

“I could, um, kiss you.”

Kisumi’s eyes went wide as he digested Tomo’s suggestion. It took a while and, while he waited, Tomo cursed himself for saying it. Clearly, kissing Kisumi was a stupid, stupid idea and he’d probably broken Kisumi with the idea.

Idiot…

Like kissing Kisumi would solve anything…

Kissing Kisumi…

He’d never let himself think about it seriously before because Kisumi was a straight boy who was his best friend…

“Okay,” Kisumi whispered.

Wait. What?
“I guess that’s really the only way to find out, isn’t it?” Kisumi said contemplatively, more to himself than to Tomo.

Tomo’s heart was beating rapidly. Kisumi wanted him to kiss him? For real?

“You’re serious? If you don’t want to, I won’t.”

Kisumi nodded his head gravely.

“I can’t take it back,” Tomo protested, though who he was trying to convince, he didn’t know, “if I kiss you, it can’t be undone. We’ll know we’ve kissed each other.”

“I know,” Kisumi confirmed, “but I have to know.”

“So you are really sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

Kisumi couldn’t believe how fast his heart was racing as Tomo reached out a hand and cupped his cheek, turning his head so Kisumi was facing him. The look on Tomo’s face was hard to see because Kisumi didn’t understand it. Was he afraid? Was he hopeful? Was he confused? Was he weirded out? Was he excited? Was he feeling all the things Kisumi was feeling?

In order to save himself from Tomo’s face, he closed his eyes. He could feel Tomo coming closer, which made his heart beat throb in his neck. Tomo’s other hand found its way to Kisumi’s other cheek so he was holding Kisumi’s head.

A caress.

God, it felt like he was holding all of Kisumi.

A slight pressure against Kisumi’s forehead told Kisumi without him having to open his eyes, that Tomo’s forehead was against his, leaning and gentle and so fucking intimate. And hesitating. This was a diversion. To buy time.

A diversion was fine with Kisumi, kissing a girl had never been this hard. For a moment, they stayed like this and it became perfect once Kisumi got used to it. Kisumi calmed down as he acclimatized to the touch, to the fact that this was Tomo.

Tomo cared about him and he cared about Tomo. Was that all they really needed?

“You’re absolutely sure you want to do this?” Tomo asked, one last time.

Against his forehead, Kisumi nodded.

“I’m sure.”
Yasutomo leaned in closer until Kisumi felt a feather light touch on his lips. From Tomo’s lips….they were kissing….

Kisumi’s lips were a lot softer than Tomo would have thought, way softer than Rajin’s. They were really, really nice.

But this was so chaste, so innocent.

Tomo wasn’t going to help Kisumi figure out what he was feeling if he kissed him like he was in middle school.

So Tomo pressed harder and Kisumi’s mouth opened slightly. Encouraged, Tomo took the opportunity to nip at Kisumi’s bottom lip, which made his mouth open slightly more. With great trepidation, Tomo flicked his tongue a bit and found himself inside Kisumi’s mouth – warm, wet….it tasted just like how Kisumi smelled.

It was nice. Warm. Familiar.

Not a shot of adrenaline that sent waves of excitement all through him. Not earthshaking. Not a kiss that reached his groin and made his blood pump hard. Not a kiss that inspired him to crave the other damp, dark places hidden on Kisumi.

But nice.

Really, really fucking nice.

Tomo’s tongue was in his mouth. Not intrusive and demanding, but it was still there and Kisumi had never felt more like a tongue didn’t belong there before.

Maybe the wrongness of it came from the way Tomo smelled and tasted. It wasn’t a bad smell, not at all. Tomo smelled fine. But up close, in his mouth…it was just hard to concentrate on the physical sensation of Tomo’s tongue - gliding gracefully over Kisumi’s - or of Tomo’s lips - slightly chapped and pressing against Kisumi’s – when it was just Tomo all around him. Like Tomo was tackling him. It was a bit oppressive.

To give the deepening kiss a proper chance, Kisumi closed his eyes harder and tried to block out the smell of Tomo, concentrating instead on the feel of Tomo’s mouth.

For a few seconds, it worked and Kisumi forgot that he was kissing his best friend. Kissing was kissing after all, and how different could two mouths really be, even if the genitalia were?

But that lovely, blank moment, where Kisumi was really truly kissing Tomo only lasted a moment because his mind, inevitably, wandered to past such experiences, landing on Kihomi, one of his former girlfriends.

God, she’d been something.

Although there had been four girls after Kihomi, she was the last one that Kisumi had really, really liked. They hadn’t been together for two and a half years now, they hadn’t even spoken since the
night Kihomi told Kisumi she was leaving him for another guy, but he could still remember every detail.

His heart began to beat a little harder as he recalled every detail in absolutely perfect detail. Unconsciously, he brought his hands up to Tomo’s chest, expecting to feel the soft cushiony embrace that had always been his favorite female part – especially that female.

But Tomo wasn’t a girl and the absence was jarring, bringing Kisumi back to reality.

With Tomo, there wouldn’t ever be any breasts. There wasn’t a warm cave in between his legs that Kisumi had fun exploring, finding the treasure spot that was different for every girl. He could sink himself into Tomo, like he could with girls, but there wouldn’t be the velvety smoothness, the softness he loved.

Not with Tomo.

It couldn’t be with Tomo.

While Tomo was still kissing him, Kisumi opened his eyes. He’d never seen Tomo from so close before and he had never looked better.

Angry tears began to pool in his eyes because the violence of his disappointment was devastating.

Why couldn’t it be Tomo?

Why the fuck couldn’t it be Tomo!?

He liked Tomo more than anyone he’d ever met so logically they would be amazing together! That should be everything they needed!

Before Kisumi sobbed straight into Tomo’s mouth, he pushed himself away from Tomo, breaking their kiss.

Why couldn’t it be Tomo!?

What had begun nice quickly became terrible. Tomo had never kissed anyone who didn’t want to kiss him too. During the last few seconds of their kiss, Tomo could feel in the press of Kisumi’s lips, the tautness of his tongue a resistance that was completely foreign to him.

Kisumi didn’t want him. Not like this.

The kiss started to fucking hurt and Tomo wished so hard that it would just stop, but he had to do this.

For Kisumi.

Rajin may have broken up with him and Sousuke may have professed his undying love for someone else, but Kisumi had never felt so thoroughly rejected in his entire life. It was a whole body rejection – something primal and terrible and it made him feel awful.

Kisumi didn’t want this. It wasn’t working.

Kisumi pushed off Tomo’s chest, breaking the kiss. And he was crying. Kisumi was crying.
The impact of the rejection, the relief that that horrible, horrible experience was over, and the sight of his best friend’s bitter tears felt like a clamp against his throat.

Oh god!

Tomo had hurt Kisumi!

They shouldn’t have done that!

“I’m sorry, Tomo!” Kisumi sniffed as he tried to wipe away his tears, “I’m sorry that was such a bad idea.”

Frozen, mute, Tomo watched as Kisumi slumped down against his bed so he was facing the wall, trying as much as he could to hide.

Tomo wanted to go home, to try to forget what had just happened, but the silent sobs shaking his friend’s body, the complete wretchedness of him….Tomo couldn’t leave him. He loved him, even if he now knew the boundaries of that love that he would never dare cross again. No way. Not to experience that complete rejection again.

And he desperately did not want Kisumi to hurt because of him.

But fuck he was glad he’d never kissed any of those straight boys he was madly in love with in high school! He’d pined over so many and bitterly lamented that he hadn’t ever had his chance. But his high school self wouldn’t have been able to handle…this. Yasutomo made a solemn vow that he was never going to expose himself to that level of rejection again! Not for Kisumi, not for any other straight boy!

Kisumi was internally yelling at himself to stop blubbering. He was being stupid. Why would it have worked with Tomo? He’d never thought about kissing Tomo, or any guy, before. The solution had been too easy, too perfect….

Nothing was ever easy or perfect for Kisumi.

Was he doomed to be alone forever!? 

Kisumi was so busy trying to stop his stupid sobbing, he didn’t feel the bed sag under Tomo’s weight as he laid down beside Kisumi. Not until Tomo’s arm snaked around Kisumi did Kisumi realize Tomo was cuddled against his back, embracing him.

He flinched, terribly unsure what it could possibly mean after what they’d just done.

Tensed and frozen, Kisumi finally managed to stop crying. How pathetic he was – to be crying! Like some kid who had been promised ice cream and was throwing a temper tantrum because he wasn’t going to get it anymore!

“Well wasn’t that terrible?” Tomo asked airily, “Let’s not do that again.”

Kisumi was too depressed to treat what had just happened so lightly.

“Tomo,” he sputtered, his voice shaking terribly, “I’m so sorry… I shouldn’t have…”

“It’s okay, Kisumi!” Tomo broke in, “You wanted to find out and now we have. It’s okay.”
Kisumi sobbed harder and Tomo hugged him closer.

“Why are you crying?” Tomo was asking, penetrating the veil of Kisumi’s misery.

“I’m so sorry,” Kisumi apologized again, feeling like a complete idiot, “I guess I’m just really, really disappointed. When Sousuke suggested it, I was so hopeful because it would have been so easy…”

Tomo squeezed Kisumi tighter, “Maybe if you were at all interested in guys it would have been easy, but you aren’t and Sousuke of all people should have known you can’t force yourself to like one thing or the other. I didn’t think it was going to work.”

Kisumi rolled around so he could look at Tomo. What he saw made him feel a thousand times more wretched.

Tomo was crying too. He was trying to hide it, but Kisumi could plainly see that Tomo was crying too.

“Why are you crying?” Kisumi asked as he tried to rub away his tears.

Tomo smiled and laughed, trying to brush it off, “Because you’re so upset, ya big oaf!”

Wordlessly, Tomo opened his arms and Kisumi scooted over until he could snuggle himself up against Tomo’s chest. Tomo wrapped his arms around Kisumi and held him close. Because of what had just happened, logic told Kisumi this is the last thing he should be doing with Tomo. But no one had held him like this in a very long time and Kisumi was feeling like he needed someone to hold him together. And the person he most wanted to do that was Tomo.

At some point, Tomo began stroking his hair and Kisumi lamented how right it felt for Tomo to comfort him like this.

Unlike that kiss.

That had not felt right.

In Tomo’s arms, Kisumi took a long time to calm himself down, but it would have taken much, much longer if he’d been anywhere else.

They’d not said anything for what felt like an hour. Kisumi had needed so much time. Well really they both needed the time. Kisumi, to calm down; Tomo, to adjust how he saw Kisumi. While Kisumi pulled himself together, Tomo had went over all the possible things he could say. What he’d decided on was perfect, though. He knew it was just what Kisumi needed to hear:

“Apparently I can’t be everything for you, Kisumi,” he began once he thought the time was right, shattering the silence, “I wish I could be your everything, I wish I was what you wanted – but I’m not. In a heartbeat I’d want to be with you if that were the case, but it isn’t. And now we know.”

Kisumi squeezed him harder and curled up against him tighter. Tomo felt Kisumi was begging him to stop. But Tomo had things he needed to say.

“I know you’re lonely,” Tomo continued, “Just like I was when we met. I think that’s why we clicked so much, so quickly, because we were two lonely people who found each other because we
both really needed each other. I’m not you and I can’t say for certain what you are feeling, but for me, it seems that the reason your feelings for me are as strong as they are, is because you found me at a time when you needed someone to fill a big hole in your life. That’s how I feel anyway and I am so so glad I found you. You make me so happy and I care about you so much.”

Kisumi lifted his head off Tomo’s chest and Tomo could see his eyes were glistening again. Not wanting to see him cry anymore, Tomo couldn’t help but run his fingers through Kisumi’s hair and he certainly didn’t stop himself from leaning his head forward, so he could kiss Kisumi right between the eyebrows.

It wasn’t meant as a romantic or sexual kiss. It was meant as a kiss of caring, an expression of the love Tomo really did feel for him. It was a different kind of love, not romantic or sexual, but damn he really, really loved Kisumi. Kisumi smiled, understanding. Then he lay his head back down against Tomo’s chest and Tomo resumed stroking his hair.

“You’ve filled a huge part that needed filling and I don’t feel alone anymore. But just like I can’t be your everything, if you don’t want me in that way, you won’t be able to be my everything either. We will both have to look for other people to fill the parts we can’t. And you need to be okay with that because there are things you can’t give me, just like there are things I can’t give you. Now we know that for sure.”

Kisumi nodded against Tomo’s chest.

“I know,” Kisumi said after a moment’s contemplation, “I want you to be happy too. It’s just disappointing though, you know? Like the things I feel about you are really intense, more than with other people, and it’s confusing because you’re right – there are things you can’t give me and I shouldn’t expect them from you. Unless I suddenly started wanting your dick up my ass and not want to bury my head in a nice big pair of titties, I guess. You don’t smell like a girl, you don’t feel like a girl, and that matters to me.”

Tomo laughed, shaking Kisumi’s head against his chest.

“It matters to me that I’m with a guy who wants a dick up his ass. Specifically my dick! To make it even harder, they have to be okay with their dicks not going up my ass all that much because I don’t like that. And they should be taller than me too, because I really like taller guys.”

Kisumi looked up again, wearing a very crooked smile. It was such a relief to see him smile and Tomo couldn’t help but smile back.

“Really, Yasutomo? That’s not what I would have thought!”

“Why not?”

“Well, Rajin is just pretty tall and Sousuke is a pretty big behemoth of a guy. I would have thought you liked tall guys that made you feel small. So when you guys are together you would…”

“I like tall guys,” Tomo interrupted, a bit awkwardly, “but I kind of love making big guys a big hot mess and not the one being made a big hot mess of, if you catch my meaning.”

Kisumi laughed again.

“What!” Tomo protested, though he was smiling too, “Rajin was perfect for that! We only tried it the other way around 3 times, otherwise he was all about me being on top!”

“No it’s not that!”
“Then what?”

“I say this only based on pure speculation,” Kisumi giggled, “but you and Sousuke would have been horribly, horribly incompatible. Worse than you and me probably!”

Tomo snorted. Yeah, he could see Kisumi being right about that one; guys with masculinity issues were usually pretty uncomfortable taking a passive role. But then again, there were plenty of big, tough guys who went ape shit about letting go of control and being taken care of. Tomo had assumed Sousuke would probably fit more into the latter category. Well if it was the other way around, Kisumi was probably right – they probably wouldn’t have worked out all that well.

“Well what about you,” Tomo continued, still smiling up at the ceiling and glad of it, “I think it’s about time we found you a girl because I’m thinking a lot of what happened today was because you haven’t gotten laid since coming to Tokyo, am I right? You are a good looking guy and from the way you have Minami and Miyashi eating out of your palm, it doesn’t seem like you would have any problems getting a girl. Plus, didn’t you say you’ve always been the girlfriend type of guy? You said this is the longest you’ve gone without a girlfriend and I’m thinking that maybe you are ready for someone to fill that part for you.”

Kisumi took a long time to answer.

“I don’t know.”

Tomo ruffled his hair, trying to rile his spirits, “What’s there to know about?”

Kisumi tightened his hug around Tomo, “I don’t really want just a girl. I want to like someone and feel like they actually like me too. Most of my girlfriends I haven’t even liked all that much and I feel, for quite a few, we went out more because we were expected to or because it was convenient than that we actually wanted to. I hate feeling like that. I want to feel for someone the way Makoto and Haru feels for someone, or how Sousuke feels for Rin. I don’t want just ‘some girl’ anymore.”

“Ahhh!” Tomo teased, “who knew you were such a big softie! Kisumi wants to be in love!”

Kisumi buried his head into Tomo’s chest

“Shut up!” Tomo heard his muffled voice.

Tomo laughed for a few seconds before falling silent again.

“That’s what I want too, Kisumi. I want to be in love and feel loved back. With Rajin, it was mostly one sided, even at our best, and Sousuke it was definitely one sided. I just want someone who loves me too.”

Kisumi didn’t reply, but he nodded against Tomo’s chest.

Once more, they were on the same page and they wanted the same things. Just not with each other.

Tomo ran his hand down so it rest on Kisumi’s neck.

“Hey Kisumi?” he whispered.

“Hmm?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way because yeah, the kiss pretty much proves we aren’t going to be great, star crossed lovers.” Tomo said, “But while we are talking about love, I just want to say, I love
you, man. You are my best friend and I really hope that never changes. Maybe other people will
come into our lives who are girlfriends or boyfriends or even other friends, but I’ll still love you.
You’ll always be my favorite and even if I do find some big, tall boy that’s madly in love with me,
you’ll always be important to me in ways no one else will.”

Kisumi turned his head to the side. Tomo’s hand moved with Kisumi, so it ended up caressing his
cheek.

“I love you too, Tomo. Would you mind staying here tonight? Like this?”

Tomo laughed and stroked Kisumi’s cheek.

“Of course!” he replied, “But only if you promise we aren’t going to kiss anymore.”

Kisumi laughed and nodded, moving Tomo’s hand, “Oh definitely not!”

“Okay then, but turn around. I want to be the big spoon.”

“Thanks for coming down guys,” Rin said to Chris and Sam, “I wanted to have a talk with you guys
because Sousuke is supposed to show up sometime tomorrow and you guys will hopefully be
meeting him.”

Chris gave Sam a look from across the couch. For weeks, Rin had been a complete basket case –
skipping practices then making up for them in the pool, on his own and at weird times of the night,
refusing to go out with friends, snapping at everyone, crying about everything, being weirdly
sentimental with people he didn’t care all that much about, obsessively making omelets at three in the
morning, not eating like he should – sometimes not eating at all. And all of this weird behavior, Chris
was pretty positive had something to do with this mystery boyfriend whom he referred to as ‘Sue’
behind Rin’s back.

“What do you mean ‘supposed to show up sometime tomorrow’?” Sam demanded angrily, “Don’t
you know when your own bloody boyfriend is coming?”

Sam had refused to acknowledge something was not right with Rin and his Sue until Rin’s little sister
Gou called Sam. It was a well-known fact that Rin’s baby sister was quite smitten with Sam after she
first met him during a visit her freshman year and, one way or another, she’d gotten Sam’s phone
number. But she’d never actually had the courage to call him until last week. When she did call, it
wasn’t to flirt or chat really - she asked after her brother because he hadn’t been answering his calls
and she was worried something had happened to him. Even laid back, laugh at the world Sam had
had the decency to become worried after that. Chris smirked to himself. No one could accuse Chris
of being infatuated with Rin and jealous that he’d finally found someone if even Sam
was worried
about him. And didn’t trust this Sue.

Besides, Chris was well over Rin. What was there even to get over if they’d never even kissed? He
wanted Rin to be happy and apparently this Sue was the one who made him happy.

“Sousuke is surprising me,” Rin explained, frowning at the uncharacteristic rancor of Sam, “So I
don’t know exactly when he’ll come. And we haven’t talked for a month so…”
“Fuck off, mate! You two haven’t talked for a month!” Sam interrupted.

Shit. Angry Sam was scary.

Chris felt bad that he was enjoying the third degree from Sam so much. Mostly it was because Sam couldn’t be bothered to care about anything enough to get angry. Except for breaststroke….Sam cared a whole fucking lot about breaststroke.

Rin was starting to look pissed and Chris was glad to see some of that old fire rekindled. For the past month, he’d been a fucking zombie.

“No we haven’t but it’s complicated,” Rin growled, “you don’t know the whole story and I’m not going to tell you because you don’t know him. Sousuke’s my other half and we’ve known each other forever and there’s a lot that you wouldn’t understand…”

Sam threw himself hard against the back of the couch and huffed angrily.

But Sam’s reaction seemed to extinguish Rin’s fire, which in turn made Sam feel bad.

“It is complicated,” Rin said weakly, returning to his former Zombie state, “and I don’t think it’s going to be very easy seeing him at first. We have a lot of things we need to work out. But can you two please just promise me you won’t be mean to him? Please be nice to him? It’s really important to me that he has the perfect trip here. I’ve planned the perfect vacation for him and I need everything to be just perfect because he is perfect. He deserves to be so happy….”

Rin sniffed a few times and, on cue, the water works began. God, Rin was such a fucking crybaby! To hide his tears, Rin tilted his head down and Chris felt a pang of regret. He hated seeing Rin like this.

“I just want to be perfect for him…he deserves that after everything he’s been through….” Rin whispered down to his hands.

Chris wished bitterly that Rin hadn’t gone to Japan and found his long lost friend/boyfriend/whatever. He’d been a pathetic, sobbing mess since and it was hard to see him like this. It was worse than when Sue disappeared during their first year.

Wasn’t love supposed to make people happy?

“Of course we’ll be nice to him!” Sam said enthusiastically, returning to his usual, puppy-dog enthusiastic self because he hated seeing Rin like this too.

Rin looked up and managed a weak, teary smile before retreating back to his room.

God what a tragedy.

“You be nice to Sue all you want,” Chris muttered venomously, “but I don’t like the guy. Not telling Rin when he’s coming and refusing to speak to him for a whole month…after they’ve only been together two months? Sounds like a wanker or a psychopath or both…”

Sam kicked him.

“Be nice to Sue,” Sam chided, “We all know you’ve still got a flame for Rin, but come on man, if it didn’t happen by now, it’s definitely not going to happen when Rin’s back in Japan, living with his childhood best friend and current lover. Besides, Rin’s right – we don’t know Sue at all and hell if Rin tells us anything. If Sue is who Rin’s chosen, then I reckon we wouldn’t be doing well by our
boy if we act like wankers ourselves. Even if Sue turns out to be a wanker.”

Chris folded his arms across his chest and pouted, “We’ll see tomorrow, I guess, if this asshole even shows up.”

Chapter End Notes

Next stop....Australia!!!!

Thanks for reading everyone! If you want to chat about SouRin or anything, feel free to look me up!!!

http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

See you next water time :)
Australia, Part 1: A Reunion Left Wanting

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sousuke missed his room.

The hotel room he was staying in for the night was near the Kingsford Smith Airport and it was cheap enough, but it was completely devoid of character and feeling. Somewhere along the line of becoming a real person again, Sousuke’s room preferences had changed. It used to be that he sought these sorts of soulless places out, because they were clean and quiet, a peaceful sanctuary where he could rest. But being back in a place like this made him wish he were home. His room was the first place that had been his for ages and he hadn’t been in it for a month. He’d returned briefly, before he was mugged, and had begun to scribble out a letter to Rin, but he hadn’t finished it. He’d fled both the letter, his feelings, and the place that felt like his. Being separated from his things, his space – it made Sousuke feel rootless and he’d became such a wimp, he detested feeling rootless now.

He wanted to be anchored. He wanted his life back. And he’d fucked everything up, probably irrevocably.

Sighing, Sousuke closed the curtains, shutting out the Sydney lights, craving a more familiar view.

The biggest problem with his room right now was that he’d been imagining Rin in it ever since they’d said goodbye after their brief reunion. The place seemed incomplete now without the streak of purple hair and he’d been fantasizing about doing stupid, domestic things with Rin - waking up with him, doing laundry with him, doing nothing with him. These fantasies had been among the best Sousuke had ever had and now, he’d most likely ruined all possibility that they would ever become reality.

After dreaming so hard for something, it was nothing short of unbearable to be in the place that provided the fantasy’s background. So Sousuke had fled.

Crossing to the bathroom, Sousuke turned on the tap and began to wash his face.

Well Sousuke was here. All his fantasies hinged on whether or not Rin would accept his apology. That’s why Sousuke had clawed his way out to Australia – to apologize and hopefully be forgiven.

Thinking about Rin made acid claw at his throat and, as had been happening since last he spoke with Rin, bile came up in Sousuke’s stomach. He raced over to the toilet and threw up, glad he hadn’t made a mess of the hotel’s bathroom. It seemed to be the only thing Sousuke hadn’t made a complete mess of recently.

When he was finished emptying the acid from his stomach, he returned to the still running sink and rinsed his mouth out, then turned the faucet off. As he unfolded to his full height, he looked at
himself in the mirror for the first time in weeks.

He looked terrible.

Sleeping on the couch at the studio or in cheap hotels like this one, when he couldn’t stand the cold of the warehouse of his studio anymore, had left dark circles under his eyes. Sousuke wanted to blame the dark rings on poor sleeping conditions, but he wasn’t going to lie to himself. Not ever again. He’d slept in much worse places just fine because he was the type who could sleep literally anywhere. No, the dark circles were from the many restless nights he’d spent in pain – both the physical and the emotional kind. He’d not been eating well either. When Sousuke was happy, he could eat more than anyone and he really loved gorging. But he’d always been one to lose his appetite if he was upset and he hadn’t been able to keep a whole lot down. Only two other times before this dreadful month had he been so upset he made himself throw up. But this month – he’d thrown up at least once a day just from pure emotion.

God, what a wimp.

He looked gaunt and his cheekbones had never looked so sharp. Shit, between his hospital stay, his lack of appetite, and the nervous vomiting, he’d probably lost 6 kilos.

Sousuke ran his hand through his hair and blinked back bitter tears.

The one thing Sousuke had in his favor was that Rin thought he was attractive. He’d never seen it for himself – he only saw a too big body and huge ears and droopy eyes – but apparently he was appealing to Rin. Rin had constantly told him how hot he was during their one month together, but surely he wouldn’t say so now. Not when he looked worse than ever before. No way would Rin want to be with him now.

No way would Rin let him apologize. Sousuke didn’t deserve forgiveness.

Sousuke was a damn fool and he’d destroyed the best thing he’d ever had.

Not liking the direction his thoughts were taking, Sousuke went over to his bed, where his duffle bag was lying, and tried to turn his mind to something more positive. Like this stupid old duffle bag. It had been with him through everything. By now it was beaten up from the three laps Sousuke had made around the globe, but Sousuke wouldn’t part with it for the world. While his vision of a room he shared with Rin may be only ever be a desperate dream of his heart, an impossible dream that he’d ruined for himself, at least this old bag would always be his and it would see him through whatever murky future awaited him.

Depressing as it was to feel so much affection for a bag, the thought did give Sousuke a sliver of comfort. No matter what happened, he would have this one thing.

Carefully, Sousuke unzipped his bag and brought out all the clothes he’d bought for his trip. There wasn’t much, six shirts, a pair of jeans, a pair of dark green cargo pants, a pair of swim trunks and a rash guard because he was going to try surfing, no matter if he did it alone or not, his aviators, and a few pairs of socks and underwear. The only other things he had with him was a book that had his map of Sydney tucked inside, his tooth brush and a cheap razor and a comb, both purchased from a vending machine down the hall, his coat, and his black combat boots that he hadn’t worn since his last trek around the globe.

These were his things; all that was really his in this country….

So few things…..
Why he should be so distressed at the lack of possessions was beyond Sousuke. He’d lived like this for years and, if anything, having a room and a home was an aberration from how his usual.

But fuck... he missed his home. It was so, so fucking nice to have a home.

Again, Sousuke blinked back tears, refusing to let them fall.

What was wrong with him anyways?!

He needed to focus! He needed to present himself as well as possible to Rin tomorrow, so by some slim chance Rin would accept his apology and take him back. Because of the rough last month, making himself presentable was going to be a challenge, so he really needed to focus on what he should wear, not about the home he might...

He wasn’t going to think about what might happen, not until he’d seen Rin at least....

Sousuke spread out the choice of shirts on his bed in order to decide which one he should wear tomorrow. They were all pretty similar, deep V-neck T-shirts in olive green, black, dark gray, and navy blue. The exceptions were the black tank top he’d bought to wear at the beach and the denim button up shirt he’d had since high school. It had been looser back then, because he’d gotten bigger, but it still fit and it was soft and comfortable. Really, if Sousuke had to pick three things he’d always want with him no matter what, it would be this denim shirt, his duffle bag, and whatever boots he was currently wearing.

No that wasn’t true.

He’d take Rin over any of these things, any day.

Stop it, stop it, stop it!

He had tried, so, so hard, not to think of Rin too much because thinking of Rin was dangerous, but sometimes...sometimes it was impossible for his traitor mind to think of anything else.

Frustrated with his stupid self, Sousuke grabbed the gray T-shirt and went back to the bathroom. In front of the mirror, he carefully peeled off the white tank top he wore as a night shirt. Doing so revealed the bandage on the left side of his abdomen. As gently as possible, he took off the bandage, revealing the stab wound.

This was the ugliest addition to his appearance and Rin definitely wouldn’t forgive him if he found out about it.

It looked better after three weeks and his doctor said he could go into the ocean if he was very careful to clean it afterwards. But still, it was one more thing that took away from his physical appeal and would no doubt make him ugly in the eyes of Rin. After what happened when Rin finally saw the monstrosity of his shoulder, Rin wasn’t going to be happy when he saw this wound. God, he’d flip the fuck out, especially when he heard how it had happened. Sousuke had sent all his paperwork, proving that he’d not done this to himself, to Kisumi and hopefully Rin would agree to let Kisumi testify on Sousuke’s behalf.

If Rin agreed to ask Kisumi.

If they got far enough that Rin saw his abdomen....

Unlikely, after the terrific ass Sousuke had made of himself....
Feeling his stomach beginning to protest again, Sousuke forced his eyes away from the stab wound up to his shoulder and he immediately calmed down as he looked at what was new there. Unlike every other part of his body, the addition to his shoulder was for once, really nice.

It had been devastating after Rin said he didn’t want to talk, but Sousuke had learned an even more devastating lesson when he was stabbed. His blood had been everywhere and he remembered the terrifying moments as he waited for the ambulance to come rescue him. He’d been lying on the pavement, bathed in the lights from the police car that was taking his teenage mugger away. He didn’t remember any of the sounds because his own heartbeat had been so loud in his ears. And on top of that heartbeat was a primal shout from deep, deep within him that screamed he wouldn’t wake up again if he gave in and closed his eyes.

Miserable and wretched as he was about the whole thing with Rin, Sousuke made himself listen to that primal shout because he finally understood the warning it was trying to give him.

In that moment, he knew what it felt like to be dying and he was scared for his life.

It was the hardest thing Sousuke had ever done, resisting the pull of that deep, final unconsciousness as he waited for help, and in those fearful moments, all the best memories he had crowded themselves into his brain, each demanding his attention.

He thought of his mother, washing his hair as a kid and smiling that sweet, unconscious smile she only showed when she was alone with her babies, and Ichirou, hugging him after a race he did really well in as a kid and carrying Sousuke off the playground when he’d hurt himself, and Kisumi, making some joke and laughing hysterically as he enjoyed a drink with Sousuke and Yasutomo, and Haru, watching Makoto like he was the sun as Makoto asked Sousuke to live with them, and Makoto, that wonderful, wonderful moment when Sousuke and Makoto ran into each other and Makoto recognized him. Someone recognizing Sousuke! After years as a living ghost, gliding through the world without being seen, someone saw him!

Sousuke had never told anyone, but their encounter wasn’t as much of an accident as everyone thought. Sousuke had been sitting in the train station, looking out at the people passing him by and feeling very much a stranger in his homeland, when he recognized Makoto in the crowd. Getting up and putting himself in Makoto’s path so that oblivious Makoto had no choice but to run into him, it had been among the bravest things Sousuke had ever done and it had been well worth it for all that had happened afterwards. But that first moment of recognition, that was the second happiest Sousuke had ever felt! It hadn’t even had anything to do with Rin. It was just so fucking nice to be seen by someone.

But in his time of dying, Sousuke had thought of Rin more than anyone else….not any one particular moment as with the rest of them, but of all the different versions of Rin that Sousuke had known throughout the years. All the images that had imprinted themselves on his heart and would always, always be with him. There was Rin before they were friends, when Sousuke was working up the courage to ask the pretty, smiling boy to play with him, not realizing that it was weird for him to think of another boy as pretty. There was Rin running around the playground with Sousuke and Kisumi, laughing like there was no tomorrow. There was Rin, playing MacGruber and O’Neil, police officers extraordinaire and promising each other they would always have each other’s backs. There was Rin in Sousuke’s arms, weeping violently because he would never see his father again. There was Rin, racing Sousuke butterfly as kids. There was the first letter Sousuke received from Rin when Rin left for Australia. There was Rin as a second year swimmer in high school, yelling at Haru in the hallway about how he was finished swimming – he’d been so hurt it had taken Sousuke’s breath away. There was Rin, looking at him with a mixture of bewilderment and joy when Sousuke was introduced to the class at Samezuka. There was Rin, crying into Sousuke’s chest
when the ugly truth about Sousuke’s shoulder came out. There was Rin, sleeping in the bunk below him, making Sousuke’s whole body ache with want, night after night. There was Rin, telling Sousuke he would wait for him, giving some form to what seemed the most impossible dream. There was Rin, saying goodbye as he went to Australia again. There was Rin, seeing Sousuke again, kissing Sousuke, sleeping with Sousuke, telling Sousuke that he was in love with him too…

Sousuke had been in plenty of dangerous situations before and he’d hurt himself on purpose before, but those times he’d never really felt like he might die. He could hurt and bleed, but he knew deep down that it wasn’t really the end. But being stabbed….that was as close to the edge as he’d ever come and brushing so close to death had scared Sousuke shitless.

He’d never been so scared. Mortally scared.

And that primal shout deep within him had begged him to live, to never come back to this place hovering between life and death until Sousuke was fucking old and gray.

Sousuke finally listened.

As shitty and lonely as his life had been at times, there were these memories…these precious, precious memories….they’d made this shitty life special and had filled Sousuke with happiness, however brief.

Just before he lost consciousness in the ambulance, safely on the way to the hospital, Sousuke had decided, once and for all, that he wanted to live as much as he possibly could.

And he really, really hoped he could share his life with Rin. But even if things went bad between them and Rin cast him out, Sousuke still wanted to live.

Because he wanted more memories and he didn’t want to let go of the precious ones he already had.

Sousuke smiled at himself in the mirror and rubbed the tattoo he’d had done two weeks ago.

As promised, he’d kept the lotus flower on his shoulder and while he was in the hospital, Sousuke had reworked Rin’s original design so that it was his as well. It only vaguely resembled a flower, it was geometric and jagged and Sousuke loved it. As soon as he was able, he’d gone to a tattoo parlor and had them ink him up.

Tomorrow would tell if he’d lost Rin forever, because he was a massive idiot and it would be his fault for ruining things, but at least he’d always have the memories of what being loved felt like and he never, never wanted to forget them. Maybe that’s all Sousuke would get, those precious few memories, but even if that was all it was enough. Probably more than a pathetic, ugly, loser like him deserved anyway.

No matter what happened tomorrow, he wasn’t going to go back to the muck. Listening to that primal shout within himself, he was going to gather what strength he had and he was going to find the light and rise above the shit that threatened to drown him. If he lost Rin, it would put him back in the shit and it would probably take a long time to rise above it. But he was going to rise.

He was going to live.

He only hoped Rin would at least give Sousuke a chance.

________________________
The next morning, Sousuke gave up on sleeping and began to get ready after a sleepless night, tossing and turning and thinking. He tried to make himself look presentable and he tried to eat breakfast, but he could only manage toast and there was nothing he could really do to keep himself from looking like a zombie. The gray shirt and the denim button up was what he chose to wear with the jeans, but it wasn’t good enough for Rin. His hair wasn’t cooperating either, no matter how long he fusssed with it. He stared at his reflection with revulsion; it was infuriating that Sousuke hadn’t pulled himself together enough to be more presentable.

But that’s just the way things were.

Sousuke checked out at 6:32 am and pulled out his map, his eyes easily finding the swimming center Rin practiced at easily because he’d marked the place. As a precaution because he would inevitably get lost, Sousuke had marked out everywhere that was to be of importance to Rin – his pool, his apartment, his university, even a couple bars Rin had mentioned frequenting. Because he was bored, he also drew pictures for the different places. He knew Rin was going to be swimming from 6:00 – 9:00 today and that was where Sousuke was hoping to meet up with him. If possible, he would really like to watch Rin swim.

From his hotel, it should have taken Sousuke 45 minutes to get the pool. Given the generous padding of time he always had to give himself for finding new places, Sousuke arrived at the pool at 8:33. Quietly, he walked into the complex and headed towards the spectator section, stopping before going into the bleachers. There were windows overlooking the pool that would prove a better place to observe without being seen than the bleachers would have. Below, in the 50 meter pool, Sousuke could see the logo he knew to belong to Rin’s team, bobbing up and down in the water on a multitude of swim caps as the swimmers swam their set. From this distance, Sousuke couldn’t tell which one was Rin.

He really wanted to see Rin, but he also really did not want to be seen.

The pool had a lay out similar to the pools back home, with two sets of bleachers flanking the pool on the second floor with long hallways running down the length of the bleachers and connecting back to the lobby. There were a few people sitting and watching on the right hand side bleachers, so Sousuke went to the left. The lights weren’t turned on, as it was still early and only Rin’s swim team was using the facility, and Sousuke used the darkness as cover.

Slowly he walked up the hall, looking in through each door openings as he got closer and closer to the far end of the pool, where the coach was barking out the last set of the day and everyone was drinking from their water bottles. Each step brought the swimmers below into sharper focus, but still Sousuke was having a hard time seeing which one was Rin. They all wore the same swim caps and Sousuke was still a bit far away to see the faces clearly.

The coach finished announcing the set – it was really bizarre to hear a set being given in English and not Japanese – and the swimmers began to take off. This made it even more difficult for Sousuke to see which one down there was Rin. He wanted to get closer, but he didn’t dare. He really wanted to see Rin first…

Sousuke watched from the shadowy doorway until the set was over and cool down began. Most swimmers took off their caps as they swam the final few lengths of practice, letting the cool water wash away the sweat that had accumulated. Sousuke strained his eyes, trying to find which head belonged to Rin.
It was impossible.

Sousuke was too high up and there were about five people who could have been Rin – they were all wearing practice suits of the same length and it was hard to tell Rin’s hair color apart from others because everyone’s hair was wet and darker. There was one head that looked more likely to belong to Rin than any of the others, but Sousuke just couldn’t tell.

The possibility that he was looking on Rin, with his own eyes and not through a computer screen, caused his heartbeat to spike and his stomach to give a nervous heave.

The toast was going to come up.

He would have to give up before he confirmed whether or not he was in fact looking at his beloved Rin. He wasn’t willing to blow his cover by throwing up all over the place and drawing attention to himself.

Quickly, Sousuke ran to the lobby’s bathroom and locked himself in a stall, just in time for his toast to come up in the toilet.

He’d just have to go downstairs and wait outside for Rin to show up after he was dressed. It wasn’t ideal, but it was the best he could manage.

“Rin, you all right, mate?” Chris called from the next lane. Rin turned his eyes away from the bleachers and down to his teammate and roommate.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Rin called back as he continued his warm down of head’s up, slow breaststroke. He dipped his head underwater to clear his mind.

He could have sworn he’d seen someone, lurking in the doorway up in the bleachers. Lurking in shadows….that’s something Sousuke would do. Could it…could it really be…him?

Rin was warming down, but the possibility that he’d seen his beloved, after all this time and all this worry, made his heart rate spike like he was doing a sprint set.

Chris was watching him as he swam by. He could really give Makoto a run for his money in the worrying department.

Rin stole another glance up at the bleachers, but there were no more shadowy figures.

It wouldn’t have surprised Rin if his head had made the whole thing up.

It wouldn’t have been the first time this horrible, horrible month that he’d conjured up an image of Sousuke.

Rin ducked underwater again and swam, knowing he’d probably break down again if he was above water.

God, he really, really, really hoped Sousuke came today.

What if…what if he didn’t come? He hadn’t told anyone about his self-imposed separation from Sousuke this past month, so he didn’t have anyone else’s perspective on whether or not it was a good
idea. What if it had been a terrible idea? What if Sousuke didn’t come?

It took the rest of cool down to push that thought aside because it was too much to think about today. He took an exceptionally long shower, trying to warm himself up because the thought he was trying not to think about…it was making him feel really, really cold. By the time he went to change into his clothes, Chris and Sam were already dressed and out of the locker room.

Sousuke was sitting on a bench, facing the main entrance of the swimming facility. He was beginning to worry that this wasn’t the entrance the swimmers came out of when he saw the first girl in the team sweats and with a messy bun, wet with chlorine, walk out. Swimmers. All over the world, you could always tell who was a swimmer. Sousuke had to be in the right place.

With his book in his hand as a decoy and his aviators hiding him, Sousuke waited and watched as more of Rin’s teammates filed out, yawning and definitely heading towards a massive feast. Sousuke remembered those days well, of feeling so hungry you could eat the whole universe after a long practice. He wished he was capable of holding food down. Sousuke waited for fifteen minutes and still he didn’t see Rin. As he waited anxiously, a terrible thought formed in Sousuke’s mind.

Maybe Rin hadn’t been at practice.

If that was the case, he would have to use his map to find Rin’s apartment. Easy.

Sousuke really wished he’d had the chance to watch Rin swim.

A pair of guys, both blond though one had hair that was Rin’s length and one had shorter cropped hair, came over and sat down on the bench next to Sousuke. They waved goodbye to a few of their teammates and then it was just the three of them. They looked over at him curiously, but Sousuke buried his head in his book until they lost interest. When they started chatting again, Sousuke was able to watch the door without being noticed by the pair. His English hadn’t deteriorated as much as he’d thought it would. He understood every word:

“Man, our Rincess sure is taking his sweet time in the shower,” the guy with shorter hair said.

Rincess?

“Ah, give him a break Chris. Kid’s been having a really rough go of it lately,” answered the guy with longer hair, “he’s leaving soon and he’s under a lot of stress with this boyfriend of his…”

Rincess. Boyfriend. They had to be talking about Sousuke. Sousuke forced himself to flip a page, to keep up the appearance that he was reading. He wondered if the pair noticed his cheeks burning.

The shorter hair guy – Chris – interrupted his friend with what sounded like a snarl.

“Boyfriend,” he scoffed, “Don’t even talk about this boyfriend! Some boyfriend! Dude sounds like a complete psychopath! What kind of asshole refuses to talk to their boyfriend a whole month before they are supposed to come visit!? And what the hell, Sam? Why the hell did you change your mind about Sue, anyways?”
Sousuke swallowed hard, feeling his stomach starting to become upset again, but for different reasons than he’d had all month.

Psychopath?

This is what Rin’s friends thought of him? That he was a psychopath?

Oh god! He shouldn’t have come!

Out of the corner of his eye, Sousuke saw the longer hair guy – Sam – glance over at Sousuke. Was he picking up on all the things roiling inside Sousuke? He turned back to his friend, whose back was to Sousuke.

“Yes, sure that’s what I thought when Rin first told us, but I’ve been thinking and I’ve decided I don’t know the guy so I guess I really can’t say one way or another anymore,” Sam said, Sousuke could hear his voice had changed, like he was now on guard, “I mean, you heard Rin last night. If Rin doesn’t want to explain things, that’s his choice and this Sousuke guy, he’s Rin’s mess to fix. We’ve not met the guy yet and it feels pretty unfair to declare him the bad guy when we don’t know what he looks like. And don’t forget to factor in that our Rincess is the biggest drama queen in the universe, so I’m sure whatever issues the two have aren’t one sided. Nothing with Rin ever is. All we can do is hope Sousuke shows up and that he works things out with Rin.”

Sousuke felt the tiniest bit of relief, hearing this stranger defend him. But he’d changed his mind; Sam had also blamed Sousuke. Maybe he was just saving face because Sousuke could be anyone or maybe he had already guessed Sousuke was the one sitting on the bench next to them. Either way, he’d changed his tune. That meant he’d also thought Sousuke was a….

Psychopath…..

“Well I bet you 50 quid we never meet Sue,” Chris continued savagely. Sam made a noise of protest, but didn’t say anything. Chris laughed.

Psychopath….

Sousuke wanted to defend himself, but listening in on a conversation about himself probably qualified as psychopath behavior…Sousuke…Sousuke wanted to run away and hide. No one had ever called him a psychopath before and given his past behavior, Sousuke couldn’t claim he wasn’t one. This was a huge mistake. Rin had a life here, friends who cared about him enough to defend their friend from a psychopath. Who was Sousuke to come and take Rin away from this? Especially when he had so little to offer….when his behavior could be deemed psychotic….

He hoped the pair couldn’t see the blush that was creeping down his neck. Sousuke had never felt more humiliated for thinking he deserved Rin….

He was nothing…these strangers knew it and they hadn’t even met Sousuke….

“Fine, don’t bet!” Chris went on, “but he’s not going to come and Rin’s going to be heartbroken! Will he even go back to Japan now?”

Sam sighed in exasperation, “Jesus Christ! Get off it! That’s what you want so you can be the shoulder to cry on and give him lots of kisses, but newsflash buddy – not going to happen! Rin already was going to go back to Japan for his mom and he’s not going to stay here just because you want him to! Get over him already!”

Sousuke was too depressed to get properly upset at this newest piece of information…still, it made
some ripples.

Chris…liked…Rin? There was someone else? Sousuke hadn’t given much thought to Rin’s social life in Australia but he knew there were exes. He’d just never thought he would meet any. In his mind, they didn’t really exist because the thought of Rin with someone else….of Rin being happy with someone else…

Someone else could do it better than Sousuke….

Maybe even this Chris guy.

“Fuck off!” Chris growled, “100% not true! Not into Rin! I’m just worried about him and I don’t want to see him get hurt by this asshole! And if this asshole shows up, he’s going to fucking hurt Rin! Look at how bad Rin’s been this past month and the psycho isn’t even here! Say what you want, Chris, but nothing good can come of this!”

Sousuke closed his book and put it away, running his hands through his hair. The pair continued to bicker about Rin, but Sousuke couldn’t listen to them anymore.

Rin had a whole life outside of Sousuke. Their lives, he’d dreamed, had always run parallel to each others’ yet he’d thought they’d always been connected. But their lives weren’t connected, they were separated. Rin had this whole other existence that Sousuke knew nothing about. And Rin had always been running away from Sousuke just to have this separate existence.

He’d fought hard to have a different life in Australia; Sousuke shouldn’t have come and interfered.

Sousuke tried hard not to draw conclusions because he didn’t want to feel like shit, more than he already did anyway, but it was really hard not to panic.

He put his left hand on his right shoulder and tried to remember everything he’d felt last night.

He wanted to live. He would rise above.

But without Rin, he wouldn’t be fine. He couldn’t even imagine what it would be like if Rin decided Sousuke really didn’t have a place in his life after all. And all he’d really ever wanted, all he’d wanted forever and ever, was to share his life with Rin.

Sousuke moved to get up, to run as far away as he could because this was unbearable, but before he could move an inch, he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

“Sousuke!”

Chris and Sam turned to look at Rin the same time Sousuke looked up, but the other two may as well have been strangers.

Rin could only see Sousuke.

Sitting before him in real life. Waiting for him. As he said he would.

Sousuke!
He’d come!
He’d come!

Rin had never felt more relieved in his entire life!

His Sousuke had come back to him!

Rin was smiling as wide as he possibly could and for what felt like the first time in a month, he wasn’t crying. He wanted to leap on top of Sousuke and cover him in kisses and thank him a million times over for coming and proving that Rin could trust Sousuke!

Seeing his reaction, Sousuke stood up and took off his sexy as aviators, so that Rin could really see him.

His smile faded and the intense relief he’d felt was replaced with deep concern.

He looked different.

He didn’t look happy.

He looked….like the guy from the letters. Not the guy Rin had seen in Tokyo.

“Hi, Rin,” Sousuke greeted him in Japanese, which sounded so foreign here in front of his pool.

His voice…he sounded small…

He looked and sounded….utterly miserable.

Rin wanted to run over to him, kiss him, thank him for coming and for proving that Rin had nothing to fear, hold him, and never let go. But Sousuke looked like the last thing he wanted was for Rin to come anywhere near him.

He looked like he was in pain.

So Rin stopped himself from coming any closer. He didn’t want to hurt Sousuke.

“Wait, this is Sousuke?” Chris demanded, reminding Rin that he wasn’t alone with Sousuke. Rin looked at Chris and Sam and was surprised to see them both blushing and glancing sideways at Sousuke. There was a distinct air of awkwardness and anger and Rin couldn’t understand why.

“Oh yeah,” Rin said in Japanese to Sousuke, “These are my roommates Chris and Sam.”

Rin switched to English for his roommates, “Guys, this is Sousuke.”

An awkward silence lasted a few seconds, both Chris and Sam staring at Sousuke as though he were a ghost or something.

“Hello,” Sousuke finally muttered, in English.

Sousuke felt the weight of Sam and Chris’ glare without needing to look at them and he very much wished he could crawl into a hole to hide.

Or have Rin come and hug him.
He wanted Rin to hold him.

But Rin may as well be standing a mile away from Sousuke and he wasn’t going to come any closer to help Sousuke.

Sousuke didn’t know what to do.

Sousuke knew what the roommates thought of him and they knew that Sousuke knew. None of them knew how to react. Worse still, Sousuke was watching Rin out of the corner of his eye and he could see that Rin noticed the awkwardness.

It was Sam who saved the day.

“Good to meet you, Sousuke,” he said genially and held out his hand, “Nice to officially meet you. Sorry about earlier, we would have introduced ourselves if we’d known it was you.”

Grateful for the life raft, Sousuke met Sam’s eye and shook his hand.

“It’s okay,” he mumbled as quietly as he could in English, “Nice to meet you too.”

It really wasn’t, but Sam was smiling and his smile seemed genuine. Sam hadn’t been as angry with him as Chris was. Sousuke didn’t dare turn to Chris or Rin.

“What’s all this about earlier?” Rin asked in English. How bizarre to hear his Rin speaking English and not have it be some text in English class or something.

“Nothing.” Chris said quickly.

They were all quiet and Sousuke knew Rin was looking at all of them, trying to figure out what was going on. Sousuke wasn’t going to say anything. He definitely wasn’t going to say anything.

“I’m starving,” Sam announced after a few tense moments, “Let’s go get breakfast!”

So they went to get breakfast. Sousuke buried his hands in his pockets and shouldered his duffle bag, trying his best to avoid everyone’s eyes while also looking at Rin out of the corners of his eyes.

It really was wonderful to see him again.

Rin wouldn’t touch him and he probably wouldn’t forgive Sousuke, but it made him feel a lot better just looking at Rin.

He was walking right next to him but there was a huge gulf between them. Sousuke wanted desperately to cross it, he wanted to take Rin in his arms and beg him to stay with Sousuke, he wanted to hold him close and kiss him and smell him and run his fingers through his hair. But Rin hadn’t offered to hug him earlier so apparently they weren’t touching. Sousuke hadn’t earned that right.


Sousuke quirked up a smile out of the corners of his mouth and he turned his head slightly, so he could see more of Rin.

“Yeah you have,” he said, “at Samezuka we were in the same English class. And we started learning in elementary school together.”
Rin laughed, lighting a small spark of hope inside Sousuke’s heart, “Ah I guess that’s true. It’s just really weird hearing you speak to people in English and not just reciting things back to the teacher.”

Sousuke shrugged, trying to not show how happy Rin’s easy laugh had made him, “I didn’t speak anything but English for three years, you know.”

Rin smiled and Sousuke dared to look at him fully. But seeing Sousuke’s face from close up made that smile fade and Sousuke quickly turned and stared back at the ground.

“Are you alright, Sousuke?” Rin asked.

“I’m fine,” Sousuke lied. He hated having to lie, but he really didn’t want to tell Rin the truth. About how badly he was hurting.

About how badly he wanted Rin to hug him.

“What was that about earlier, with those two?” Rin pressed. Sousuke had a feeling he wasn’t using their names so they wouldn’t know he was talking about them.

“Nothing,” Sousuke said quickly, “it’s fine.”

Rin huffed in frustration and again, Sousuke sank back into despair. He didn’t want Rin to know his friends hated him, because with all his heart he hoped Rin would allow a place for him in Rin’s life and those guys…they were a part of that life. If Rin knew how much they hated Sousuke, he probably wouldn’t let Sousuke back in.

Chris made an effort to lag behind Rin and…this Sousuke guy. Who was apparently Rin’s boyfriend. Chris couldn’t believe it. Sousuke was, admittedly, sexy as shit – he was probably the tallest Japanese guy he’d ever seen and there was something really dark and very, very appealing about him. Of course Rin’s boyfriend would look like a fucking gorgeous ass model. He was some kind of artist too, though Rin hadn’t elaborated at all on it. In fact, Rin hadn’t elaborated at all about Sousuke. Chris’ cheeks grew hot, remembering all the crap he’d said in front of Sousuke about Rin. And Sam. He’d brought up something that hadn’t been true for a very long time. About Rin. And Chris.

It had been a stupid, one-sided crush during their freshman year; it was well over.

Well, mostly over. Chris would always think Rin was really special and hot. Chris would always care about him in a way that may always border on romantic, but would never cross that line. Because Chris had never dared risk his friendship with Rin. He’d never confessed and he’d given up.

That’s why Chris had to hate this Sousuke guy. Dark and appealing as he may be, he was a really shitty boyfriend and he flirted uncomfortably with the line between emotionally abusive. Who the hell tells their boyfriend they don’t want to talk to them for an entire month? There hadn’t been any time to interrogate Rin about it since last night, but the whole thing made Chris dislike Sousuke more.

And now?
He’d been with them the entire time they’d been reunited and they hadn’t even shaken hands or accidentally bumped into each other. What the hell was wrong with Sousuke? If it was Chris who was the boyfriend, he’d jump Rin’s bones immediately upon seeing him.

But these two…they were barely even talking! And Chris had spent quite a lot of time around Rin to tell that the stoop in his shoulders, the droop in his head…Rin was unhappy!

The boyfriend coming was supposed to make Rin happy! He’d been absolutely miserable for a whole month, Rin didn’t deserve this!

He didn’t deserve an emotionally abusive, asshole as a boyfriend!

He deserved…the world.

They arrived at one of Rin’s favorite breakfast places and the whole time, Rin was watching Sousuke. He’d lost weight since the last time Rin had seen him, and it had only been two months! Was Rin just not remembering what he looked like correctly? But his cheekbones had never stood out so much and Sousuke, King of Naps, had never had such dark circles under his eyes before. The worst part of all was how pale he looked. It was summer in Japan and hot as hell. Sousuke looked like it was the middle of winter and there was a light sheen of sweat on his skin. Not the same kind of sheen Rin remembered from the handful of times they’d been able to have sex during the reunion weekend…like a sick kind of sweat.

God was he sick?

Rin wanted to ask, but he hesitated. Whatever was going on, no doubt it had a lot to do with the past month. Sousuke had always been bad at taking care of himself when he was upset – something both he and Ichirou had often discussed while Sousuke was gone. Clearly, Sousuke had been taking really terrible care of himself this past month because he’d never looked so sick before.

It was Rin’s fault.

The month where they weren’t speaking had been meant as an exercise of trust, because Rin had been having such a hard time believing that Sousuke was going to be there after he got off the phone. Rin had explained all that during their last Skype conversation, he’d told Sousuke how he wanted to be the perfect boyfriend for him and the only way he knew to become the perfect boyfriend was to get over this fear, that Sousuke would suddenly not be there. Yeah, that fight about the whole topping issue had sucked, but Rin had kind of sprung it on Sousuke and he should have known Sousuke would take something like that pretty poorly, given his issues with his sexuality in general. Sousuke had been a huge dick about the whole thing, but so had Rin. And the fight had just proven to Rin how badly he needed to work on trusting that Sousuke wouldn’t leave him because he’d felt like he was going crazy with worry when Sousuke didn’t pick up the phone afterwards. In swimming, if you were not doing well on your start, you worked on your start until it’s better. Without the start, you can’t swim the race. Simple as that. Rin was having a hard time believing that Sousuke wouldn’t leave him, so he’d done what he thought would best help him work on that believing. By forcing himself into a situation that he had to believe Sousuke would come back.

And he had!

Sousuke had proven that Rin’s fears were groundless. But Sousuke was hurting, he was so
obviously hurting. Whatever had happened during that month, Sousuke hadn’t emerged from it well.

Rin wanted to tell him how hard it had been for him too, how many sleepless nights he’d had worrying that Sousuke wouldn’t come, that he’d pushed away the best friend he’d ever had and he’d be left alone. But talking about these things, getting to the bottom of Sousuke’s suffering, well discussing all that over the massive swimmer breakfasts Chris and Sam were eating didn’t seem very appropriate. Sousuke himself had only ordered oatmeal and Rin was watching carefully enough to see he was only pushing around his food in his bowl, not actually eating.

That was probably the most worrying sign of all, because Sousuke had always been a huge eater. He wouldn’t have grown so big if he wasn’t! Sousuke must be sick.

Chris made a really valiant effort at small talk, but Rin and Sousuke both gave bare minimum answers, so eventually Chris gave up and he and Sam prattled on about something or another. Rin wasn’t really paying attention. He was too focused on Sousuke.

They paid their check – Sousuke insisted on paying for Rin’s breakfast – and while they waited for their receipts, Rin finally plucked up the courage to talk to Sousuke.

“You doing all right, Sousuke?” he asked in Japanese, “You’re cheeks are flushed and your eyes are brighter than normal. It looks like you have a fever.”

Sousuke looked at Rin for a while, many different things going on beneath the surface that Rin couldn’t decipher, then he smiled apologetically.

“I’m r tired,” he admitted quietly.

“You haven’t been sleeping well, I’d guess.” Rin replied.

Sousuke’s nod was his answer.

“Well we can go back to my place and sleep today. I have afternoon practice at 3, so we can do something after I get back. And we can stop by a pharmacy on the way to my place too, I don’t have any medicine.”

“Okay,” Sousuke agreed.

Sousuke had always hated taking medicine, so Rin was surprised he didn’t put up a fight. He must really not be feeling very well.

Well, Rin had decided he was going to be the best boyfriend possible to Sousuke, so he was going to take ridiculously good care of him!

Years of living and swimming with Rin had made Sam acutely attuned to Rin’s body language. They were waiting outside the pharmacy two blocks from their house and Rin was slumped against a wall, watching the pharmacy doors with his eyebrows furrowed together with concern. Although Sam couldn’t understand the Japanese they’d spoken to each other, he could tell that Rin was very worried.

Rin…worried about someone…
In a weird way, it was pretty cool to see. Rin, as fun and awesome as he was, tended to be pretty self centered and he had always had a hard time getting outside of himself. Sam understood this and had quickly come to terms with the way Rin was. If Rin wasn’t such an enthusiastic dork all the time, Sam wouldn’t have bothered, but Sam forgave Rin all his selfishness because Rin was such a golden child and yeah, Sam loved him loads. Besides, Rin generally had very good intentions and he was all about sacrificing for the team and keeping the apartment nice and neat; the arena Rin’s selfishness most reared it’s ugly head was with romantic relations and as Sam was straight and had no interest in Rin, he hadn’t ever been too effected. Others had. Chris had. But that was a long time ago. Sam was at first shocked when Rin announced he was in love and he had a boyfriend. Sam didn’t believe Rin was capable of really being in love with people because he was just so damn selfish.

But then Sousuke showed up.

From the very moment Rin laid eyes on Sousuke, Rin had become this completely other person. He’d been attentive, fussy, and completely focused on his boyfriend. This level of concern, the tender way Rin watched Sousuke, that look of profound relief when he first saw Sousuke….this was all behavior Sam had never seen in Rin.

Rin must really love this Sousuke dude.

Sam smiled as he watched Rin.

He didn’t think it was possible, but no doubt about it, Rin really loved Sousuke. This Sousuke must be something special to make even the self centered Rincess get outside of himself.

And the sidelong looks, the tiny smile when Rin talked to him, the way Sousuke positioned his body in relation to Rin, the little jolt he gave whenever Rin said his name…this Sousuke kid was pretty hard core in love with Rin too.

Hopefully they could work out whatever issue had separated them for the past month. He didn’t know the particulars and he still didn’t 100% trust Sousuke, but Sam had been pleasantly surprised to see the effect Sousuke had on Rin. He wanted to see what it looked like when they were in full on happy couple mode. Judging on the awkwardly reunited and still in the middle of a fight mode they were still on, the happy couple mode was bound to be ridiculous.

While he hadn’t been as vocally upset that Rin was leaving so soon as Chris had been, Sam was going to miss the Rincess a lot. But meeting Sousuke, seeing how much Rin cared about him and how much Sousuke cared about Rin, well it was going to make the goodbye a little bit easier.

Good for Rin.

Sousuke emerged from the pharmacy and Rin couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him. As they walked home, Sam watched them walk together, not touching but with their bodies angled towards each other. He wanted them to bridge the gap and hold hands, because that would be nice as shit, but they weren’t there yet.

Hopefully, they would get there soon because Sam was super curious now to see what loving Rin would be like.

Sam glanced over at Chris, walking next to him and glowering at the couple. No doubt, he saw it too. How could he not? Poor kid. In that department, Sam was pretty glad Rin was leaving because it was sometimes hard to watch unrequited love between his two best friends. At least now, hopefully, Chris would actually move on. He just sincerely hoped Rin wouldn’t be too mean when he found out all the stuff Chris had been saying earlier. Kid had a bad habit of putting his foot in his mouth,
especially when it came to Rin.

No doubt Chris was thinking the same thing.

In any case, the next two weeks until Rin left were bound to be interesting.

“Here we are,” Rin announced in English as he opened the front door. His eyes quickly scanned the living room to make sure it was just how he left it – clean and neat as can be. Chris and Sam walked in and wandered off to their rooms before Sousuke cautiously took a step over the threshold. For a few minutes, he looked around and Rin watched him nervously, hoping he liked it. It wasn’t the piece of art Sousuke’s own room was, but it had still been Rin’s home for three years.

Sousuke turned around and gave Rin a tiny little smile that made Rin’s toes curl.

“You have a very nice place,” he said quietly.

Stupid as it was, his approval made Rin ridiculously happy. How embarrassing! To get this excited over someone saying his apartment was nice!

“Here’s my room,” Rin mumbled as he walked over to his door. Sousuke followed him.

Rin opened his door and held it open for Sousuke. For a moment, Sousuke hesitated and that hesitation made Rin feel really nervous. The bedroom…where Sousuke was going to be staying…with Rin…

As Sousuke walked through the open door, he passed closer by Rin than he had been yet and it took a lot of will power for Rin to not reach out and grab Sousuke and hold him tight. But Sousuke had been really guarded since he arrived and anything physical seemed like it would be extremely unwelcomed. Rin wasn’t going to push it, not after the past month.

No matter how much he wanted those big strong arms wrapped around him and to bury his face into that chest.

Sousuke smiled as he looked around Rin’s room because it looked so much like the room they shared at Samezuka. Rin had always been a bit of a clean freak and it showed. Everything was tidy and well dusted and pristine. Still, with such a room you would think there was no room for personality, but everywhere Sousuke looked, everything screamed of Rin. His CDs, his clothes, his skateboard, swimming things….Rin was written all over the room. Sousuke frowned.

Rin was complete here, he didn’t really need to come back to Japan. He didn’t really need Sousuke to be complete.

“So you can take a nap in here,” Rin said quietly behind him, “I have afternoon practice though, but we will hang out later.”

“Okay,” Sousuke agreed.
Sousuke had fallen asleep in about two minutes after he’d taken the flu medicine and he’d been passed out ever since. Rin was trying to be quiet as he got ready for afternoon practice, but really he knew it didn’t matter. Once out, Sousuke was out and, from the looks of him, he had been operating on a pretty big sleep deficit.

Rin looked over at the bed, where Sousuke was sleeping soundly.

Because of the tree in the courtyard of their complex, just outside Rin’s window, the afternoon light pouring into the room was dabbled and the breeze outside made the shadows dance across Sousuke. When Rin had stayed with Sousuke in Tokyo, Sousuke had slept fairly stiffly. He’d never slept like that before and after hearing some of Sousuke’s travel stories, Rin thought the change must be because he’d slept on his guard for years. Or he wasn’t used to sleeping with people next to him. Either way, he couldn’t have been sleeping very restfully if he couldn’t relax even as he slept. It was nice to see that under the influence of the flu medicine at least, Sousuke was finally resting. His face, which Sousuke usually tried to wear as an emotionless mask, was relaxed and open and serene. He looked so peaceful.

He looked so beautiful.

Rin wanted to respect the no touching policy Sousuke had been operating under since his arrival, but Rin had been holding back all day and he’d missed Sousuke so fucking much and seeing Sousuke sleeping like this….Sousuke just looked too perfect for Rin to resist any longer. Quietly, he tiptoed across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, right next to Sousuke.

Up close, Rin could see that Sousuke’s face was slightly flushed from the heat of his body as he slept. No doubt Sousuke’s shirt, which he absolutely refused to take off, contributed to the flush, but Sousuke always generated a ton of heat while he slept. Rin smiled to himself as his body remembered how warm Sousuke’s body had been when they’d slept next to each other. Rin had only slept with Sousuke a total of two nights, but even that had been enough to make a deep impression on him, to leave him craving that warmth, that comfort. Since Tokyo, Rin often found his mind wandering back to those nights. The sex, which had been awesome, but also just the feel of his back against Sousuke’s and the warm, sturdy presence of him…Rin couldn’t wait until Sousuke was comfortable enough and felt well enough to wrap Rin in a warm cocoon made entirely of Sousuke. He’d been looking forward to sleeping with his Sousuke almost as much as he’d been looking forward to having sex with his Sousuke.

His Sousuke….

Carefully, Rin reached out and pushed some of the messy hair out of Sousuke’s eyes, smiling stupidly to himself. With his hand, he caressed Sousuke’s warm cheek.

He was so warm.

For a moment, Rin hesitated, remembering that they weren’t there yet. Sousuke had been standing so far from him, he’d been crossing his arms so tightly across his chest, all to warn Rin he wasn’t ready for touching. He wasn’t feeling well.

Rin shouldn’t be touching Sousuke at all; he shouldn’t be thinking about kissing Sousuke yet.

Anyways, Sousuke was sleeping. Rin shouldn’t be a creeper.

Sousuke turned slightly so that his serene face was turned more towards Rin, as if he were leaning
into Rin’s touch.

Rin had missed Sousuke so so damn much.

And Sousuke was just so beautiful like this, cuddled up with Rin’s pillow, sleeping like a baby.

Maybe this was creepy as shit, but his Sousuke had come for him and Rin had missed him terribly.

Closing his eyes and praying that Sousuke wouldn’t wake up, Rin leaned over and kissed Sousuke gently on the forehead. In his sleep, Sousuke stirred a bit, tilting his face further towards Rin. Thinking he’d woken Sousuke up, Rin jerked away.

Two things were immediately clear:

1) Sousuke was still sound asleep.

2) The kiss had somehow reached down through whatever medicine induced dreams he was dreaming and made him smile.

That smile…

It would be the end of Rin…

Rin made a quick escape from his room because he both needed to go to swim practice and because Sousuke was absolutely slaying him.

He hoped Sousuke would want to touch Rin soon.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was originally going to be much longer, but I decided to split it into two as it was just getting way too long. Part 2 should be up fairly soon! As always, thanks everyone for reading and for your support!!!!

Feel free to look me up on tumblr: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

I don’t have a super clear vision of what the lotus tattoo looks like, anyone have any suggestions?

Have a great week everyone :)
Sousuke woke up to the golden light of afternoon and, for a very brief moment, he completely forgot where he was. A snatch of conversation drifted in through the cracked open door and with a jolt, Sousuke recognized Rin’s voice.

He’d dreamt of kissing Rin again. The fits of sleep he’d been snatching since he’d been stabbed were filled with dreams of knives and pain and his own death; they’d often woken Sousuke up, screaming. But kissing Rin, his subconscious hadn’t given him that gift in a really long time. The dream hadn’t been especially sexual – as his dreams of Rin usually were. No, it had just been sweet and tender, a gentle kiss on his forehead and the feather light touch of a hand against Sousuke’s cheek. It had filled him with such bliss, he’d woken up smiling for once.

But that sleepy euphoria lasted only until Sousuke recognized a peel of laughter that was undoubtedly Rin’s. The sound of his laughter churned up all the desperate longings of his heart, all the doubts about Rin’s affections, and all the despair he’d been feeling as he waited for Rin to deliver the final blow to their nascent relationship. Sousuke curled into a ball and sat there, trying to listen to the conversation out in the living room unsuccessfully and wishing Rin was in here right now, holding him.

But Rin wouldn’t touch Sousuke and he wasn’t in here. He was happily, pleasantly engaged with his friends. The worst part was, Sousuke couldn’t blame him for wanting to be with his friends over Sousuke. Rin had barely smiled in Sousuke’s company, he certainly hadn’t laughed.

Before allowing himself to sink too far into despair, he forced himself to get out of Rin’s bed, put his pants back on, and go out into the living room, to join the others.

“Sousuke!” Rin greeted in Japanese when he saw Sousuke, “Feel better?”

Sousuke nodded. He was a bit groggy, but yeah, even though he was sad he did feel physically better. A little bit more like a human. Maybe he could eat something.

“Great!” Rin said cheerfully, switching unexpectedly to English, “So my buddies on the swim team are going to this bar nearby called The Traveller and we are going to go meet them! Do you want something to eat before we go? I can make you an omelet.”

Chris and Sam, both laughed and Rin shot them both filthy looks. Sousuke didn’t get it. It must be some joke Rin had with them, something completely unrelated to Sousuke.

“Not really,” he said. Truthfully, he was hungry, but he didn’t feel like eating. He didn’t think he’d throw up again, but he wouldn’t press his luck.

Rin frowned.
“You haven’t eaten since you got here,” Rin retorted angrily, switching back into Japanese, “You didn’t have breakfast and you slept through lunch.”

“I’m not hungry, Rin,” Sousuke protested, though not very forcibly.

He was hungry.

Instead of arguing, Rin got up and went to the kitchen, where he proceeded to grab a protein bar out of a cupboard and tossed it to Sousuke.

“Eat this,” he commanded, a delicious pout spread across his face.

Sousuke wanted to refuse because he was tired of throwing up, but that pout…Sousuke had always been a sucker for Rin’s pout. With Rin watching him, he unwrapped the bar and slowly ate it, trying his best to gauge whether the protein bar would stay down or not. Everything seemed fine; he didn’t feel immediately nauseous.

Chris stood up and leveled an annoyed look at Rin.

“We good to go then?” he asked, “We’re already an hour later than everyone else.”

He wouldn’t look at Sousuke, but there was no mistaking that the comment was barbed and directed at Sousuke. Rin frowned.

“Would you relax, Chris?” Sam called from his chair in the living room, “No one cares if we aren’t there when Lydia gets there.”

Chris opened his mouth to argue. Sousuke interrupted, because he didn’t want to be the cause of a fight and he didn’t want this Chris guy to hate him anymore.

“If you guys want to go, we can go,” Sousuke mumbled in English.

Chris finally looked at Sousuke and he was furious, but what more could he say? As they gathered their things – map, wallet, and passport for Sousuke (he always had his passport with him when he travelled) – Sousuke couldn’t help but steal peeks at Rin. Of course, he was the same pretty boy he’d always been. He looked relaxed and open and happy, the polar opposite of how Sousuke felt. Surely, if Rin was going to break with him, he wouldn’t look so at peace, right? And the protein bar. Sousuke’s face flushed as he thought about that. Rin had done something to take care of him. If he was completely unfeeling towards Sousuke, he wouldn’t have cared how much food Sousuke had eaten. He wouldn’t have insisted they go to the pharmacy to get flu medicine. He wouldn’t have made Sousuke sleep in his bed all afternoon.

A thin ray of hope lit pierced Sousuke’s heart. Maybe Rin wasn’t going to break up with him?

But why wouldn’t he touch Sousuke?

This was all very confusing and Sousuke hated it.

As everyone else began to head towards the door, Sousuke stopped and waited until Rin noticed. He didn’t know what was going through Rin’s head, he couldn’t understand why Rin insisted on keeping a distance between them. What Sousuke did know was that he’d fucked up with Rin and that he needed Rin to know how sorry he was for that. He needed Rin to hear his apology so, whatever was going on between them, Rin would at least know Sousuke was sorry. Sousuke couldn’t go on any longer without apologizing, because he didn’t know how long Rin intended to keep him around.
“Rin, wait,” Sousuke called out in Japanese as everyone was heading to the door. Rin turned around and look at Sousuke. Well everyone, including Chris, turned around and looked at Sousuke. With so many eyes on him, a blush crept up Sousuke’s neck but what was there to worry about? Chris and Sam couldn’t understand Japanese and Sousuke had to say this. Sousuke needed to do everything in his power to make things better. He couldn’t leave without even trying.

“I’m really sorry for that fight,” Sousuke said, his voice a bit too shaky. Rin’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open in a beautiful little oh. God he was so cute!

Sousuke continued, “I was a complete ass hole about it and I shouldn’t have acted how I did. If you want…”

“It’s fine,” Rin interrupted, casting his eyes down to the floor in embarrassment, “I brought it up suddenly and I should have known you wouldn’t have reacted well to it. I’m sorry too.”

Rin? Was apologizing? Sousuke blinked at him in confusion.

“No you don’t have to apologize,” he protested, “I was a huge jerk and you…”

“I should have known better than to bring that issue up so suddenly and getting angry from your reaction. I should have known you would react like that” Rin interrupted, looking back at Sousuke, his expression fierce, “so I’m sorry too, buddy.”

To show his sincerity, Rin smiled a smile that felt like a shot of light through the dark. Sousuke’s eyes grew wide as he watched Rin turn back around and continue walking out the door with Sam and Chris. Sousuke hadn’t even considered that the horrible fight was anyone’s fault but his own, he certainly hadn’t thought Rin was in any way responsible. He still didn’t. But for Rin to act as though he should be blamed equally, that it wasn’t just Sousuke who had messed things up so badly between them, that however incorrect he may be, he still wanted to take some of the blame, take responsibility for Sousuke….

That was something….

Maybe there was some hope….

If Rin wanted to take responsibility, maybe he really did want to be a part of something…with Sousuke….

But buddy….Rin hadn’t called him buddy since they were kids….

“You coming, Sousuke?” Rin called over his shoulder, in English. Sousuke realized he was the only one left inside the apartment, the others had gone on ahead while his world readjusted over what had just transpired.

The Jaws theme played out into the quiet night as a ringtone.

Sousuke quickly walked out the door and looked around frantically for Rin. Rin was answering his phone; he wasn’t looking for Sousuke.

A wave of bitter disappointment crashed down on Sousuke as Rin began to chatter to some girl named Lydia on the phone. The small gleam of hope Rin’s apology had inspired was brutally extinguished with the word buddy.

Buddy. That wasn’t something Rin would call his lover. That was something he called his friends.
Rin was his friend, they’d been friends forever. Even when Rin didn’t want to see him or left him behind, they were still friends. They would probably always be friends, even if it hurt. They worked well at a distance, they could still be friends if they weren’t nearby.

The concern over Sousuke’s health, the nap, the protein bar, the apology….Rin cared about him, obviously, and Sousuke thought he probably was glad to see Sousuke. He hadn’t sent him away, in any case, and he seemed at ease. He hadn’t touched Sousuke, but he hadn’t sent Sousuke away.

But buddy…was that why Rin was acting the way he was? Was that why he wouldn’t touch Sousuke? Because that’s what he wanted Sousuke to be? His buddy?

Sousuke’s mind plunged into a chaotic spiral of despair while he contemplated that word. Chris managed to hail down a cab and they all piled in, heading to the bar. Rin did not sit by Sousuke, he sat in the front seat and texted away furiously.

That must be what Rin wanted from Sousuke. He didn’t want a lover, he wanted a friend.

Sousuke looked out the window and watched cars pass him by, thinking all the while on this newest development. He’d been Rin’s friend forever, the last two months had been something out of the ordinary that Rin must not want to repeat. Was that fine? Could Sousuke really go back to being just a friend when he’d felt the weight of Rin’s tongue against his, knew what it felt to be inside of Rin? Was he desperate enough for Rin that he could forgo all of that?

Truthfully, Sousuke would do absolutely anything for Rin, but even Sousuke had his limits. He didn’t know if it was possible for him not to love Rin. He didn’t know what he would do if Rin asked that of him.

In any case, Sousuke had apologized and he felt much better now. So many times Sousuke had debated whether he should just give up and run away again, because Rin wouldn’t forgive him. But Sousuke knew he couldn’t disappear, not until he at least apologized and Rin had accepted his apology. Now, come what may, he at least had accomplished one of his goals for Australia.

“Rin, Chris, Sam!” Lydia called, waving from a big booth at the back of the Traveller, “Over here!”

Rin smiled and waved back, as did Sam.

No one else knew it yet, but Sam and Lydia had gone on two secret dates last week and Rin could tell Sam had had a really good time. Not in a million years would Rin have put the two together – Sam was laid back to the point of never being able to sit up and Lydia was a bit high strung and intimidating – but they’d both been smiling quite a bit this past week.

Even through all his worrying about Sousuke, Rin had noticed.

“Now who is this?” Lydia asked coyly as she caught sight of Sousuke, who was straggling far behind Chris. Sousuke looked up and caught Rin’s eye. Rin swallowed hard at the sight of his boyfriend. The nap had done him some good, he looked better.

Sousuke was so beautiful.

Rin looked away quickly before he blushed too awkwardly.

“This is Yamazaki Sousuke!” he introduced in English, “Sousuke, this is Lydia Johnson.”
Lydia drank Sousuke in and smirked. When Sousuke got closer, she held out her hand for Sousuke to shake.

“Nice to meet you, Lydia,” Sousuke greeted in perfect English, his voice low and deep. Why was it that English words coming out of Sousuke’s mouth made Rin’s toes curl so much?

“Nice to meet you too, Sousuke!” Lydia gushed enthusiastically, “Rin’s been looking forward to seeing you so much!”

Sousuke looked at Rin curiously, making Rin’s face flushed instantly. That was the understatement of the year. Rin had been dying to see Sousuke and having him here, it was like the last two anxious months didn’t exist, like Rin was a whole new person. Surely, Sousuke had to know how happy it made Rin to see him. To have Sousuke materialize again when Rin thought he had disappeared once more.

“Really?” Sousuke asked quietly, in English. Rin’s blush deepened.

Why wouldn’t this stupid, beautiful boy let Rin touch him!? Rin had never wanted to hug anyone as much as he wanted to hug Sousuke, right then and there! But Sousuke didn’t want to be touched and Rin would respect that. It may kill him, but Rin would wait for Sousuke to get comfortable enough to touch him rather than force him to do something he wasn’t ready for.

“Well whatever, of course I’m glad you came, you big idiot.” Rin snarled in response, “Why would you even ask that!? Now do you want a beer or not?”

Sousuke’s face cracked into a smile, the first real one Rin had seen, and for a split second, nothing else in the world existed.

“I’ll get them,” Sousuke replied softly, switching into Japanese. His voice curled around the words Rin watched him go, his heart thumping hard against his chest.

That was the first time Sousuke had looked remotely happy since he’d arrived.

For a few seconds, Rin watched Sousuke. He walked over slowly to the bar, leaned against it in a way that wasn’t deliberately trying to show off his ass so well in those snug, form hugging jeans he’d developed a taste for, but did nonetheless, and ordered drinks. Whatever weirdness had happened between Sousuke, Chris, and Sam, Rin really hoped it was over and forgotten. He really wanted Sousuke to relax so his friends could see how awesome he was. He wanted Sousuke to smile. He wanted Sousuke to fuck him senseless at the end of the night.

He wanted to see Sousuke happy and he wanted to forget the letters, just for a night….

“Earth to Rin!” Chris said, breaking into Rin’s thoughts. Rin looked around and saw all his friends had taken their seats in the booth. Lydia and Sam were smirking at him. Chris was scowling.

“Sit down, lover boy,” Lydia teased, “Your tall dark drink of water will be back soon. Sit down and tell me all about him before he gets back!”

Rin muttered something unpleasant in Japanese under his breath as he took a seat, more to act annoyed than that he actually was.

“You haven’t actually told us much about him, sweet Rincess,” Sam chimed in as Rin settled in next to Chris, leaving a big space at the end of the booth open for Sousuke, “So what’s he do again?”
“He works as a welder in a shipyard…” Rin began, but was interrupted by Chris’ snort next to him.


“He’s a welder?” Chris retorted, “You said he was an artist.”

Under the table, Sam kicked Chris hard. “Stop being a dick, Chris.” he warned.

“He is!” Rin said defensively, “He works in a shipyard for money, but he welds these really awesome metal statues on the side. He’s sold a few and he says he probably will be able to stop working in the shipyard soon. He’s a really good writer too, he wrote this story that won a really prestigious new writer award for a magazine. He got a shit load of money for it too!”

“Sounds very dramatic,” Lydia sighed dreamily, turning to look at Sousuke as well, “and what a handsome guy too! You should have warned us that your boyfriend deserves to be on the cover of GQ or something! He could be a model! I knew your self described soul mate would be such a hottie!”

Rin’s face turned a furious shade of pink as he looked back around the table. Chris had been sour all day, so it wasn’t exactly surprising to see him frowning. Sam, however, was also frowning. Rin would too, if Sousuke suddenly started gushing about how hot Sam was. No one wanted to hear the person they liked fawn over another person.

“He’s…Sousuke…” Rin stammered, unsure of what he should say. Yeah, Sousuke was hot and artistic, but he was Sousuke and he was so much more, so much better than just that. Rin wanted to make them see how amazing Sousuke was…no, he didn’t want to make them see, he wanted them to see for themselves.

“Yeah and you guys didn’t talk for a month before he came here either,” Chris broke in angrily, “And he disappeared for three years without letting anyone know where he was! Some boyfriend…”

Sam kicked Chris under the table again and Chris punched Sam back. But the damage was done. Lydia’s face fell.

“Oh jeesh,” she said quietly, “really? I hadn’t heard about that.”

Before Rin could explain about Sousuke’s long absence, Sousuke reappeared with a big pitcher of beer and five glasses. He was smiling, but that smile evaporated the moment he saw everyone’s downcast expression. Without saying a word, he put the beer and the glasses on the table and sat down next to Rin.

Sousuke looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here and that made Rin want to scream.

They didn’t know! Chris and Lydia and Sam didn’t know Sousuke! They didn’t know him at all!

Rin wanted to tell everyone, everything about Sousuke so they’d understand, so they wouldn’t look at him like they were. He wanted to tell them how terrible Sousuke’s father was, how Sousuke had worked so hard at swimming he’d destroyed his shoulder, how he’d waited for Rin to come back from Australia, how he’d been with Rin, helping Rin through everything! He wanted them to know Rin cared about Sousuke more than anyone, besides his mom and sister. He wanted them to know how much Sousuke loved him. He didn’t want them to think badly of Sousuke.

But with Sousuke here, there was nothing much Rin could say to make them understand without also making Sousuke feel bad or embarrassed.
Rin wanted to take Sousuke far away from them, protect him.

Rin wanted to cry.

Rin did none of these things because he didn’t want to make things worse.

Why couldn’t they just be happy for him?

Why couldn’t they give Sousuke a chance? For Rin?

Why were they being such assholes!?

Rin had said, in front of everyone, that he was really happy Sousuke was there and that had made Sousuke extremely happy. When he went up to get beer, Sousuke had felt like he was finally starting to get somewhere and that maybe, his apology had worked and coming to Australia wasn’t a terrible idea. Lydia, who Sousuke recognized from the pool as that girl with a messy bun on top of her head, would be something of an ally and maybe she could help Sousuke win over the roommates after all. But when Sousuke returned with beer for everyone, the mood had drastically changed. From the way they all looked up at him when he came back to the table, Sousuke could tell they’d definitely been talking about him while he was gone. Whatever it was they’d been saying, it wasn’t good.

Sam struck up some conversation, but Sousuke hardly listened. He’d never felt more unwelcome at a table before and it broke his heart that Rin was at that table. Sam, Lydia, and Chris struck up a conversation – about swimming of course – but Rin didn’t join in. He was lost in some dark thought of his own and it was painful knowing that Sousuke was probably the cause of that. Rin answered his friends’ questions with pert, monosyllabic answers that did not invite further discussion. His arms were crossed angrily across his chest and Sousuke could practically feel the rage radiating off him.

Sousuke hated seeing Rin like this. He hated even more that he was most definitely the cause of whatever hurt Rin was experiencing.

Sousuke should just leave, everyone would be so much happier if he did.

After a while, a few more girls – Cynthia, Alicia, and Jessica – arrived, squeezed into the booth, and were introduced to Sousuke. They all flashed with immediate curiosity that quickly evaporated when they picked up the ‘don’t fuck with me’ vibes coming off Rin. So by and large, they ignored Sousuke and Rin, opting instead to join in to the increasingly lively swimmer discussion.

Without anyone to talk to and not knowing what else to do, Sousuke distracted himself with looking around the bar. This bar was on the young side, there were quite a few college age kids trying to hook up with one another. Everyone looked well dressed and clean, just like the bar itself.

This was not the kind of place Sousuke felt he belonged.

“I have to take a leak,” growled Rin next to him. Sousuke got up and let Rin out of the booth, without looking at him. Rin was gone instantly. Everyone at the table was looking at Sousuke and he slid back down in the booth, very reluctantly.

“So Sousuke,” the girl named Jessica said the moment Rin was safely out of earshot, “your Rin’s fabulous new boyfriend he’s been going on and on about?”

Sousuke couldn’t help but blush and the girls all fell into a fit of giggles. Yeah, Sousuke should have
“He hasn’t told us a ton about you though,” said the girl named Alicia, “you two went to high school together, right?”

“I came to his school during our third and final year,” Sousuke confirmed, “but I’ve known Rin since first grade.”

The girls all gasped with surprise.

“Really?” cooed Cynthia, “And now you two are boyfriends? That’s so romantic! Just what I’d expect for our Rincess! Did he have the biggest crush on you back then?”

Sousuke couldn’t help but smile.

“I don’t know, I’ve never asked,” Sousuke admitted, “but I’ve been in love with him pretty much always.”

The girls all went ‘ooohh’. Chris grunted his disproval.

“You left him though,” he broke in, “for three years you were gone and no one knew where you were. Doesn’t sound like love to me. I remember how devastated Rin was. Why’d you bugger off like that?”

“For fuck’s sake!” Sam cried, “What the hell Chris?”

“It’s a legit question, mate!” Chris retorted, leveling a fierce gaze at Sousuke, “So why’d you leave if you were so in love with him?”

Sousuke turned to look down at his hands. The bar suddenly

“I had my reasons,” he said quietly, though his voice was having a hard time coming out of his throat.

The table fell silent; all eyes watched Sousuke.

Really, what had changed for Sousuke? He’d accepted that he was gay and he had let himself get attached to people again. He’d found dreams for himself that weren’t soaked in chlorine. Sure, he was happier than he was back then and, after brushing with death, he knew now he definitely wanted to live. He never wanted to feel like his life was slipping away again.

Yet still, when it came down to it, Sousuke really didn’t have much to offer Rin.

God! This was all just so confusing and depressing! He wanted Rin to come right out and say whether or not they really were together.

Rin returned and they went back into their charged silence while everyone else resumed their swimming conversation, as though nothing had happened. Without anything else to do again, Sousuke took to looking around the bar. For the most part, everyone was bubbly and fun and excited to be out with their friends – very typical of college bars Sousuke had been to. There were, however, two guys up at the bar that did not seem to belong. They were in their mid twenties, a bit older compared to the rest of the clientele, and the way they were looking around the bar did not sit well with Sousuke, like they were hungry. The two guys didn’t speak, but they exchanged looks with
each other whenever a pretty, young woman walked by.

Sousuke could feel his hackles rising and he was secretly thankful for them as a distraction. He didn’t know what their deal was, but if they tried anything stupid, Sousuke would know about it.

“I am going to get a cocktail!” Lydia announced an hour later, “Anyone want anything?”

“No thanks!” Cynthia answered as she raised her half full beer glass, “My bank account will only stand beer tonight.”

“Suit yourselves!” Lydia laughed. Everyone on her side of the table stood up to let her out, then sat back down and resumed their lively conversation. Sousuke watched her as she went up to the bar and he cringed when she found an open spot next to the two creepy dudes. Sousuke debated whether he should go up to the bar and stand with her, so those guys didn’t get too bold, but before he could reach a decision, Jessica stood up and announced she wanted a cocktail too. Within moments, she was up at the bar with Lydia.

The two creepy guys weren’t paying any attention to Lydia and Jessica, they had directed their attention the other way. Sousuke didn’t know whether he should be relieved or more worried.

Lydia’s drink came first, as she ordered before Jessica, but she waited for Jessica’s drink before having any of hers. The two were chatting together and not paying much attention to Lydia’s drink. Why would they?

Sousuke tensed up, watching those two dudes carefully and for a few minutes nothing happened.

The bartender brought Jessica her drink and the two clinked glasses together, twittering on about something Sousuke couldn’t hear. Rather than come immediately back to the table, they both set their drinks down and looked around the bar, giggling at a pretty attractive guy sitting not too far away. With their drinks unattended and their attention diverted, Sousuke watched as a hand slipped out and tipped something into Lydia’s drink, which was closest to the two dudes.

Sousuke stood up and as he did so, Lydia blindly grabbed her drink and sucked it down.

“Where are you going, Sou?” Rin asked in English, but Sousuke ignored him.

The guys had tapped Lydia on the shoulder and were introducing themselves to the girls.

No fucking way!

Sousuke crossed midway to the bar, prepared to beat the shit out of those two would be rapists, but then a memory flashed across his mind, one of blood and pain and the fear that he was dying.

For the first time in his entire life, Sousuke hesitated in a fight. The force of how much he did not want to hurt anymore nearly left him breathless. That had changed as well, when he’d been stabbed? He’d loved fighting and he was good at it. But he no longer craved the contact of fist against flesh, he didn’t want to experience the sting of a black eye or the taste of blood in his mouth. It made him feel almost nauseous thinking about it.

But no way in hell was he going to let those two guys get away with this shit. Not for any girl or guy, but especially not for Rin’s friends.

No fucking way!

He continued towards the bar, his hand moving unconsciously to hold his side.
This is what Rin saw:

Sousuke walked up to where Lydia and Jessica were at the bar. Two guys were talking with the girls and it was these two guys Sousuke spoke to. Before, they’d been laughing and joking with the girls, but the moment Sousuke opened his mouth, the mood shifted dramatically. Rin was wondering what the hell Sousuke was doing, when one of the guys punched Sousuke square in the face. Rin stood up and shouted Sousuke’s name. Over the sound of the bar, Rin heard a loud thud, the sound of the stranger’s fist making contact with Sousuke’s jaw, through the bar. Sousuke face absorbed the impact; his body didn’t move an inch.

Once he’d made contact, the stranger let his fist fall, watching Sousuke to see what the next move was. For a second, Sousuke stood there, his face turned towards the side. Then, slowly, he turned to face his attacker.

Rin could see his face.

A red splotch marked where the stranger’s fist had crashed against Sousuke’s jaw. Sousuke’s eyebrows were contracted together in a way they only ever were when he was yelling. His mouth was a thin line and Rin could see that Sousuke’s jaw was clenched hard.

Sousuke….Sousuke was scary. Rin took a step back, suddenly afraid. He’d never seen Sousuke look so angry.

The stranger didn’t seem to think so, he rolled his eyes at Sousuke and began to turn away. That’s when Sousuke reached out and yanked the stranger’s shoulder, turning him around again, so Sousuke could clock him hard in the face.

For a second, the stranger staggered back from the impact, blood running from his nose. But the kid wasn’t going to just leave things like that. Once he recovered himself, he launched his full weight at Sousuke, trying to tackle him.

Sousuke was too quick, he sidestepped fast enough so the kid sprawled out on the ground.

The bartender had finally noticed the disruption and was yelling something at the pair of them. Rin didn’t hear. He was too busy watching in horror as the stranger’s friend came up behind Sousuke and punched him hard in the ear.

Sousuke went down.

The second guy was winding up to kick Sousuke hard in the side. As his foot came flying towards Sousuke’s stomach, Sousuke agilely rolled safely out of range. Without Sousuke’s stomach to stop the momentum, the second stranger’s foot went too far, upsetting his balance for just a split second. That was all the time Sousuke needed to kick the second stranger hard behind the knee that was supporting all his weight.

On his way down to the ground, the second stranger, flailing, knocked his head hard against a barstool, knocking him out.

While all this was going on with the second stranger, the first guy, his face covered in blood, had managed to recover well enough. He’d crawled up behind Sousuke and locked his massive forearm around Sousuke’s neck, chocking him.

Fearing for Sousuke’s life, Rin shot out of the booth, shouting Sousuke’s name. Whether or not Sousuke could hear him was up for debate. His face was beginning to turn red from lack of oxygen
and with his hands he was grabbling with the strong forearm.

Oh god.

He was dying!

Sam was beside Rin in a flash.

While they ran over to his aid, Sousuke stopped trying to claw the forearm off his throat and instead elbowed his attacker hard in the stomach behind him. Rin gasped in unison with the stranger and watched as his grip on Sousuke weakened a fraction under the impact.

It was all Sousuke needed. He threw his head back hard into the guy’s face and Rin heard a sickening crunch as the kid’s nose broke. With the searing pain of a fractured face, the kid let go of Sousuke and Sousuke took the opportunity to wriggle out of his grasp and get back up on his feet. To complete his victory, he kicked the kid hard in the stomach, sending him rolling back against the bar.

The second guy had come to and Sousuke didn’t see him get up to his feet and grab something against the bar. Rin was too focused on the other guy to notice either, so the bottle, shattering against the side of Sousuke’s face was as much of a surprise to Sousuke as it was to Rin.

Rin stopped in his tracks.

Sousuke stumbled backwards.

His beautiful face had pieces of glass in it. And there was blood. So much blood.

Rin wanted to throw up.

When he recovered himself from the bottle, Sousuke turned back to his foe and smiled.

It was the only time in Rin’s life that Sousuke’s smile scared him.

It wasn’t sweet, it wasn’t cute, it didn’t make Rin’s breath hitch.

It made him tremble.

Sousuke looked capable of anything.

Rin had never seen him like this before.

Even Sam, who was trying to get between Sousuke, the stranger, and Lydia, stopped, his eyes fixed on Sousuke in complete horror.

Seeing that smile, the stranger took a step back. He dropped the neck of the bottle he’d shattered over Sousuke.

Like some wild beast, Sousuke flung himself at the stranger, easily brushing past Sam. He was punching his attacker in the head and in the stomach, left, right, as fast as lightening. The assault was almost too much for Sousuke’s opponent to handle, he was getting knocked around pretty hard. But somehow, he managed to recover just enough to land one hard punch in Sousuke’s left side.

A savage cry clawed its way out of Sousuke’s throat as he first stiffened, then fell hard to the ground. He curled up into himself, his hands wrapping around where the punch had landed.
For a terrible moment, everyone was perfectly still. Everyone in the bar was completely quiet, the only sounds were the heavy, pained panting of the fighters.

Rin couldn’t tear his eyes away from Sousuke. From the way he’d landed, Rin couldn’t see Sousuke’s face, but from the lines of his shoulders, the way he was holding himself so rigidly, Rin could tell, he could just tell, that Sousuke was hurting. Really fucking hurting.

“Oi!” the bartender screamed, interrupting the silence, “Take it outside or I’ll call…”

Sousuke’s assailant’s foot connected hard with Sousuke’s stomach. Sousuke made a sound like a dying animal.

“Stop!” Rin screeched. He reached out at the assailant and grabbed his arm as the guy began winding up for another kick. The guy flung Rin off, easy as could be, and Rin crashed against the bar, next to the guy who’d first hit Sousuke. That guy was lying on the ground, holding his face and watching the fight through his fingers and the blood.

But Rin’s attempt to help Sousuke had momentarily distracted Sousuke’s opponent. Sousuke managed to unfurl from his tight ball of pain and, as hard as he could, he kicked the guy in the knee caps, laying him flat on his back.

Despite the pain he was so clearly in, Sousuke managed to climb on top of his attacker, pinning his arms down with his knees. With his free hand, he grabbed the guy’s hair and pulled his hair back, exposing his neck. His other hand roamed around, fumbling around blindly until he found the neck of the shattered bottle. Once he had it in his hand, he brought the jagged edge up to the soft, exposed throat.

Panting hard, Sousuke pressed the sharp, glass edge up to the guy’s throat.

Sousuke’s face was hard. The lines were etched in pain, but his features were immovable. Rin was two feet away but still he barely recognized his Sousuke. For a terrible moment, the guy tried to break free of Sousuke, but Sousuke quieted him down by pressing the bottle harder against the tender flesh of his throat. A drop of blood rolled down the glass, dripping down onto the pure white skin below.


The guy’s eyes widened as he looked up at the grim face of Sousuke.

He yielded, nodding his head slightly to show Sousuke he would obey.

Sousuke rocked back on the balls of his feet, allowing the pressure off the guy’s arm, allowing for him to escape.

He scrambled out from underneath Sousuke and, once on his feet, he practically dragged the other attacker up to his feet. They fled the bar, leaving behind a barrage of useless curses.

Rin didn’t watch them leave, however. He was watching Sousuke. Everyone was.

With the space beneath him free, Sousuke had put his hands down and was leaning on them. He almost looked like he was kowtowing or praying as he caught his breath.

A drop of blood fell from Sousuke’s stomach down on the floor, splattering crimson against the white tiles of the bar. That drop was followed by another, then another until a small puddle blossomed against the white.
“Sou,” Rin peeped, still staring wide eyed at the blood splatter. 

Sousuke turned to look at Rin, his beautiful face marred by several jagged and bleeding cuts, but Rin couldn’t take his eyes off the blood. Why was Sousuke bleeding from his stomach? The punch and the kick should have bruised him. He shouldn’t be bleeding from there. Why was he bleeding? 

Sousuke followed Rin’s eyes down and found the blood splatter. Instantly his right hand went to the spot on his left side where the kick had connected. 

Sousuke paused with his head down for a while, catching his breath, before laboriously standing up. His right hand didn’t leave his left side but even so, when he was fully upright, Rin could see a dark stain blossoming out from beneath his hand. 

He was hurt. 

Rin’s brain short-circuited. He missed the part where Sousuke took out his wallet and slapped down money on the counter, apologizing to the bar tender. He missed the part where Sousuke called out to him. He missed the part where Chris started yelling. He missed the part where Sousuke walked out the door alone. 

He only came to a moment later, when Sam put a hand on Rin’s shoulder. Snapped back to reality, Rin looked around frantically for Sousuke, his only thought was that Sousuke wasn’t there and that Sousuke was hurt. Sam dragged Rin up to his feet nodded his head over towards the front door of the bar. 

Rin tore after Sousuke like a wild thing. 

Sousuke was hurt. 

Sousuke was hurt. 

Fuck, that had hurt. Sousuke’s face was throbbing, but not as much as his side was. 

Damn it! 

Of all the places to get hit, that guy just had to find Sousuke’s stab wound. Without needing to even look at it, Sousuke knew the wound was reopened, Sousuke was sure of it. Three weeks had gone by and his stitches were gone, but the kick had felt like Sousuke was being torn open again. And he was bleeding. 

Fuck! 

Sousuke needed to get to a hospital. 

His lips curled up into a terrible smile. 

Sick as it was, he was glad he had this blood and pain to worry about immediately. It was distracting him from the scene he’d just caused, from the look of horror and disgust on Rin’s beautiful face. 

Any chance Sousuke had had was probably ruined. Rin had never seen what an animal Sousuke could be, but now he knew. 

A taxi drove by and Sousuke flagged it down, but it passed him by.
“Soul!”

Sousuke turned around and found Rin running out of the bar, panicking.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

“Soul!” Rin repeated breathlessly as he caught up to Sousuke, “Soul, are you alright?”

Sousuke looked back towards the street, gritting his teeth, unwilling to look at Rin. He didn’t want to see how much Rin hated him now.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” he lied, hoping Rin would buy it.

Rin, of course, didn’t.

“You’re not fucking fine!” Rin argued as he reached out and grabbed Sousuke’s right wrist, trying to pull his hand away, “You’re bleeding and you’re not fucking fine!”

For a moment, Sousuke put up a futile struggle, but he was in too much pain to resist for long. Besides, it was best for both of them if the ugly truth came out now. No matter how angry Rin was going to be when he found out.

Sousuke let Rin lift his hand away from his side, revealing the dark stain on his side. It was big, but not as big as Sousuke thought.

Rin tore his eyes back up to Sousuke’s face, his beautiful features contorted in worry and fear.

“Sousuke?” was all he could manage to say.

Sousuke looked down at Rin’s hand, holding his wrist. Next to the massive, bloody paw that belonged to Sousuke, Rin’s looked small and white and fragile.

This was the first time during this whole, horrible day that Rin had touched him.

“Sousuke,” Rin repeated, his voice full of many emotions, “what…are you okay? Why are you bleeding?”

Sousuke sighed heavily and yanked his hand free of Rin’s, covering up his side and putting pressure on his wound. He stared down at the ground because looking at Rin’s face….it was just too painful.

“I was mugged a couple weeks ago,” he finally admitted, “I got stabbed. It opened up again. Kisumi has all the paper work. He’ll tell you I didn’t do this to myself.”

“You got stabbed!?” Rin bellowed.

Sousuke nodded down to the ground.

Evidently that wasn’t good enough for Rin. He grabbed Sousuke by the collar of his shirt and turned him around so he was facing Rin. Sousuke let himself be moved. He couldn’t look at Rin’s eyes.

“You got stabbed and you didn’t tell me about it!”

Tell him about it….
That would involve talking.

Throughout this whole month, Sousuke had been too worried about how badly he’d messed up to really let himself feel any anger. It was his fault for their fight, after all, and he felt like he should be punished.

But for Rin to just throw talking out there, like it was an option he’d left for Sousuke….

White hot rage Sousuke hadn’t even known he was suppressing boiled up in his throat.

If he wasn’t still hopped up on the adrenaline from the fight, he probably wouldn’t have even known he was angry at all…

“Tell you about it?” Sousuke demanded louder than he’d meant to, “How was I supposed to do that!? You told me not to talk to you until I came down here!”

Rin made a feral noise and his grip on Sousuke’s collar tightened.

“You could have told me about something like being stabbed!”

“You didn’t want me…” Sousuke shouted. He meant to say ‘You didn’t want me to’, but his voice trailed off before he finished the thought. He’d told himself again and again he wasn’t going to say something like that, because if it was true, he didn’t want to know. But now it had been said.

Rin’s grip loosened a fraction on Sousuke’s shirt.

Just like that, they were confronting the problem that seemed to hang between them. The anger went out of Sousuke, replaced by fear. This was it.

“You didn’t want me.” Sousuke whispered again, looking away from Rin. He couldn’t bear to see Rin’s face if he had heard him.

“Sousuke, come on, I told…” Rin began, but Sousuke couldn’t bear to hear what he was going to say.

“I know it was hard for you when I left,” Sousuke interrupted, “I know that simply saying I’m sorry wouldn’t fix things between us. I’d hurt you too much for that to be everything and I knew there would be greater consequences coming.”

The words were spilling out of Sousuke’s mouth and he wished they’d stop. But he was hurt, he was hurting, and he had no strength left to stop them. All the strength he had, he needed to stop the tears that were threatening to make a fool of Sousuke.

“I tried being okay with not talking to you. I did. I knew you needed this because I’d done you wrong. But I…it…Rin, I can’t tell if this past month has been because I deserved to be punished for what I’ve done to you or if it’s something else.”

“Something else?” Rin whispered, his voice choked and strangled. Sousuke dared meet his eyes and he could see Rin was too shocked to even cry.

God if Rin cried, Sousuke would loose it.

“It feels like you are running away from me, again.” Sousuke said quietly, Rin hung his head down, “You say you want me, but you are always leaving me behind. Just tell me what I need to do to be good enough for you to stay. Tell me…”
The door to the bar opened and out stormed Chris. Sousuke fell silent.

Just what Sousuke needed.

This conversation needed to be spoken in Japanese, because Sousuke had fallen in love with Rin in Japanese and his feelings were Japanese, not English. Chris wouldn’t understand and no doubt, when Rin went home tonight alone, Chris would misinterpret and harden Rin’s heart even further against Sousuke.

Sousuke sucked up all his courage and put his left hand on Rin’s shoulder. At his touch, Rin looked up at Sousuke, a single perfect tear rolling down his cheek.

“I love you Rin,” Sousuke said quietly, “more than anyone I love you and I’ll never love anyone as much as I love you. It’s impossible because you’re the only one who’s ever been able to see anything good in me and no one will ever understand me as well as you do. But if I’m not what you want, if I’m not enough for you. If that’s not how you feel….” Sousuke paused because those words had felt like knives being drug up his throat, “If that’s not how you feel, that’s okay.”

Rin looked as though Sousuke’s words slapped him hard across the face.

Oh god.

Had Sousuke just voiced Rin’s secret thoughts?

Was it….true?

“Rin it’s okay,” he sputtered out, unable to stop himself because a growing sense of desperation threatened to undo him and he had to do something, “It’s okay if you don’t love me too. No one said you ever had to. But I need to know. If you don’t love me.”

‘Just contradict me,’ Sousuke begged in his head, watching as the darkness closed in around Rin’s beautiful, beautiful face, ‘Please, please, my love, please just contradict me.’

Rin was staring at him, completely silent. His face was a flurry of emotions and each and every one of them tore Sousuke’s heart apart.

Worry, confusion, guilt…. 

And Rin wasn’t denying any of them.

Oh god.

“It’s okay,” Sousuke repeated again, letting his hand fall from Rin’s shoulder, “It’s okay.” It wasn’t. “I’ll be by your place tomorrow after morning practice to pick up my things. Take care of Lydia tonight, those assholes put something in her drink and she will probably have a rough night.”

“Sou…”

Sousuke didn’t wait around to hear what Rin was saying. He wouldn’t have been able to hear anything about the shattering of his heart anyways.

Despite the pain coursing through his body, Sousuke’s feet were running him down the street.

The darkness swallowed him whole
The taxi ride home was terrible. They'd all spent an hour running around the area, trying to find Sousuke but finally even Rin had to admit defeat. That asshole was nowhere to be found. The night was ruined and everyone had agreed it was time to go home. Lydia was leaning her head against the window, watching the lights of Sydney fly by through a drunken haze. Sam was watching Lydia, not saying or offering anything, but watching nonetheless. Rin…Rin was furiously speaking to someone in Japanese on his phone. Chris couldn’t understand what he was saying or who he was talking to, but he could tell Rin was panicking and desperate.

That fucking Sousuke.

Chris turned his eyes away from the rearview mirror, looking outside instead.

Sousuke was legitimately crazy, of that Chris was 100% sure. Why else would he have picked a fight with complete strangers at the bar? From the way he fought, fought and won against two big ass dudes, clearly fighting in bars wasn’t something new to him.

And then afterwards, he was yelling at Rin and then he’d vanished into the night, fleeing and leaving Rin behind.

Fuck Sousuke.

He didn’t deserve Rin!

Chris had to say something! He didn’t want his friend to suffer because of some psychotic asshole!

“I don’t feel well, Sammy,” Lydia mumbled as Sam helped her out of the car, “I don’t think I can go to practice in the morning. I’m gonna throw up, I’m sure…”

“It’s okay, you can stay here tonight and I’ll take you home on the way to practice tomorrow,” Sam said quietly, pulling her up gently.

Lydia stumbled standing up.

How had she gotten so drunk so quickly? Sam reckoned she’d only had two beers and half that cocktail. Lydia was six feet tall and 77 kilos of solid muscle. That’s how she was able to win the national title in the 200 free this past year, by being a solid wall of beautiful muscle. Granted she didn’t drink very often and had only agreed to come because she was just as excited to meet Rin’s boyfriend as everyone else, but still. She was too big and too Australian to get this pissed off so little.

“C’mon, my warrior princess,” Sam said soothingly as he draped her arm around his shoulders, “Let’s find you the toilet.”

Lydia was too fucked up to even laugh at his joke.

Fuck. Should she go to a hospital?

Lydia was two inches taller than Sam and they weighed the same. Steering her into the apartment, therefore, wasn’t easy. She kept flailing. Finally, with Chris’ help, they managed to get her inside.
Rin had wandered in before them and he was now in the shower. As she wasn’t currently throwing up, Sam and Chris deposited Lydia on their couch.

“What a fucking night,” Sam muttered as he crossed back to the kitchen.

Chris didn’t reply. He took a seat on the couch, next to where Lydia was sprawled out, and pouted.

Oh boy.

Sam knew that look. That look rarely ended without some kind of confrontation.

“I would have never guessed Rin was dating such a tough guy,” Sam continued as he pulled out three glasses, trying to sound casual and not too impressed, “Rin’s only ever fancied pretty boys without much meat on them. Gotta admit, that was pretty hot. Everyone looks better covered in blood, you know?”

Chris didn’t say a word. Sam turned on the tap and filled up the water.

Honestly, Sam was feeling far more favorably towards Sousuke than he had all day. He’d eyed those assholes at the bar before the fight and Sam didn’t like them. They gave off a bad vibe. And Sousuke! Shit, he’d won, two against one! And they weren’t scrawny guys either!

Sam was not nor had he ever been a homosexual. Rin and Chris were the only two gay guys on the team, though there was a Gina who was a lesbian. Sam had never found any guys at all attractive.

But Sousuke looked like a fucking model and watching him beat the crap out of two guys at once, his face all covered in blood, a demonic smile like he was enjoying it….well it was only about the fourth time in Sam’s life he’d ever entertained a gay thought.

Sam chuckled to himself as he carefully brought the glasses back over to the couch.

Had Rin found Sousuke fighting as sexy as Sam had? Was that why he had fled immediately to the shower, to go vent some of that attraction because Sousuke wasn’t here?

Nah, that was stupid. He’d seen Rin in the car. Rin was a fucking mess.

Reaching the couch, Sam handed the glasses to Lydia and Chris, then plopped down between them.

No, whatever Rin’s reaction to that fight, it wasn’t good.

The only sound in the apartment was that of the shower and, after a few minutes, that too stopped.

In a cloud of steam, Rin emerged from the bathroom, wearing large, loose sweats. Sam recognized the sweat pants, but the shirt….it had to be Sousuke’s.

“Rin,” Chris said, his voice low and serious, “We need to talk.”

Rin stopped mid walk and looked around at Chris with eyes dead to the world.

“Not now Chris,” Sam said, trying to warn Chris away from the disaster he was about to cause. Chris, of course, ignored him.

“Rin, I have to say something because I’m worried about you,” Chris was saying as he stood up
from the couch. This was like watching the very beginning of a slow motion car accident, “Rin, you’re better off without Sousuke. He’s a psychopath and abusive! You’ve been miserable since you’ve gotten together with him and you deserve to be with someone who will make you happy. He isn’t the one for you.”

For one terrible moment, Rin was too shocked to register a reaction. But the moment was brief and Sam watched in horror as Rin’s dead eyes changed into something completely savage and angry and terrifying. Chris unconsciously took a step back and that movement prompted Rin into action. He stepped in towards Chris and grabbed the collar of his shirt, twisting it tight while at the same time shoving Chris backwards.

“How dare you say that?!” Rin growled ferociously, “You know absolutely nothing about Sousuke and you don’t know anything about what’s going on between us!”

He was pushing Chris back so hard, Chris was stumbling.

“YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT SOUSUKE!!!” Rin bellowed, finally succeeding in pushing Chris down to the ground.

Rin fell down on his knees before Chris, his face contorted with rage.

“I know what you’ve told me!” Chris argued angrily, “I know the bastard hasn’t talked to you in a month and now that he sees you again, he gets into a bar fight and then runs away into the night. If that isn’t psychotic behavior, I don’t know what is! Rin, I’m worried about you! You can’t be with someone who will abuse you!”

“It was me!!!” Rin erupted. Seemingly surprised by his own words, he rocked back on the balls of his feet and fisted his hands into his sweat pants.

“It was me.” Rin whispered again.

“What are you talking about, Rin!?” Chris asked.

“I was the one who told him we shouldn’t talk until he came,” Rin said quietly, “I was the one who pushed him away.”

“Rin, come on! You wouldn’t do that, you…”

“IT WAS ME!” Rin yelled again.

“Why?"

“I was afraid he would disappear again,” Rin explained, “I needed to trust him so I did what I thought would help me trust him.”

“Rin…” Chris said softly.

“But he doesn’t know that’s why I did it!” Rin said, his voice shaking, his composure quickly fading, “He thinks I meant the last month as some kind of punishment because he was gone for so long! He thinks he deserves it! He thinks I want to punish him and that I don’t want him!! What kind of boyfriend am I to make him think he needs to be punished!?”

Rin looked up, tears beginning to flow down his cheeks as hysteria set in.

“He fought those two guys because he saw them put something in Lydia’s drink! No one else saw
but Sousuke and he isn’t the type to let something like that go!”

Wait. What?

Sam’s head snapped to Lydia. Normally she was a fearsome beast of a woman, but now she looked like a sick kitten. Anyone who’d ever met Sam would say he was a laid back, easy going guy who was really only moved to strong emotions when it came to breaststroke. But hearing that Lydia, whom he’d worked quite hard to go out with, had been drugged, while Sam had just sat around….

For the first time in his life, Sam knew what it felt like to become angry. He wanted to go back to the bar and find those wankers so he could do exactly what Sousuke had done. Next time Sam saw Sousuke, he was going to have to buy him a bottle of expensive whiskey.

Oblivious to the rage churning up Sam’s insides, Rin was continuing to defend Sousuke.

“I fucked up so bad,” Rin howled miserably through his violent sobbing, “Sousuke doesn’t think I love him and I do love him so, so much! I’ve been in love with him since high school and I don’t want to ever be with anyone but him. He doesn’t believe that! I’ve been a terrible, selfish boyfriend and he thinks I’ve been trying to run away from him again! He got hurt badly while we weren’t speaking and I didn’t know anything about it because he didn’t think he could talk to me! I’m the worst boyfriend in the universe! Sousuke deserves the best and I’ve failed him, failed him, failed him! Now he’s going to leave me and it’s all my fault!!!”

“Rin…” Chris said quietly, reaching out a hand for Rin’s shoulder, a gesture meant to comfort Rin. Through his blubbering, Rin shrugged away from Chris.

“And I didn’t tell him I loved him tonight, so now he thinks it’s over and he said he’s going to leave tomorrow and it’s all my fault!!!”

“Rin,” Chris tried reaching out a hand again, but this time, Rin smacked his hand away.

“You don’t know Sousuke fucking at all,” Rin growled miserably, “Yet you say this shit about him? What the fuck kind of friend are you?”

Chris’s jaw dropped open and Sam could see Chris’ brain sputtering around, trying to find some way he could fix this. But Rin wasn’t waiting around to hear anything he had to say. He shot up to his feet and ran into his room, slamming the door as he locked himself away with his misery.

Sam couldn’t look at Chris. He was a goddamn tragedy.

Lydia started heaving and Sam decided now was as good a time to take her into the bathroom as any. She was probably going to need it. It took some effort, but Sam finally helped Lydia to the toilet where she proceeded to throw up. While she emptied her stomach, Sam looked back into the living room through the open door. Chris was still kneeling on the ground, visibly shaken by the words Rin had spat out at him.

A goddamn tragedy.

He may have brought it upon himself, but Sam knew Chris had acted out of jealousy and feelings he tried so desperately to deny. Chris valued Rin a lot, he had since the first swim practice they’d all had together. Rin had never spoken to Chris like that and even Sam had to wonder if Chris hadn’t screwed things up irrevocably.

Sam couldn’t help but feel sorry for Chris because even from so far away, Sam could see Chris’ heart breaking.
A goddamn tragic night. For everyone.

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter, I know. Hope you all enjoyed! I'm on tumblr: tornadoquakes.tumblr.com
Chapter Summary

Rin and Sousuke finally work things out, hooray!

*WARNING - Sousuke has PTSD.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Sam woke up to his alarm clock with a terrible crick in his neck. Sleeping on couches usually did that to him, even though he was pretty short as far as swimmers went. He woke up with a crick, but he couldn’t be grumpy. Not when the whole reason he was out here on the couch was because he’d sacrificed his bed for Lydia last night and he most certainly did not want her waking up, probably hung over and whacked out, next to Sam. They hadn’t woken up next to each other sober yet and Sam didn’t want to scare her or make her uncomfortable. He’d had a crush on Lydia for some time now and he really wanted the first time they did wake up next to each other to be nice. Especially after last night.

Sam sat up and rubbed his neck, remembering all that had happened. He’d sat with Lydia and held back her hair while she spewed up the contents of her stomach. When finally she’d stopped and Sam had helped her into his bed, he’d tried to check on Chris and Rin. Both of them had locked their doors and neither answered his knock.

Bloody hell.

What a disaster last night had been.

He couldn’t say who he felt worse for: Sousuke, Rin, or Chris. He reckoned it had to be Sousuke, because the poor bloke had been stabbed and Rin had treated him pretty terribly. But at the same time, he knew Rin well enough to know that Rin had been doing his very best. His actions may seem illogical, crazy, maybe even abusive to anyone who didn’t know him, but Sam did know Rin. He knew he’d never seen Rin so upset about anyone nor so focused on anyone as much as Sousuke, not even close. He must really love Sousuke, in his strange, Rin way.

And Chris. Poor Chris. Seeing the person you love so clearly in love with someone else was hard enough, but Chris had violated one of the most important rules of friendships. Never talk shit about a romantic interest; it will only hurt you in the end. With Rin’s head full of Sousuke and his date of departure quickly approaching, Sam had to wonder if Chris would say goodbye to Rin in friendship. After the turn of events last night, the outcome of Rin and Sousuke’s relationship was completely up in the air, it could go either way. But if Sam had to predict, the outcome with Rin and Chris would
probably be the same no matter what and that outcome was not how Chris wanted to leave things with the guy he’d been in love with since freshman year.

With a heavy sigh, Sam stood up from the couch and went into his room. There was no point worrying about all that now – he had to get Lydia home and he needed to go to practice. Quietly as he could, he tiptoed to his bed and sat on the edge. Gingerly, he placed a hand on Lydia’s face. Her eyes fluttered open.

Sam had never seen her look so weak and vulnerable before and his heart swelled with emotion. Nope, he definitely felt worse for Sousuke. He’d saved Lydia from something horrific and for that, Sam would be forever in his debt. Hopefully Rin would work things out with Sousuke. Sousuke was a really good guy.

Through the haze of a terrible hangover, Sam explained as best he could what had happened and why Lydia was in his bed. She was upset and she cried as she tried to sit up in order to get ready for practice.

“Come on, Lydie,” he said as soothingly as he could, “it’s fine for you to miss a day of practice for something like this. Don’t worry I’ll take you home on my way to practice and I’ll cover for you, say you had food poisoning or something.”

Lydia hung her head down, her cheeks flushing bright red. They sat like this for a full minute, Sam’s hand on her shoulder and Lydia’s head hung down. Finally, she raised her head and the sight of her tears formed a lump in Sam’s throat.

“You’ll come over after practice, yeah?” she asked quietly, averting her eyes once more.

Sam laughed, more nervously than nonchalant as he’d been going for.

“Why would you want me there? You must be feeling bloody awful; you probably will want to sleep it off.”

She shook her head vigorously and looked up at Sam through her eyelashes. A single, perfect tear fell down her cheek.
She was so fucking beautiful. Someone had tried to take advantage and hurt this beautiful girl and the look in her eyes told Sam that she knew. She was scared. She was reaching out to him for help. This beautiful girl who was looking at Sam like *that.*

Fuck!

“I thought it would be nice to have you around today,” she whispered, though words didn’t really seem necessary, “Maybe we could just watch some bad movies because I do feel fucking terrible. But I still want you around is all.”

For what felt like an eternity, Sam stared at her. Lydia slayed him. She was so fast and competitive and amazing in the pool. She was the captain of their swim team and the best leader. She was beautiful and strong and brilliant and here she was, like this. In front of Sam. She didn’t let her guard down in front of anyone, she was the iron queen.

His heart was thumping loudly in his chest; he hoped she didn’t hear.

Finally, he managed to smile. His hand reached out and cupped her cheek, causing her to smile as well.

“So long as you want me around,” he whispered, his voice all kinds of shaky, “so long as you want me around, I’d be happy to watch bad movies all day long. With you, my lioness.”

For possibly the first time in Sam’s life, he felt acutely embarrassed by something he’d said. Lioness? Really!? Why the ever loving hell had his brain jumped to that!? But that word pulled Lydia out of her painful hangover and she smirked in a way that was familiar, in a way that had first caught Sam’s attention – like she was an actual lioness and Sam, by God, was her prey.

Lioness it was.

Five minutes later, Sam was leading Lydia out the front door, their fingers intertwined. They’d never held hands before, but today they were. He’d knocked on both Rin and Chris’ doors to see if they were coming to practice, but neither of them responded. Sam decided to drive to practice without them; he wasn’t their babysitter after all and they were both big boys. He’d deal with their mess later, if he needed to.

Sam opened the front door and Rin came toppling into the entryway. Clearly he’d been sitting in front of it. Sam’s instinct was to laugh it off, but then he saw Rin’s face and decided against it. Rin’s face even made Sam forget about holding Lydia’s hand for a split second.
His eyes were bloodshot and red, definitely from crying because it was Rin, and dark circles loomed underneath his usually bright and pretty eyes. He looked pale. He looked like hell, even more so than he had looked at any point in the past month.

Rin averted his gaze, stood up, and stepped aside, allowing Lydia and Sam to go through the door.

“All right there, Rin?” Lydia asked cautiously. She wasn’t Rin’s roommate so she didn’t see the day to day changes like Sam did.

Rin shook his head, emotion choking him up.

Poor Rin. He was often very unaware of the effects of his actions and he suffered when he learned about the consequences. He remembered how torn up Rin had been when Sousuke first left and he knew how elated he’d been during that first month after his trip to Japan. Seeing them together, even when they were fighting and not communicating, made it clear that Rin’s affections and feelings were completely reciprocated. To hurt Sousuke – that was probably Rin’s personal version of hell.

But Rin was Rin and Rin was tenacious. A fighter. He could make things better.

In an effort to help out his friend in the only way he could think of, Sam reached out and clapped Rin’s shoulder with his hand.

“You royally fucked up mate,” he said, making Lydia jolt and Rin wince, “but you’re Rin and I know you aren’t going to let your man go without a fight. I can tell Sousuke’s crazy about you, so make things right when he comes back, yeah?”

Rin looked up, his eyes wide and brimming with tears. For once, he didn’t let them fall, but he did nod his head in silent agreement. Sam smiled and he could see some of the tension seeping out of Rin. Sam grabbed Lydia’s hand and the two of them walked out to Sam’s car, each wishing him luck over their shoulders.

From the state of things after last night, Rin was going to need it.

It was ten in the morning and every part of Sousuke hurt. His body, his heart, his soul…everything ached and begged him for rest. He shouldn’t have come, the primal voice inside him pleaded him to run away and save himself from further injury. But Sousuke wasn’t listening, today he just couldn’t. Getting out of the taxi, in front of Rin’s apartment complex was laborious, his whole body was stiff
from a sleepless night spent at the hospital. Once he was out and he’d paid his fare, the taxi sped off.

‘Idiot!’ shouted that primal voice, ‘You shouldn’t have let the taxi leave you here! Nothing but more pain awaits!’

Sousuke sighed heavily, acknowledging that that voice was probably right but ignoring it anyways.

In a way, he was really thankful his stitches had opened up. He’d been bustled around from one test to another, poked and prodded until he couldn’t take it any more. His night at the hospital had distracted him and he hadn’t really had time to process the events of last night. But now, standing alone in the parking lot outside of Rin’s building, reality punched Sousuke hard in the gut.

Rin didn’t love him. This would be the last time Sousuke would probably ever see him.

The dream was over.

If he had been at full capacity, if he wasn’t exhausted beyond belief and had food in his stomach, he would be having a violent, physical reaction about his future he now knew Rin didn’t wish to share with him. As it was, he didn’t have anything left in him. Like he was a space ship that could only power the most basic systems. He knew, once he found somewhere to hide and recover and reflect on what was happening, he would find himself tumbling into an abyss of despair. But for now, he was only still teetering on the edge of the precipice. The immense pain he knew of losing Rin finally and forever hadn’t sunk in yet. Nothing felt real.

With leaden feet, he slowly made his way through the parking lot of Rin’s complex and down the walkway that wound round the building, towards the stairwell where Rin’s front door nestled away from view. Every step was more difficult than the last and the lump in his throat grew heavier the closer he came to his doom. His heart was beating rapidly.

Just before he turned the corner into the stairwell, Sousuke stopped. Out of nowhere, a memory appeared. Sousuke crouched down, the weight of the memory and it’s meaning, now of all times, nearly crushing him.

Reality began to seep in.

The memory was from the time before Rin and Sousuke were friends and they were on the
playground on the day they began. Sousuke was a painfully quiet child because he was bigger than everyone else and he was very shy. He didn’t want others to laugh at him for being so big, so he tried to be as quiet as possible instead. He had never played with anyone at school, only ever his brother Ichirou, and the intense loneliness he’d suffered from back then made him gasp for air, thinking about it in the present. Not during the three years he’d spent wandering the world in solitude had Sousuke ever felt so alone as he had back then, in the time before Rin. Then, he knew nothing else, but recalling that afternoon, the afternoon that changed Sousuke forever, well Sousuke remembered the pain of those early years and how desperately he wanted something different.

Across the playground, playing with a very young Kisumi, was Rin and Sousuke remembered watching him with such terrible, terrible longing. Rin was so exciting and warm and beautiful. In their class, Sousuke was always watching Rin, though Rin never noticed, and he thought Rin was the greatest thing in the universe. But he was always with someone else and Sousuke didn’t want to play with anyone else, only Rin. Rin always had people around him and Sousuke didn’t want anyone there when he asked the beautiful, warm boy to play with him. He didn’t want to share that special feeling Rin gave him.

Kisumi left for some reason and Sousuke’s heart gave a leap of excitement. For the first time that Sousuke could remember, Rin was alone. Now was his chance.

Sousuke walked across the playground towards Rin and stopped just before he reached the swings, where Rin was smiling and beaming and laughing all on his own, just from the thrill of swinging. He didn’t notice Sousuke at first.

A cloud passed over the sun, momentarily darkening the day. Sousuke lost his nerve.

Why would the beautiful, sun boy want to ever play with Sousuke? He surely would laugh at Sousuke if Sousuke asked, because who was Sousuke? Better let Kisumi, bright and warm and smiling Kisumi, play with Rin. Those two were alike and Sousuke was so different.

As Sousuke hovered on the edge of the swings, he gave up. He turned to run away.

Fate, however, had other plans for Yamazaki Sousuke. Sousuke was in the process of learning to tie his shoes and his latest attempt was unsuccessful. The angle that he turned somehow caused one foot to catch on the shoelace and Sousuke fell on the ground, face first. Sousuke was a big boy, he didn’t cry, but he really wanted to, more from embarrassment than from the pain. He could hear someone laughing and he was positive the laughter was directed at him. From Rin.

It was then that Sousuke felt a small hand on his shoulder. He turned around to look and see whose hand it was. Small Sousuke’s heart nearly burst from happiness and embarrassment when he saw Rin’s serious, concerned, beautiful face. He was kneeling beside Sousuke, his game abandoned.
He’d noticed Sousuke!

“Are you okay, Sousuke?” small Rin had asked and Sousuke felt he had never heard a voice as sweet and nice as Rin’s.

Rin knew his name! He must have noticed Sousuke before if he knew Sousuke’s name!

Sousuke was a very shy child and tried to say as few words as possible, to keep from being noticed. But Rin’s full attention was on Sousuke and, for once, Sousuke wanted to be heard.

“I am okay,” he mumbled, his whole face burning bright red. That was the most he’d ever said to any of his classmates without a teacher forcing him to talk.

Rin smiled a smile that could rival the sun and Sousuke couldn’t help but smile right back.

“You must be very tough!” he laughed, his voice golden drops that illuminated Sousuke’s dark and lonely world, “I can’t help but cry if I ever fall! I wish I were more like you!”

For a moment, Sousuke could do nothing but look at Rin, completely enthralled. Be like Sousuke? He almost laughed at the idea! If either of them wanted to be more like the other, it was Sousuke who wanted to be like Rin! He was so brave and so energetic; a comet that zipped around the dark night sky, a spectacular sight! He was good at everything he did and Sousuke was always watching him, silently trying to match him or do better. If he showed Rin he was just as good or better, Sousuke reasoned, Rin might pay attention to him. Never had he imagined Rin had already noticed him!

So touched was Sousuke that for that fateful moment, the crux around which his whole life rotated, he forgot his inhibitions

“Will you play with me?” he blurted out.

Even now, Sousuke could remember Rin’s eyes growing large and the momentary panic Sousuke felt that Rin would laugh at him and reject him. But then, beautiful, wonderful Rin broke into a wide smile that was so pure and bright and beautiful. He stood up and offered Sousuke a hand.
“I would love to play with you!” he said brightly as he helped Sousuke up. “I thought you would never ask me to play but I am so happy you did!”

That was the beginning, the very, very beginning of the relationship that had made Sousuke. The greatest, most amazing and wonderful relationship Sousuke would ever have.

And now, sitting against the pavement, his back pressed against the wall, Sousuke had reached the end of the greatest thing he’d ever experienced and the darkness was coming for him. Rin didn’t love him, Rin didn’t want him because Sousuke…Sousuke had never deserved to stand beside his sun.

Exhausted and numb as he was, reality made it’s presence known, slowly ripping his heart apart, making every second hurt more than the last. He should have listened to the voice in his head, telling him to forgo this last encounter, this goodbye. This visit would be the most painful thing his wild, sadistic imagination could possibly conceive of.

Because this would be the last time he would see the love of his life. The center of his universe.

His Rin.

The sound of footsteps immediately pricked up Rin’s ears and he lifted his head from between his arms. The building wasn’t massive, but it was big enough that whoever was walking towards him could be someone other than Sousuke. His heart was being an idiot for racing so hard as he listened to the steps tread closer and closer.

The footsteps stopped and Rin listened for a door to open and close. Rather, he listened for the absence of a door, which would mean those footsteps did not belong to one of his neighbors. The sound of footsteps drew closer and still, no door.

Rin’s heart began to beat wildly against his chest, half from excitement, half from fear. Throughout the years, Rin had listened for Sousuke enough times that he thought he could recognize Sousuke’s footsteps from anyone else’s. Slow, deliberate, heavy…maybe Rin was out of practice, because he’d heard Sousuke’s footsteps so seldom over the past four years, but he had a feeling that he’d been hearing Sousuke.
The foot steps didn’t start again, but Rin heard another noise, a soft swooshing that could be someone sitting down or turning around rapidly. A shadow emerged from the edge of the building. A big shadow.

Rin’s breath caught in his throat and he could barely hear anything over the fierce pounding of his heart, the rush of blood in his ears.

It was strange how intimate knowledge of a person somewhat translated to the details you recognized about them. Looking at this shadow, Rin recognized the particular angle of the shoulder’s, the proportion of leg to body, the slope of the neck, all these small details that belonged to his Sousuke. No one else in the world would make a shadow quite like that because no one else in the world had the body of Sousuke. Rin would know; he’d been worshipping that body since they were reunited again as teenagers.

Sousuke was here! He’d come!

Just like he said he would.

The moment Rin recognized Sousuke’s shadow, he jumped up off the ground. He’d been sitting there since five that morning and his ass and legs were both asleep, nearly causing him to trip from lack of sensation. For a split second, Rin shook himself out, getting the blood flowing to his limbs once more. But that was all the time he was willing to spare. The second he could safely move, he was flying around the corner.

As Rin had anticipated from his shadow, Sousuke was sitting with his back against the wall, his head hung between his arms just as Rin had been sitting moments before.

He’d come.

Rin knelt down beside Sousuke and put a hand on Sousuke’s shoulder, causing a violent shudder to go through him.

“Sou?” Rin asked, his voice quavering and thick with emotion, “Are you okay, Sousuke?”

Sousuke raised his head and looked at Rin.
It was a long time ago and Sousuke probably didn’t remember it, but the look on Sousuke’s face reminded Rin of the first day they’d met.

Rin had been swinging as hard as his little legs could handle because even back then, he loved to go fast. While he was swinging, he noticed the big, quiet boy coming towards him, watching Rin. Rin was friends with everyone in his class, even the girls. Everyone, except for Sousuke.

Everyone else was terrified of Sousuke, especially Kisumi. Sousuke never talked and he never tried to play with anyone. He tried to be invisible but unfortunately for Sousuke, he was too big to go unnoticed. Besides, he was good at everything! You couldn’t try to be invisible but also be the best!

Since their first day of school, Rin had watched Sousuke when Sousuke wasn’t looking. He hadn’t wanted to frighten him or let on that he was watching, but he always was and whatever Sousuke did, Rin tried to do better. Everyone else in their class was already Rin’s friend and he liked playing with them. But it was really Sousuke, hovering on the edge of everything, never speaking to anyone and completely without friends, that Rin paid the most attention to. He wanted Sousuke to see him, be impressed by him. He wanted to experience the kindness Rin had noticed manifest itself in ways no one else could see. The small presents Sousuke would make for the teacher when she said something kind to Sousuke, the way he took special care of the class bunny. He wanted to know what it would look like for Sousuke to really, really smile.

He wished he were as kind as Sousuke.

With anyone else, Rin would have no problem marching straight up and demanding that they be immediate friends, but even from the very beginning, Sousuke was different. He made Rin excited in a way no one else could.

Sousuke was the only one, past or present, who had ever made Rin feel shy at any time.

Before that day, Rin had given a lot of thought as to how he could make Sousuke his friend, but the longer he drew out the plan, the harder it became. Rin had never been very good with plans, he went head first into everything, but he felt he couldn’t do that with someone as special as Sousuke.

Sousuke….Sousuke was different than everyone else.

So that day, on the playground, when Sousuke was quietly coming closer and closer to Rin, Rin was
getting more and more excited. His mind began to whirr rapidly, trying to figure out a way that would make Sousuke want to be his friend. Now was his chance!

Disaster struck, Sousuke fell down and Rin gasped in horror. Rin hated being hurt and seeing Sousuke hurt, it felt like Rin was being hurt. He rushed off the swings and towards Sousuke, all thoughts of plans and tact abandoned. When he asked Sousuke if he was okay, Sousuke looked up at him and looked at Rin like no one had ever looked at him before.

Even though he’d been so young, Rin was stunned to read the emotions in Sousuke’s eyes so well. Fear, longing, crushing loneliness he desperately wanted to leave behind. But above all, Rin saw a slow and steadily burning admiration, whose intensity Rin knew he would never find in another pair of eyes.

That was the beginning for Rin.

All those emotions, Rin now saw in Sousuke’s eyes as they sat, looking at each other outside of Rin’s apartment. But the look wasn’t completely analogous because Sousuke was older and he’d been through so much.

The admiration, the loneliness, the fear, the longing – all of that was there, but there were other things there as well.

And the absolute worst of all…despair

Rin had done this to Sousuke. He’d done this because he’d wanted to be the best boyfriend possible, but all he’d done was hurt Sousuke badly. Sousuke didn’t like to show his wounds to people; when injured he was an animal who didn’t want to show weakness and who hid themselves while they recovered. For him to show such emotions went against his nature.

He must really, really be in pain.

There were three people in Rin’s life that he could not bear to see in any pain. His mother, Gou….and Sousuke. With everyone else he was close to, such as Haru, Makoto, and Sam, he of course didn’t like to see them suffer. But when Sousuke was hurting, he felt a deep, visceral stab in
his gut, like he could feel their pain. No one else effected Rin in the way his family and Sousuke did. Seeing Sousuke, seeing all the hurt where usually Rin couldn’t see any, knowing that Rin was the cause of it all...

God, Rin had fucked up SO badly!

He couldn’t just sit there, seeing Sousuke suffer like this without doing something to make him feel better. Obviously he needed to explain himself, but that would take time and Sousuke needed something now.

Since he’d arrived yesterday, Rin had respected Sousuke’s personal space because he could tell things were wrong and when things were wrong with Sousuke, Sousuke turned into a wild, injured animal. He hadn’t wanted to upset Sousuke more, he still didn’t want to upset Sousuke more, but Rin didn’t know what else he could do. Besides, he had missed Sousuke like crazy and he’d been dying to hold him, smell that familiar, wonderful smell, listen to Sousuke’s breath…know with every one of his senses that Sousuke was real and well and with Rin….

Sousuke closed his eyes as Rin draped his arms around his shoulders and brought Sousuke into a tight hug, causing Sousuke to flinch. Rin couldn’t help but shed a few tears at Sousuke’s reaction. He obviously hadn’t expected Rin to hug him; he must have thought Rin was going to hit him. Things were that bad that Sousuke believed the person who loved him, who he was in love with, was prepared to hit him.

Like a beaten dog.

Rin squeezed Sousuke tighter and he waited for Sousuke to relax before he said anything. When Sousuke understood that Rin wasn’t trying to hurt him more, Rin felt some of the tension leave Sousuke’s body. Without breaking contact with Rin, Sousuke turned his body, so he could lift up one of his big, warm hands and put it on Rin’s back, putting just enough pressure on Rin so that he could stay where he was, if he wanted, or he could come closer to Sousuke, also if he wanted.

As soon as Rin understood, he moved his arms up around Sousuke’s neck and pressed his cheek against Sousuke’s. With his hand, he cupped Sousuke around the back of his neck, dragging Sousuke closer. It wasn’t close enough, but it was better.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke, they just sat on the pavement, holding each other. Rin was trying his best not to break down into sobs, because he didn’t want to steal attention away from the real problem, Sousuke’s pain. This wasn’t about how Rin was feeling, this was about Sousuke and making things right. But Rin wouldn’t be Rin if he wasn’t at least a little effected, if he didn’t cry just
a little— for Sousuke, but also for how horrible Rin felt. Everyone made fun of Rin for crying so easily, but he knew no better way of venting strong feelings he otherwise didn’t know how to express.

Sousuke noticed the slight shudder of Rin’s shoulders and he easily put things together. No one knew Rin better than Sousuke, after all.

“I’m okay,” Sousuke said quietly, breaking the silence, “No lasting damage, I just can’t get my stitches wet for two weeks. I’m okay, really. Please don’t cry.”

Rin constricted himself harder around Sousuke, feeling like complete shit. Sousuke shouldn’t be the one comforting Rin, it should be the other way around! Rin nuzzled his head into Sousuke’s neck and he took a few shuddering breaths to calm himself down.

“I was so scared last night, Sou,” Rin blurted, his words tumbling out of his mouth almost too quickly, “You were hurt and bleeding and I’ve never seen you fight anyone before and I…it was just…it was just a lot all at once! And then you asked me if I loved you and I wasn’t expecting it because I thought it was obvious and then you were gone two seconds later…we looked everywhere for you, but we couldn’t find you!”

Rin sniffed back a sob that would have rocked them both. The only reason he was able to hold himself back at all was because he reminded himself that this couldn’t be about Rin’s feelings. This conversation had to be about Sousuke and explaining things to Sousuke. Making Sousuke understand. Repairing.

Rin lifted his head so he could look Sousuke directly in the eyes. Those beautiful teal eyes were a tangle of emotions, not the least of which was confusion.

Well, at least Rin knew what he needed to say, to begin.

“I love you, Sousuke,” Rin whispered, averting his eyes because it was too painful to see the wreck he’d made of Sousuke, “I love you so much and I’ll never love anyone like I love you! I know I’ve fucked up and you could probably find someone so much better than me to love you, someone easier who doesn’t screw things up as badly as I do. I really wasn’t trying to hurt you, but I have. Still, I love you, all the same, and I always, always will.”

An eternity seemed to pass before anything happened, but part of Rin knew it had only been a few
seconds. Saying those things out loud didn’t even come close to how strongly Rin felt, but when had Rin ever been able to adequately express his feelings? Words had never been enough.

A featherweight caress against Rin’s cheek sent a ripple through him. He looked up and found Sousuke, smiling. The pain was still in his eyes, but for Rin, he was smiling.

Not many things in life made Rin feel humble, but this, having this wonderful, beautiful man who loved him so completely smile at Rin at a time like this…well it was one of those moments.

“Well will you come inside, big guy?” he asked, finding himself blushing and feeling surprisingly bashful. Some of the pain seeped out of Sousuke’s eyes as he smiled wider and nodded his head.

Rin rocked back on his heels, extricating himself from Sousuke, then stood up and offered Sousuke a hand. Sousuke studied his hand for a moment, before reaching out and allowing himself to be pulled up. Without letting go of Sousuke’s hand, Rin led him into his apartment.

In the kitchen, Rin carefully deposited Sousuke down on the bar stool, fussing that he was arranged perfectly and letting his hands linger on Sousuke because, fuck, Rin had missed the feel of him.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Rin asked as he smoothed Sousuke’s hair. Sousuke shrugged, smiling from all the attention.

Rin sighed and left Sousuke so he could assemble ingredients for an omelet. He would talk to Sousuke about everything, but there was so much to say and he knew that Sousuke was always easier to talk to if he had a full stomach.

With Sousuke watching his every move, Rin began to crack eggs. Sousuke wasn’t the only one who had had a sleepless night and Rin was surprised how hard it was to keep his hands from shaking. If Rin was being honest, it wasn’t just the exhaustion that made him tremble. It was Sousuke, here, watching him.

He was too good. He was too precious. Rin shouldn’t be trusted with him. Sousuke had always been sensitive and shy, something he tried very hard to hide but was true nonetheless. Rin was a bull in an emotional china shop, he had never been very good at seeing how his aggressive, out-there emotions hurt the people around him. No one had suffered as much as Sousuke.
Rin’s trembling hands dropped an eggshell into the bowl. Quickly, Rin fished it out and put it back in the carton with the others. His cheeks were so hot, they probably could have cooked the eggs themselves. Knowing none of this escaped Sousuke’s attention, Rin looked up. Sure enough, Sousuke was watching him with a damnable adorable look of concern.

Maybe Rin would be able to concentrate on the omelet better if he got a few things out of the way first. He didn’t like the feeling of tension hanging between them.

“I wasn’t trying to punish you,” Rin said, looking directly into Sousuke’s eyes, “I want you to know I really wasn’t trying to punish you for being gone. I hadn’t even thought about it that way at all.”

“Then why?” Sousuke asked in a hoarse voice, “Was it because of that fight? I know I’m not the most open minded person and I came off as abrasive. I am really sorry about how I acted, Rin. I wish I could take it back because I was such an ass and I don’t want to treat you like that.”

Rin shook his head vigorously, trying to both emphasize how wrong Sousuke was and to keep himself from shedding the tears now stinging his eyes.

“No!” he exclaimed, “I know all the crap that you had with your father and I know how hard a time you’ve had accepting your sexuality. Like I said last night, I should have been smarter with how I brought sex stuff up with you because I know what a hard subject it is. No, it wasn’t that.”

Rin’s heart beat faster as the pause lengthened.

“No!” he exclaimed, “I know all the crap that you had with your father and I know how hard a time you’ve had accepting your sexuality. Like I said last night, I should have been smarter with how I brought sex stuff up with you because I know what a hard subject it is. No, it wasn’t that.”

Rin’s heart beat faster as the pause lengthened.

“Then what was it about, Rin?” Sousuke asked, his voice soft and deep and soothing.

“I was afraid,” Rin admitted, grudgingly. Sousuke raised an eyebrow. Rin didn’t want to hurt Sousuke and he knew Sousuke would probably take things the wrong way. But still, if they were going to get past this horrible month and start to really build something, Rin needed to tell him how he felt. The omelet could wait.

Sighing, Rin continued, still holding Sousuke’s eyes with his own: “I wasn’t mad that you left. When you told me why you wanted to run away, I understood because that was such a you way to handle what you were going through. Even that first day, when we saw each other again, I couldn’t be angry that you’d gone. But while you were gone, I literally had no idea if you were still alive or not and that terrified me. That you could be gone and I wouldn’t even know it…I was so scared because
how would I ever know?

“You coming back was the greatest thing in the world because, Sou, you are just…you’re just so wonderful and I love you so much! But then I saw your shoulder and I read all those letters you wrote and I learned parts of you I’d never guessed were even there. I’d feared for your life before, but I’d never…” Rin’s voice was shuddering as hard as his hands, “I’d never thought that you wanted to end it all for yourself. That you had seriously thought about taking your own life…”

Sousuke’s face hardened and he looked away from Rin. “I shouldn’t have shown them to you…” he growled under his breath.

“No!” Rin yelled, his voice much harder than he’d thought. Sousuke was so surprised by Rin’s reaction, he turned around and looked at him again.

“No I needed to read those letters!” Rin affirmed, his voice full of passion, “You hiding things and not wanting to share things has always given us problems before, Sou! But when you gave me those letters, you were finally opening up to me! You trusted me! No, I needed them because I needed them to understand you. I…what I found in those letters scared me, because I didn’t know that part of you and I thought I’d known everything about you. I didn’t want to loose you, but I was glad you trusted me enough to share the parts that you didn’t show anyone else. Every time I turned my back, I was worried you might fall back into that pit and that you might hurt yourself, but I was really glad you let me know the problems you’ve faced. I want to know all of you, Sousuke, every last part of you and I love every part of you!”

Rin needed a moment to catch his breath. He couldn’t look at Sousuke, just then.

“Reading those letters was hard,” Rin continued, his voice quieter, “but it was really powerful, learning about how hard you worked to bring yourself to a better place. I was so proud of you, Sou. Learning that stuff about you made me realize you deserved to be the most sublimey happy person in the universe. I mean, I’ve always wanted you to be happy because I care about you like no one else, but reading about how much you’d been through, how much you’ve suffered…I knew I wanted you to just burst from being too happy! And the way you wrote about me, all the things you’ve done for me, just everything throughout our lives…I know what your love is like and I know it’s pure and deep and the greatest thing anyone has ever offered me. I…if anyone…maybe it sounds conceited, but I knew that if anyone had a shot at giving you the happiness you deserved, it was me! So I decided I needed to work on things. If I was going to be the best boyfriend, be the most perfect boyfriend for you…I had to figure out how I was going to look away from you without worrying that you would hurt yourself. I didn’t want to talk for that month, because I had been having such a hard time believing you’d be there whenever we said goodbye and I needed to get over it so I could be perfect. For you. But all that did was hurt you.”

Rin looked back down at his bowl, away from the shocked look across Sousuke’s face. He picked
up the whisk and continued beating his eggs. He was glad for the distraction and for the excuse to
look away. As could be expected, tears had begun trailing down his cheeks halfway through his
explanation and he was glad of an opportunity to hide them. Not for the first time, Rin wished he
wasn’t such a cry baby. He just felt things so strongly, he didn’t know how else to react.

From the other side of the kitchen island, Rin heard the scraping of a stool and a split second later,
Sousuke had wrapped his big arms around Rin, pressing him close to his chest.

Absence eroded memories and sensations. Suddenly finding himself surrounded by all the warmth of
Sousuke, Rin was surprised at how much better it felt than he’d remembered. Sousuke’s hands were
in Rin’s hair and he was running his fingers through the strands. Lovingly.

Rin’s composure broke completely. Abandoning his omelet, he clutched onto the fabric of Sousuke’s
shirt, sobbing. He knew he was probably making a fool of himself, but he couldn’t help it.

“You should have told me that’s how you felt,” Sousuke said above him, his voice rumbling his big,
broad chest. “I don’t know if it makes any difference to you, but I definitely don’t want to die. I’m
well over that. You don’t have anything to worry about on that front. I’m not going anywhere.”

Sousuke held Rin tighter and waited until Rin had finished. When finally the shuddering and the
sniffles stopped, Rin gently pushed himself away from Sousuke so he could look up into that face.

“You promise?” Rin whispered. Sousuke smiled and nodded his head.

“Can you forgive me, Sousuke? Can you forgive me for not being there this past month, when you
needed me, and for hurting you?” Rin whispered back.

Sousuke reached out a hand and gently tucked a strand of hair behind Rin’s ear.

“Of course I forgive you,” he said quietly, “can you forgive me? For making you suffer and worry
about me?”

Rin furrowed his eyebrows together and frowned. There was nothing to forgive; anything Rin had
suffered had been of his own making.

Nonetheless, Rin nodded his head.

“Of course I forgive you, you big idiot.”

Sousuke smiled and leaned his head in so it was touching Rin’s and for that brief moment, nothing in
the world could possibly compare to the strength with which Rin’s heart beat for Sousuke, and Sousuke’s for Rin.

Now, Rin felt, they could finally begin to move forward.

What a goddamn relief!

Sousuke’s stomach, growling angrily for food, interrupted that moment, and despite all the tears, Rin couldn’t help but laugh. Now that his heart was unburdened and Sousuke still wanted him, he felt lighter than air. Playfully, he pushed Sousuke away.

“Get over there, Mr. Yamazaki!” Rin teased, “This omelet isn’t going to make itself!”

Sousuke clearly felt the same as Rin, because he was wearing a big, goofy grin as well. Obediently, he went around the counter and sat back down, his eyes were all for Rin. He watched as Rin heated up the pan and melted butter. Half the eggs went in and Rin got to work. Rin hadn’t eaten anything in a long time either and he wanted to share the meal with Sousuke.

Flipping the omelet like an expert, Rin could feel Sousuke’s smile on him. This was what their reunion was supposed to feel like. Not the weirdness of yesterday, not the tension…none of it.

Finishing the first omelet, Rin plated it and slid it over to Sousuke before beginning his. He expected Sousuke to eat immediately, because Sousuke was a great food vortex when he was happy. Sousuke didn’t. Rin peeked up and was a little upset to find Sousuke watching him, frowning.

“Rin,” Sousuke said once he noticed he had Rin’s attention, “about what you said earlier. About being the perfect boyfriend.”

Rin flipped his omelet.

“I fell in love with you,” he continued, “when we were kids, I fell so hard for you I’ve never been able to really look at anyone else. I worked damn hard to get here, too, and I only did it for you. I don’t want some perfect version of yourself, who hides his feelings and doesn’t address things head on because he’s afraid of hurting my feelings. That’s not you. The good parts and the bad, I want
them all! Because, to me, you are already perfect and just exactly what I want.”

Rin gulped hard, trying not to burst into tears again.

“So no more nonsense about being perfect, yeah? Just be you because it’s you I love. We’re going to fight because that’s how we are and we are both going to make mistakes, because that’s what we do. But no more of this perfect business, alright?”

Rin nodded his head down at the pan. That speech wasn’t something Rin had expected, but he sure as hell needed to hear it. He took a few deep breaths and his desire to cry dissipated, replaced instead by a warm glow that Sousuke had inspired in him, even when they were little kids.

Damn, Sousuke was great.

Finishing his omelet, he plated it and walked over to where Sousuke was sitting, jumping up on the counter, right next to Sou. Together they began to eat.

“Shit, Rin!” Sou cried after the first bite, “This is amazing! Where did you learn to cook like this?”

Rin couldn’t help but grin one smug ass smile.

“Well you said you had really good memories from France, so I decided I’d learn how to cook French really well for you! Omelets are about all I can do now, but I’ve got big plans!”

It looked like a bomb of blush suddenly exploded all over Sousuke; he became red all the way to the tips of his ears.

“That’s really sweet of you,” he mumbled awkwardly, then turned back down to his plate to gobble the rest down.

Rin beamed down at him again, his eyes leaking just a tiny bit. Maybe trying to be perfect was a bad idea, because yeah, Rin was far from perfect. But this feeling, of feeding Sousuke, of making him happy with something he did for him…yeah, Rin would be happy to work on things like that. He should probably buy a Julia Child cookbook, maybe figure out how he could make some of those things without needing an oven. They wouldn’t have one in Tokyo.

They finished their meal and Rin felt loads better. He took their plates and washed them quickly before going back over to Sousuke.
“Okay,” he said as he grabbed the collar of Sousuke’s shirt, “time for a shower. Then let’s take a nap because I am fucking tired. And I can tell you are fucking tired too.”

Standing together in the bathroom, with the door closed, Rin suddenly felt very shy. Sousuke hadn’t questioned his command of a shower and he certainly didn’t question Rin when he closed the two of them in together. But here they were, the warm spray of water already steaming up the mirrors, acting like two little kids who wanted to slow dance together but didn’t know how. How idiotic! They had been best friends, best swimming friends, their whole lives and they’d already had sex multiple times! It was stupid to feel so embarrassed about being naked, in front of Sousuke of all people, because Rin never felt embarrassed in front of anyone! But the longer they waited, the worse it became.

Finally, finally, Sousuke broke the silence.

“I, um, will take off my shirt now,” he mumbled, “I guess.”

Rin snapped his head to the side and watched as Sousuke lifted his shirt up off his head, revealing his full torso.

There were two new additions, since the last time Rin had seen him, and Rin’s eyes immediately sought out the one he was expecting. A clear piece of plastic was taped over it, but there it was, the nasty stab wound. It was raw and angry, seeping blood into the small, contained environment within the plastic. Seeing it for the first time, Rin took a step closer. It was larger than he’d imagined and his throat was a huge lump, just looking at it.

Sousuke put a hand on Rin’s shoulder, drawing his attention up to him.

“I am alright, really,” tried to console Rin, “I will have a scar, but all the doctors said I was really lucky. It only hurts today because of yesterday and in a few more days, it won’t hurt at all.”

Rin nodded his head, though he didn’t really believe Sousuke. It was then, looking up at Sousuke, that something else caught Rin’s eye.

Since high school, Sousuke’s right shoulder had been a source of incredible pain and disappointment. When Rin noticed in the corner of his eyes something dark where there had been so much pain before, he almost didn’t want to look. But he did and he was glad he did because what he saw there, for once, was something beautiful.
Although Sousuke had vastly improved the design, Rin could see the lotus flower he’d drawn on Sousuke, back during their reunion weekend in Tokyo. A hand fluttered up to Rin’s mouth as the other reached out to touch it.

It was absolutely beautiful. It felt like something they’d made together.

“I got it done after I got out of the hospital,” Sousuke explained, “I didn’t know what was going to happen with you, but I felt like, no matter what, I needed to remain positive and stay out of the muck I’d come from. Life is precious and I came out of the hospital, ready to fight for my life if I needed to. I may have some difficulty going to hot springs from here on out, but that’s okay. What do you think, Rin?”

Rin turned his head up and smiled at Sousuke.

“It’s perfect, Sousuke!” Rin gushed, “I love it! It’s so beautiful!”

Sousuke smiled down at Rin for a solid minute before he shyly reached out his hands and began rolling the edge of Rin’s shirt up. Rin lifted his arms up, allowing Sousuke to undress him.

The warm water felt incredibly good as it washed down Sousuke’s body, but not nearly as good as it felt to be so close to Rin. His mind was still catching up, but one thing was sure. Rin was still his boyfriend and Sousuke couldn’t be happier.

Or more relieved.

Rin wanted him to stay and such a positive outcome, Sousuke hadn’t even thought to prepare for. He really had believed that he and Rin were finished. Rin, blubbery, sweet, beautiful, misguided, and emotional Rin, wanted Sousuke to stay with him, love him, be his. God, that was the best possible outcome!

Sousuke couldn’t even fathom how happy he was, his joy was so immense!

He hadn’t felt this wonderful in…well in longer than Sousuke could remember.
“Sou, get down on your knees,” Rin commanded with a wide grin.

Sousuke cocked an eyebrow up at Rin, unsure of what Rin wanted. But then Sousuke gave it a second and the pieces fell into place. Knees. In front of a dick.

Sousuke was usually the one telling other people to get down on their knees, not the other way around. He’d have to put blowjobs as one more thing he was actually pretty inexperienced with; his sexual education had not been as broad as he’d thought, even with so many partners.

“Rin, I really don’t think I could handle giving you a blow job right now,” he sighed, “I’m really tired. I’m sorry. Another time, I promise.”

Rin bristled and exploded with indignation.

“Not a blowjob, idiot!” he stuttered, “I just wanted…I just wanted to wash your hair for you and your too damn tall for me to reach! Unless you don’t want me to!?”

Sousuke regarded Rin for a second, to see if he was joking. When it was abundantly clear he wasn’t, Sousuke dropped down to his knees, not knowing whether he should be laughing or blushing. Instead of doing either, he gently grabbed Rin’s hips and pressed his cheek against the hipbone.

A moment of grumbling later, Sousuke felt Rin’s hands in his hair as he gently began to massage his scalp, lathering up the shampoo. Sousuke smiled and closed his eyes, letting his mind wander.

This felt so lovely, he really liked it.

The touch, the warmth, the feeling of another person…caring for him….

People didn’t take care of him like this, or at least he hadn’t been taken care of in a really long time. Sousuke had forgotten how nice it felt to have someone wash his hair. His mom used to do it, when he was a kid. Sousuke had half forgotten she used to do that, he hadn’t remembered it until….
Suddenly a vice was against Sousuke’s chest and his eyes flew open in panic. A split second later, a phantom pain, just like he’d felt that night, ripped into his side. The edges of his vision began to darken and he couldn’t breathe. He probably sounded like he was choking, but Sousuke couldn’t stop it. He pushed away from wherever it was he was. He tried to run away from the fear by pushing himself into a corner and curling up into a ball, but it was no use. Terror engulfed him and he was unaware of everything else except the pain, splitting his side in two.

Oh god! The pain!

Sousuke felt like he was dying! Again.

Rin was the crier. That was a well-established fact that Rin had come to accept. Everyone else, they could keep themselves together. Sousuke, who Rin had known the best and had loved the most, was his friend least likely to cry. In their years together, he’d only seen Sousuke cry a few times and he’d certainly never seen him cry like this.

Nothing like this.

Rin had been washing his hair, enjoying the feeling of taking care of Sousuke, when suddenly Sousuke had broken down in a way he never had before.

What had Rin done? Why was Sousuke now huddled in the corner, sobbing uncontrollably!?

Seeing Sousuke like this was worse than the time he’d confronted Haru in the locker room, after Haru had botched his 100 free at regionals during their third year. This wasn’t just Sousuke raising his voice. This was Sousuke having a breakdown.

Rin didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to react, other than to cry because fuck this was scary!

The only thing Rin could think of was to somehow comfort Sousuke, so he got down on his knees, right next to him, and put a hand on the back of his neck. He didn’t put any pressure on his hand, he didn’t want to make things worse. He only wanted to let Sousuke know he was there for him, no matter what.
Sousuke flinched at the contact, but afterwards his body began to relax. It took him three full minutes of ugly, hard sobbing until he was spent, but Rin didn’t let his hand waver. His other hand, he put on Sousuke’s shoulder, just for an extra reminder that he wasn’t alone. What felt like any eternity later, Sousuke’s body finally stopped shuddering and he lifted his head to look at Rin. At first, he tried to smile, pretend like nothing had happened, but then he saw the tears streaming down Rin’s cheeks and he frowned.

“Ah please don’t cry,” he said weakly, wiping his own tears away with the palms of both hands, “I’m sorry, I’m just being stupid. Please ignore me”

Rin grabbed Sousuke’s wrists, halting them.

“As if I could!” Rin shouted angrily, “What happened?”

“Oh,” Sousuke said evasively, “It’s dumb, really. I should be over it by now.”

He looked away, trying to hide.

Rin let go of his wrists so he could grab Sousuke’s face, making him face Rin. Sousuke’s eyes were wide and he looked shocked, but Rin didn’t care. He wasn’t letting go until Sousuke told him what was wrong!

It wasn’t only Makoto and Haru who had some level of telepathic ability with each other. Sousuke had always been able to read Rin like a book and Rin could tell, in Sousuke’s eyes, that he understood Rin’s feelings.

With his head firmly in Rin’s grip, he sighed in defeat. Rin relaxed his hands a fraction, he didn’t want to hurt Sousuke after all, but he didn’t let him go.

“My mom used to wash my hair, like you were just doing,” Sousuke explained, “and I loved it. It feels so nice, you know?”

He looked at Rin for help, but Rin didn’t understand where this was going. Sousuke was on his own and Rin was hanging on his every word.

“When I got stabbed,” he continued, quieter than before, more reluctant, “I really thought I was going to die. Not like before, when I was alone. Then I was just being a self-pitying idiot who was stuck in my misery. It wasn’t like that this time. While I was laying there for the ambulance, that memory, of my mom washing my hair, and a whole lot of other memories came into my mind. My life, flashing before my eyes, you know? Feeling you wash my hair, just now…I guess it just brought back that memory…of dying.”
Rin’s hands dropped from Sousuke’s face, but they weren’t needed. Rin had Sousuke’s full attention, but Rin didn’t know what to do with it.

He had no idea what to say.

Sousuke seemed to understand. He smiled that warm, half smile that seemed mostly unconscious.

“It may sound ridiculous,” he said quietly, “but I’m kind of glad I got stabbed. Since I learned what it feels like to really be dying, I’ve never wanted to live more. The tattoo isn’t just because of you; it’s because I never want to feel that horrible again. So trust me when I say, I am done doing shit like that to myself. No matter how bad things get, *nothing*, absolutely *nothing*, will ever make me want to feel like that again. I promise you, Rin. You don’t need to worry about me.”

They both fell completely silent, staring at each other on the ground of a shower too small for the pair of them. Water, rushing down the drain, was all that could be heard. Thirty seconds passed.

Sousuke’s words drove deep within Sousuke and slowly, one by one, they dislodged Rin’s heart from the icy grip that Rin had suffered from since he first read Sousuke’s letters.

At the root of that icy feeling, Rin had been terrified that Sousuke would do something terrible to himself that would take Sousuke away from Rin forever.

Just like his father had been ripped from Rin’s life.

When it came down to it, Rin’s problems all stemmed from Rin’s fear that Sousuke would leave Rin, just like his father had. Worse even than his father, because his father’s killer was nature itself while Rin had felt Sousuke would surely be his own slayer.

But looking at Sousuke, hearing the words Sousuke told him, seeing how much he feared that pain…it was enough. Rin finally, *finally* believed Sousuke. Sousuke didn’t want to die. He wasn’t going to leave Rin.

The relief Rin felt was profound.
For the very first time in years, there was nothing keeping Sousuke away from Rin.

Thirty seconds after Sousuke had spoken, Rin smashed his mouth against Sousuke’s, reaching up to entwine his hands in Sousuke’s still soapy hair. He had taken Sousuke momentarily by surprise, but only for a moment. Sousuke responded with equal enthusiasm and Rin kissed Sousuke roughly, savagely, with all the pent up feelings from the last two months, from the last four years, from the last two decades. Their tongues wrestled with each other like a pair of dogs playing with each other. With any other beast but their own kind, they would have been too rough, but for each other, it was perfect. It was important and it was perfect.

This, right there, should have been their very first kiss. It felt like a rebirth. It felt fucking honest, for the first time.

Rin didn’t know how or when Sousuke had done it, but Rin was sitting in Sousuke’s lap and Sousuke’s hands were splayed out across Rin’s hips, as if he wanted to cover as much of Rin as possible. Sousuke had said he was too tired for sex, and Rin would respect that because, honestly, he was too, but they sat in the shower, kissing, for a long time.

The rough, hungry kisses with which they started eased in intensity, becoming gentler, sweeter, more adoring as time passed. It didn’t surprise or offend Rin when Sousuke eventually pulled away and Rin was more than happy to rearrange himself so his head could rest on Sousuke’s left shoulder, his ass on the ground, and his legs tangled between Sousuke’s. Obviously, Sousuke had his arms around Rin, hugging him tightly.

Rin felt drunk off Sousuke, he was so happy.

“Say Sou,” Rin sighed, “what do you think about making new promises to each other, like before I went to Australia the first time?”

Sousuke chuckled above Rin, equally as intoxicated off Rin.

“Sure!” he agreed, “I promise I’ll take such good care of you, Rin!”

Rin laughed too, “No, I’ll take such good care of you, Sou!”
They both giggled, eventually falling silent. Sousuke began to play with Rin’s hair.

“Rin, I promise you I won’t run away again. If you don’t want to live in Japan anymore, I’ll happily go wherever you want, but I won’t go unless it’s with you.”

With some effort, Rin lifted his head so he could look at Sousuke. Sousuke’s face was serious again. The hand that had been playing with Rin’s hair moved so that Sousuke could caress Rin’s cheek with it.

“How about you, my love?” he asked quietly, causing Rin to blush.

“Oh now you’re being so serious!” Rin whined as he sunk back to his place on Sousuke’s shoulder. Sousuke’s hand followed his head and he continued to stroke Rin’s hair.

“I promise to tell you everything that’s bothering me,” Sousuke continued, “the good and the bad.”

Rin curled up closer into Sousuke and tilted his head so he could kiss Sousuke’s shoulder.

“And I promise I will love you more every day, Matsuoka Rin. That’s my promise to you.”

Rin looked up again so he could see Sousuke, but before he could get a good look at him, Sousuke was kissing him again. Not rough and not deeply, but sweetly. When he pulled back, he was smiling his stupid, sexy smile that drove Rin wild.

“Yeah, well, I promise to love you more each day too, dummy,” Rin grumbled, causing that smile to widen, “and I promise I won’t hide things either because I’m terrible at that, and I’ll talk to you about things that are bothering me. And I won’t try to be perfect either.”

Sousuke brought the hand that had been holding Rin to the front and made a fist.

“Promise?” Sousuke asked.

Rin smirked and pounded his fist against Sousuke’s.
Later, when the hot water had finally run out and Rin had helped Sousuke clean his wound, they were standing in Rin’s room, bare ass naked. Rin was rummaging through his drawers, looking for something to wear.

“Leave it!” Sousuke whined as he came up behind Rin and wrapped him in a hug, kissing his neck, “You promised me a nap and I want to sleep naked with you.”

The tips of Rin’s ears turned pink.

“Fine you big oaf,” Rin complained, though he made no effort to push Sousuke off of him, “let’s sleep naked then!”

Sousuke smiled as Rin turned around and wrapped his arms around Sousuke’s neck. Sensing what Rin wanted, Sousuke picked Rin up so Rin could wrap his legs around Sousuke’s waist. Rin giggled as Sousuke kissed and nipped at his neck. All too soon, Sousuke’s knees were knocking against Rin’s bed and he dropped Rin down. Rin gave him a pout, then grabbed Sousuke’s wrist and yanked him into bed with him. They laughed together as they wrestled each other and the sheets, finally coming to rest with Sousuke, snuggled up against Rin’s side and draped all over him.

As they quieted down, Rin began to absently rub Sousuke’s head. This time, Sousuke didn’t collapse into a pitiful pile of tears.

“The thing about you, Sou,” Rin said quietly, like he was continuing some conversation they’d been having earlier, “you make me want to be a better man. I know I get caught up in my own shit and I’m not good at seeing other people’s shit around me, but that’s not how it is with you. I see beyond myself if I’m looking at you. I want to make you proud of me as much as I want you to love me. Dumb, right?”

Sousuke lifted his head up so he could give Rin one last peck.

“It’s not dumb,” Sousuke said as he snuggled back up against Rin, “you make me want to be a better
man too. Shit, if I’m honest, pretty much everything I’ve ever done was to impress you. I’ve always felt that with you in front of me, I can do anything. I want you to be proud of me as much as I want you to love me too.”

Rin squeezed Sousuke tighter.

“Love ya, idiot,” he said as he affectionately ruffled Sousuke’s hair.

“Love ya, too,” Sousuke said, smiling.

There were still plenty of things they needed to talk about, plenty of problems that would crop up and make them fight. But as Sousuke finally fell into a much needed sleep, he was blissfully happy.

He was in Rin’s arms, right where he’d always wanted to be. Since Day One.

Chapter End Notes

I was really getting into writing this chapter, so it got finished sooner than I'd anticipated! So everyone knows, I changed a slight thing in Chapter 29 after my original posting. Rin does go and look for Sousuke after he runs away, because it was super OOC for Rin to do nothing at all.

Anyways, hope you enjoy! Two more Chapters set in Australia before the boys head back to Japan. They will be mostly fluffy, though of course some relationship building for sure.

Feel free to chat me up anytime here or on tumblr: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

Thanks soo very much everyone for reading and sticking with me!!!! I really appreciate it and it’s so lovely to have so much support :) Take care and hopefully everyone is enjoying being back at school (if you are in school ;)

-tornadoquakes
Rin woke up from his nap to the sight of Sousuke’s broad back. The warm, muted light of the lengthening afternoon caused Sousuke’s skin to glow more warmly than usual. Even though he’d stopped swimming, Sousuke had lost none of his muscle definition. If anything, the curves of his back muscles were larger than they had been when they were teenagers. Rin wondered if Sousuke was aware of what a perfect, human specimen he was. Not in every way, of course. Even with the new addition to the damned shoulder, Rin could still see the faint outlines of Sousuke’s only physical imperfection. Well, now there was the stab wound in his side and the micro-cuts on his face from the bottle shattering against his skull would likely leave some marks. But in all other things, Sousuke possessed an objectively perfect body. Ai and Rei had both said it in high school, it was still true now.

Did Sousuke realize how attractive he was?

Rin’s eyebrows contracted together as he rolled over to face Sousuke’s back.

He must have an idea. From what he’d told Rin of his past sexual experiences, finding a nightly lover wasn’t something he’d ever struggled with. If anything, sex had been too easy for Sousuke. Rin had been pretty successful in that department and he’d been pursued plenty of times before. But even then, there had been an art to attracting partners; nothing had ever happened without some effort. The art was what Rin liked the most, and the discovery of new sensations, so for Rin that had sufficed in the past.

But things were different for Sousuke. Rin saw it in strangers’ eyes. Plenty of people, male and female, looked at him as though they’d do anything for Sousuke to consider them. Sousuke hadn’t paid those looks any attention, at least that Rin could tell. To be fair, when Sousuke was with Rin, Sousuke’s attention, conscious or not, was always and completely devoted to Rin. In order to see if Sousuke was aware of the looks strangers gave him, Rin would have to not be there. And such a scenario was something Rin wasn’t willing to create anymore.

He wanted Sousuke and he didn’t want to share.

Quietly, Rin reached out a finger and brushed it against Sousuke’s warm skin. At contact, he flinched, making Rin smile. He snaked his hands around Sousuke’s broad chest and pulled himself closer so he could steal a kiss on the back of Sousuke’s neck.

“Did you sleep alright?” Rin whispered. His breath ruffled the short hairs at the back of Sousuke’s head.

“Yeah, you?”
Rin kissed Sousuke again and pulled himself closer.
“Better than I have in a long time. What time is it?”
“Don’t know.”
Rin kissed Sousuke again.
“You know, Sou,” Rin said quietly. “We haven’t inaugurated your trip properly yet.”

His hand trailed down the ridges of Sousuke’s abdomen, lingering in the grooves. As he planted another kiss on the back of Sousuke’s neck, his hand found Sousuke’s hip. Sousuke’s whole body went rigid and Rin frowned against Sousuke’s skin.

“What’s up?” he asked.

Sousuke didn’t answer and Rin began to worry that the much desired union of their bodies would have to wait. He’d wait, if that’s what Sousuke wanted, but Rin had been waiting for months. He craved a release and he wanted Sousuke to be the one to give it to him.

Sousuke rolled out of Rin’s arms and sat up. Rin did the same, sitting a little behind Sousuke so he could observe Sousuke properly.

Shit. What had Rin done to fuck this up again? As an experiment, he reached out a hand and put it on Sousuke’s back. As expected, Sousuke flinched.

This wasn’t a good sign.

“What’s wrong, big guy?” Rin asked.

Sousuke took a long time to answer.

“Fuck me, Rin.”

Rin’s hand dropped as his mind went blank. Sousuke perceived the lack of contact and turned his head to look at Rin. His face reminded Rin of when they used to fight as kids. He had that same, earnest eyes, the same stubborn set of his jaw, the clenched teeth. Like he was daring Rin to fight back.

“Don’t make me beg.” Sousuke murmured.

Rin’s brain kicked back into gear.

“Come on, Sou,” Rin sputtered. “It’s fine if you don’t want to ever bottom, I like you topping me. It’s good that way, there’s lots of stuff to do being on the bottom and I really like how big you are. We don’t need to change it if you don’t want to…”

“I want to.” Sousuke insisted.

Rin frowned. He opened his mouth to protest, but the look in Sousuke’s eyes made him close it again. Sousuke was being serious. That whole fight had started because Sousuke didn’t want to bottom, so why was he asking now? The only way to find out was to ask.

“You have to tell me why before I agree,” Rin replied. “I don’t want you doing anything you don’t
Sousuke looked away. He couldn’t hide his ears though, Rin noticed they were turning pink.

“Sousuke, I know you don’t want me to do you, you made that pretty clear. I’m not sure what you are trying to prove, but really it’s fine for me to be the bottom. I’m okay with that…”

“I was being an idiot,” Sousuke mumbled. “I know better now. Someone really smart told me something really important about sex, that it’s not just about the physical pleasure of it. You can have sex for sex’s sake and it can be fun and feel great, but having just sex can also leave you feeling empty. That’s what it was for me for a long time, until recently really. I fucked and fucked and kept myself away from people because I didn’t want to hurt more than I already did. Maybe it was just me, but sex like that is just about the worst thing I could have done to myself because I’m someone who needs a connection. You’ve shown me that.”

He turned towards Rin so his cheek was resting on top of his knees.

“Relationships are about connecting with people and the most solid foundation for a relationship is trust. Trusting someone else with yourself and trusting they won’t hurt you. Sex is a way to show trust to each other.”

Rin swallowed. His heart beat faster.

“I don’t know about you, but I want to trust you more than anything,” Sousuke continued. “I want to trust that you won’t hurt me and I want to believe that what we have is something more than just sex. You could tell me to leave tomorrow and I’m terrified you will. I’m terrified because I’ve let you further in than I’d ever consider letting anyone else. I’m terrified that this is too good to be true and that at any moment, something is going to happen that will once again take you away from me and destroy my hopes of happiness. Or that you will realize one day that I’m not worth the effort and you’ve made a mistake by choosing me. You’re terrified too. You’re afraid I’ll hurt myself and I’ll disappear again. I know you better than anyone and that’s scary for you. If we are being honest, this is where we both are right now. We don’t trust each other.”

Under the weight of this truth, Sousuke crunched into a tighter ball as Rin’s eyes grew wider. Sousuke wasn’t wrong, but it sucked hearing it said out loud.

“If we’re serious about making things work out between us,” Sousuke whispered, “We need to start trusting each other and stop fearing what the other will do. It’s not going to happen overnight. We aren’t strangers. There’s a lot between us coming into this thing so we have a lot to work on. It’s harder than if we were new to each other because we know each other so well and can’t excuse shit. But that’s all the more reason to work on what we have. I’m willing to work on it because I fucking love you more than anything and I want to be happy with you. And I want you to be happy too. So yeah, I can’t say I really like the idea of you sticking shit up my ass because I don’t have a fucking clue what that means about me as a man or how it will feel. But I want you to fuck me because I’m trusting that you won’t hurt me or make fun of me or think less of me because I let you do this. And I want to show you that I’m willing to open myself and do things I wouldn’t do for anyone else, because I am trusting that you’re going to stay with me no matter what you see inside.”

He looked at Rin expectantly, but Rin was momentarily speechless.

“So Rin,” Sousuke said. “Now I need to know. Will you fuck me?”

“Yes.”
The word came out of Rin’s mouth before he thought about it. He had to stop himself from clapping a hand over his mouth and taking back the word. But it was said and Sousuke seemed satisfied. His body relaxed.

“Okay, then how do you want me?”

“Let me pee first, yeah?”

“Sure.”

Moments later, Rin splashed water on his face.

He was going to fuck Sousuke.

It had been a long time since Rin had topped anyone and none of those other experiences would be as important as this one. After all that Sousuke had said, Rin doubted it would be a fun experience, for either of them. Sousuke certainly wasn’t going to enjoy it. For their first time together again, Rin had wanted things to be easy and fun and perfect, but it wasn’t going to be any of those things. He’d never had important sex before and it was terrifying to think about.

No matter what, this wasn’t going to be a good experience. What then? Would Sousuke use this as an excuse to flee?

He shouldn’t have agreed so quickly without thinking things through. He wanted to have sex with Sousuke, he didn’t want to loose him.

Rin looked in the mirror and, as always, saw his father’s eyes looking back at him. Everything else was his mother’s, but his father had given him his eyes.

‘Dad’, he whispered low enough so no one outside the bathroom could hear. ‘What should I do?’

Rin talked to his father a lot more than he cared to admit. He talked more to his dead parent than his living one.

He closed his eyes and listened. Really, he was listening for his best judgment, but he’d assigned that voice inside him his father’s voice.

‘It’s not a test,’ he father replied. ‘Don’t do Sousuke the disservice of thinking this is a test. It’s an offering.’

Rin sighed because of course his dad was right.

‘You’ve never come to me for sex advice before,’ Rin’s dad continued. ‘That in and of itself tells me something. This isn’t just about sex.’

Rin rolled his eyes. He knew that, of course he did.

When it came down to it, Rin and Sousuke had treated sex the same way. Rin hadn’t gone and fucked his way around the world, but what Rin had done could be construed as much worse, much more selfish. He’d enjoyed the game of having boys fall in love with him, though he’d never really cared for them. During the pursuit, he’d convince himself he liked the guy because he didn’t want to think of himself as a monster. And while the relationship burned bright, Rin did like whomever, or at least he tried to convince himself he did. What he really liked was their feelings, given to him so
freely. He liked feeling their affections grow and did whatever he could to stoke them. Rin didn’t like to admit it to himself, but he was a bit of an addict. But these feelings weren’t the right kind and inevitably, Rin would become dissatisfied because he’d reached the limit or he’d get bored. Whoever his latest victim was would end up heartbroken and their feelings would go out the door with them. That’s the part Rin hated and as soon as bitterness replaced the adoration, Rin would seek out someone new because Rin couldn’t handle being alone with bitterness.

That’s what sex was for Rin, a tool to play with people’s hearts in order to bask in their affections. He liked to be adored and he liked people to think he was special. Sex was the ultimate vanity trip for Rin, but it was a symptom of a larger problem. He needed more and the harder he tried to find it, the more dissatisfied he became. A few months ago, he’d stopped finding partners because he just couldn’t do it anymore. He was like a vampire that couldn’t get excited about blood anymore because the blood would inevitably lead to thirst again. He needed something to quench his thirst.

That’s where Rin was when Sousuke reappeared.

Sex with Sousuke was better than it had been with anyone. The adoration was there, in more plentiful quantities than Rin had ever experienced with anyone else. But it was more than just adoration. Sousuke may not have said it as a teenager and neither of them had understood it as kids, but Rin had always felt the steady, strong love that Sousuke gave him. It was a foundation, one half of their core. There could be anger and bitterness and hard feelings, but underneath it all was the foundation that would always render any bad feelings ephemeral.

It was this half of the core that Rin had been trying to find through orgasms and dates with other people. One or two of them maybe could have developed feelings as strong as Sousuke’s if given the opportunity. But the thing was, it didn’t matter how strongly they felt for Rin. What made Sousuke special wasn’t how much he loved Rin, but that Rin loved Sousuke back with as much enthusiasm. Their core had two halves and Rin couldn’t have those feelings for just anyone. It was always Sousuke he’d been looking for, it had always been Sousuke.

But he’d broken enough hearts to not want that for himself. And if Sousuke decided to withdraw from Rin, like everyone else did eventually, that would deliver a devastation Rin never wanted to feel again. He’d barely survived when his father had died, without Sousuke’s steady love he probably wouldn’t have.

If Rin fucked Sousuke and it goes badly, that would be grounds for Sousuke to leave.

‘He will never leave you,’ the voice of Rin’s father assured Rin. ‘You know that. He’s been loyal to you your whole life and he wants to be by your side forever. He’s offering to build something with you.’

‘He hasn’t been loyal,’ Rin argued weakly. ‘What about all those people he slept with?’

‘You both were looking for each other in other people, young man. And you knew this a while ago, that’s why you stopped sleeping around. He’s the one you want. So build that trust with him, take that leap of faith. Give him yourself and trust that he won’t hurt you. It’s what you need.’

Rin sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

Their core wasn’t perfect. This past month had shown just how damaged that core had become. All that they had suffered this past month boiled down to their trust issues. From last night, it appeared that Sousuke didn’t trust that Rin reciprocated Sousuke’s love. And Rin was terrified that Sousuke
would withdraw his love forever. Rin’s actions had been another symptom of the state of their core. The lack of trust had been Rin’s whole reason he hadn’t wanted to speak with Sousuke in the first place. He wanted to believe that Sousuke would really come. It too, hadn’t been meant as a test but as an exercise. The expression had been poorly chosen and hurtful, but the idea was the same.

Rin wanted their core to be whole and steady again. He wanted to have what Haru and Makoto had, but better because it would be with Sousuke. He wanted to have his best friend be with him, because he’d been so fucking lonely without him. Rin, stupid, selfish, emotional Rin, had never found anyone he cared about as much as he cared about Sousuke.

And what Sousuke was offering wasn’t just a sexual experience Rin wanted. He was offering him the first step in repairing the core that time and distance and bad feelings had tried to corrode.

‘You give that boy the best damn experience you can,’ Rin’s father told him. ‘You take this offering and you show him not only that you are trustworthy, but that you are capable of taking the best care of him.’

Rin smiled in the mirror and splashed more water on his face.

He’d never asked his dad for sex advice before. He wondered if his real dad would have been weirded out talking about his son having sex with another guy. From what he remembered of his dad, probably not. He’d been an extrovert to the max and Rin’s mom had told him plenty about how he loved to be friends with everyone. That kind of guy wouldn’t have cared if his son was gay.

“Thanks Dad,” Rin whispered. “I can always count on you. You and Sou.”

After getting a glass of mostly ice, Rin went back into his bedroom and found Sousuke lying on his side, waiting for him. His whole back was flushed pink and Rin couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment, excitement, or both. Rin crossed the room and set the glass of water down on the table. He was beginning to sit down on the bed when he realized Sousuke had found one of Rin’s scarves and tied it around his eyes. And he’d take his belt from his jeans and tried to tie his wrists up to Rin’s headboard. He hadn’t managed it though and Rin had a pretty good hunch that this was the reason why Sousuke’s whole body was flushed.

Sousuke had never mentioned this desire before, but it wasn’t shocking. Really it was less shocking than Sousuke insisting on bottoming. Since they were little, Sousuke was the one that wound up being tied up whenever they played Officers MacGruber and O’Neil. All of the story lines he’d been in charge of always involved ropes or chains in some way. Rin had anticipated this desire, he’d bought some bondage stuff he thought Sousuke might like. He’d even prepared a whole speech for when Sousuke brought it up finally, something along the lines of ‘you’re so obvious’. But Rin preferred this blushy, bashful way of diving right in without saying anything about it. Sousuke really didn’t do things by halves and it was pretty adorable how Sousuke had articulated his desire. Maybe all tied up and blind folded, Sousuke would actually enjoy this experience more.

With growing confidence, Rin retrieved the cuffs he’d bought for Sousuke from the box under his bed. He also grabbed the eye mask he’d bought for Sousuke. It was double sided with the words ‘Fuck’ and ‘Sleep’ embroidered in loopy cursive on either side. You flipped the mas around, depending on your mood. He had more stuff he’d bought for Sousuke and him, but this would do for now.

It was time. His lover was waiting.
Fuck.

All the power was in Rin’s hands, but he’d never felt less powerful. Sex had only ever been about his desires, his pleasures. He used sex to absorb other people’s emotions. He’d never had sex with the focus completely on his partner. He’d never used sex to assure someone they could trust him. Rin realized, it really didn’t matter if he had an orgasm or not, but Sousuke had to have one. He had to have a really good one. Today was all about Sousuke.

It was a big first time, for both of them.

What a fucking idiot Sousuke was! The second he heard Rin return from the bathroom, he regretted instantly tying the stupid scarf around his eyes and his failed attempt with the belt. God, what a moron! What must Rin think of him!? They hadn’t ever talked about it, but Sousuke had come up with the idea after they’d had sex for the first time. At first he thought it was just excitement that Rin had brought Officers MacGrubber and O’Neil back into their lives, but it wasn’t. When he was alone at night, the thought of ropes around his wrists would creep into his head and stir something deep inside him. Once he allowed that thought in, it wasn’t long until a blindfold joined the fantasy. He hadn’t gone so far to consider what the sex would be like if he were to be tied up. When he spat it out that he wanted Rin to fuck him, he realized that to have that kind of sex, he’d have to be the passive partner.

Maybe this way, being passive might bearable.

While Rin was in the bathroom, Sousuke had scrambled to find things that would work, arguing with himself the entire time that this was a stupid idea that Rin would never go for. But now that Rin was here and no doubt looking at Sousuke like he was a freak, he wished he would have listened to his better judgment.

It was too soon, Rin was going to think him a complete weirdo.

For the first time having sex again, this had been a terrible choice.

Rin began to move and Sousuke strained his ears to divine what he was doing. Rin grabbed Sousuke’s wrists and released Sousuke from the pathetic tie he made with a belt.

Despite his supreme embarrassment, Sousuke’s heart dropped. Guess Rin decided now wasn’t the time. Sousuke would just have to bear penetration.

Fuck.

But then something cold snapped around one of Sousuke’s wrists followed momentarily by a matching sensation around his other wrist. Rin’s hand’s cupped Sousuke’s fingers and gently guided them down until he felt a metal chain. Sousuke gave an exploratory tug and found that he couldn’t move his wrists much.

He didn’t quite laugh, but he made a small sound of surprise. His smile felt like it could crack his face. Rin’s hands disappeared from his wrists and returned a moment later behind Sousuke’s head. He lifted Sousuke’s head up and untied the scarf. It fell away and Sousuke’s eyes flew to Rin’s.
He had a delicious smile quirked up on the side of his mouth and he had an eyebrow raised at Sousuke. While Sousuke was watching, he lifted up something satiny and black and waved it around at Sousuke. Then, he leaned down and gave Sousuke a quick peck. The black thing Rin had held reappeared and Rin put it on Sousuke’s eyes, darkening the world.

An eye mask.

Jesus Christ.

The ghost of Rin’s breath tickled Sousuke’s ear.

“If anything I am about to do to you makes you feel at all uncomfortable or if you change your mind, say ‘stop’.” Rin whispered.

He waited for Sousuke to nod his agreement, then kissed the shell of Sousuke’s ear. Electricity raced down his body, straight to his groin.

Oh fuck.

This was….shit…

Rin pulled away and for a moment, Sousuke was briefly alone in the dark and his whole body tingled with anticipation, waiting for Rin to touch him again. He yearned for Rin, but in the dark he could not find him. God why was Rin keeping him waiting!? Had he changed his mind?

A sudden shock of wet, cold exploded from the top of his right foot and a startled moan escaped Sousuke’s mouth. The sensation glided over his ankle and up his shin, sending waves of shivers through him, hardening his nipples and exploding goose bumps all over his skin.

What was Rin doing?

He briefly considered saying stop, but he was more curious than uncomfortable. Plus, the cold on his skin was making him burn all over.

Warmth surrounded the cold for a moment as it reached the curvature of his quad muscles and reappeared. There was something warm taking over from the cold and after the cold swirled a few achingly delicious patterns further and further up his thigh, it disappeared completely, replaced by something more familiar – lips.

Rin had had ice in his mouth!

Sousuke smiled harder when he figured it out. He wished he hadn’t put the scarf over his eyes, he would have loved to see what Rin looked like with a dripping, melting ice cube clenched between his teeth. But Sousuke had a good imagination and that was the whole point of the blindfold.

Rins lips trailed kisses up Sousuke’s thigh, coming ever closer to Sousuke’s quickly hardening penis. Half way up, Rin paused and rubbed his cheek against the inside of Sousuke’s thigh.

“Shit, Sou!” Rin stated, breaking his silence. “How did I not know you had such silky smooth thighs?”

Sousuke barked out an undignified laugh and immediately pulled on his hands to cover his mouth. But, as he was all tied up, he couldn’t. Rin chuckled and continued kissing Sousuke’s thighs until Sousuke finally brought himself under control and stopped laughing. The laugh stole some of the nerves out of his body and he felt looser, more relaxed.
Rin’s mouth continued to work and he moved up Sousuke’s thigh to his hip bone, then followed the line down to his penis. For one, excruciatingly blissful moment, Rin’s wet mouth encircled Sousuke, his tongue swirling around the most sensitive part. Sousuke’s hips bucked up into Rin’s mouth, eager for more, but Rin withdrew. Slightly disappointed, Sousuke’s hips fell back down to the mattress and it was then that Rin returned with another ice cube in his mouth.

Rin took his sweet time working his way up Sousuke’s torso, visiting every rise of Sousuke’s abs but avoiding the bandaged stab wound. Rin had a lot of fun with Sousuke’s nipples, closing his mouth around the ice cube until he was right over the bud of Sousuke’s nipple, then letting the ice drop down, surprising Sousuke and sending ripples of quivering sensation straight to his groin. Sousuke’s lower back arched up, yearning to be closer to Rin, but Rin only allowed his mouth to touch Sousuke. The rest was just infuriating, tantalizing empty space that was driving Sousuke wild.

The ice cube melted away over Sousuke’s Adam’s apple, but Rin didn’t pull away immediately. He nipped and kissed at Sousuke’s neck and Sousuke’s head went further and further back into the mattress so Rin had more exposed area to caress or bite. Each time he did the latter, a guttural grown rumbled up from Sousuke and no matter how embarrassing it was, he couldn’t keep it down or disguise it as something else.

Rin’s mouth disappeared, leaving Sousuke erect and panting.

“On all fours, big guy,” Rin whispered.

Sousuke nodded and then twisted around as best he could with the handcuffs restricting him. As his hands were restrained, he had to go up to his forearms. His ass was completely wide open and Sousuke remembered what they were doing here. His erection began to subside. The ice cubes and all that had distracted Sousuke from the task at hand.

Any second now, Rin was going to plunge himself into Sousuke and it was going to fucking hurt.

An explosion of cold erupted between Sousuke’s shoulder blades and he yelped in surprise and threw his head back, causing the cold to slip down the curve of his back. Rin grabbed the ice cube and gave replaced it.

“Keep that there,” Rin commanded. “No matter what, you have to keep that there.”

Sousuke hung his head down and nodded his consent.

While he waited for Rin to do whatever.

That whatever was Rin’s hands were spreading Sousuke’s ass cheeks, shutting Sousuke’s mind up immediately. The feeling of air in an unexpected spot was exposing. Sousuke tensed up again.

Now Rin was going to shove his dick up his ass.

Sousuke wanted to tell Rin to stop, but he’d committed.

Something wet flicked at his entrance and Sousuke’s whole body jerked. The ice cube between his shoulder blades began to slip and, remembering what Rin had said, he adjusted himself so the ice cube was where Rin told him it should be.

Another flick of wet at his entrance, but this one didn’t startle Sousuke as much. Another flick, followed by another, then Rin’s tongue was lapping at him, then pushing slowly inside.
Sousuke had never felt anything like this before and he groaned. The guys he’d slept with had been
to dirty for this kind of thing, so Sousuke had no clue what Rin was going through. It felt weird as
hell, having something wet inside him, and it was weird to think that Rin’s tongue was inside his
ass…but at the same time, it felt really, really good. So good, in fact, Sousuke forgot what he’d been
thinking about.

Inside Sousuke, Rin’s tongue flicked at something that felt insanely good and Sousuke couldn’t help
but arch his head back, causing the ice cube to fall off. Rin withdrew and Sousuke protested with a
grumbling moan. The cold of the melted water dripped down the sides of his back, contrasting
painfully with Sousuke’s hot, hot skin.

Sousuke waited for Rin to put another ice cube between his shoulder blades, but heard instead the
unmistakable sound of a bottle snapping open.

Oh god, here it came.

But contrary to expectations, Rin didn’t just shove his dick inside Sousuke, as Sousuke had been
worried. Instead, he began with a finger and he played at Sousuke’s entrance until Sousuke relaxed a
bit. What an idiot Sousuke was! He’d done this to plenty of guys, to open them up before they could
admit his penis. It was a pretty necessary part of anal sex. Before he tried pushing in a finger, Rin
bent over Sousuke’s back and kissed the super sensitive part of his lower back as his finger
continued to play at Sousuke’s entrance. He kissed him again and again until Sousuke melted into his
hands and was fully erect again. Then, and only then, did Rin push a finger inside.

Sousuke tensed up, because, shit…this felt WEIRD! But Rin sensed that and continued to kiss him
where Sousuke was so sensitive until he was once more putty and moaning. Rin took some time to
actually move his finger in and out of Sousuke, but with the barrage of kisses, Sousuke didn’t take as
long to relax. Then, Rin added a second finger. It wasn’t so bad now. It was still weird, but there
were worse things. It didn’t hurt as much as Sousuke had thought.

Just as Sousuke was convincing himself that yeah, this was alright, though he didn’t understand the
hype, Rin scissored his fingers inside of Sousuke and hit the spot that his tongue had only teased at.

An intense wave of pleasure, unlike anything Sousuke had ever imagined left him gasping for air.
Having never been on the receiving end of prostate stimulation, he waited a second, to see if it was a
miraculous fluke. Again, Rin hit that spot again and Sousuke moaned loudly. His penis began to
throb as Rin went in again and hit him there a third time. The muscles around Rin’s finger relaxed as
they welcomed Rin and Sousuke pushed his hips back into Rin’s finger, eager for more of that
magic. Rin added a third finger, which Sousuke took easily, and went in and out a few times. Each
time, destroying Sousuke when he hit that spot. It felt so good, Sousuke almost sobbed when Rin
withdrew his fingers completely.

This was the hype? Shit!

Maybe having a penis inside him wouldn’t be so bad, not when it hit that place!

“Oh your back, please.” Rin commanded.

Sousuke flipped himself around. Rin lifted Sousuke’s legs up and draped them over his shoulders,
then lifted Sousuke’s hips and lined them up so he could line himself up with Sousuke. This was
how Rin wanted to be? Sousuke was under no delusions about how heavy he was, he worried that it
would be too much for Rin. But, to give Rin credit, he was a first class athlete and much stronger
than he looked. If he thought he was strong enough for this, then Sousuke wasn’t going to argue.

“You ready for this, big guy?” Rin asked. Sousuke nodded his head.

Once permission had been given, they were off. Rin did a few warm up thrusts that did feel completely weird and uncomfortable at first. Rin’s penis was bigger than his three fingers had been and Sousuke had to get accustomed. But the strangeness only lasted as long as it took Rin to find Sousuke’ prostate again. The first time Rin brushed him there, Sousuke was a lost man.

With the world darkened and his ability to focus on reality falling away with every new thrust, Sousuke was left alone to face this unbelievable pleasure straight on. It was like Rin’s penis was burrowing deep inside the darkest part of Sousuke and retching up buried secrets Sousuke had never known about himself. It had taken him years to admit he was a homosexual, who was also madly in love with the best friend he’d ever had. He’d accepted that about himself, but it took a long time.

But this pleasure…Rin had only just exposed it and Sousuke hadn’t had time to consider or reconcile with it. It wasn’t the sheer bliss of it that was terrifying to behold, it was the fact that Rin was the one dredging it up from the depths of him. He couldn’t have done this on his own. Rin was exposing more of Sousuke than Sousuke had ever seen himself and there was nothing Sousuke could do to hide it. It was an agony and an ecstasy and Rin was witnessing it all. God, Rin was seeing everything!

Sousuke had been caught off guard and Rin was scooping out the essential core of Sousuke, leaving Sousuke hollow inside. But there was nothing villainous about this interaction on Rin’s part. Sousuke wouldn’t have discovered this about himself without Rin.

Makoto was one smart son of a bitch.

Sousuke came and it felt like the essence of him exploded out instead of semen. For a terrible moment, Sousuke felt completely empty, but then Rin came as well, filling Sousuke up with the essence of Rin. Sousuke melted into the mattress, his body no longer belonging to just him but to Rin as well. Sousuke was only half aware of Rin slipping out of him and later cleaning him up and unbinding him. When Rin reached for the mask, Sousuke perked up enough to roll over on his side so Rin couldn’t take off the mask. He needed some time to pull himself back together again. Before he could face Rin, he had to reconcile himself with this new feeling, of being filled with someone else.

And how amazing it felt to have Rin in him.

Rin seemed to understand because he didn’t push it. Instead, he spooned Sousuke, kissed him on the back of the neck, and waited for Sousuke to calm down. Grateful, Sousuke intertwined his fingers in Rin’s hand.

Sousuke simultaneously felt more a part of Rin and vulnerable than he ever had before.

The minutes drifted by and slowly, Sousuke came back to himself. Rin had fucked him and he’d survived. On top of that, it had actually been pretty good. That was a lie, it had been amazing. Honestly, Sousuke had prided himself at being good at sex but Rin…Rin was an artist. No way was there any contest. To be so good, Rin must have practiced a lot and Sousuke wondered if he was going to meet any of Rin’s former partners.

Sousuke cringed at the thought and Rin hugged him tighter, kissing Sousuke on the back of the neck.

It was hard to imagine that strangers had exposed themselves to Rin, like Sousuke just had. Sousuke
had fucked plenty of people, but what they’d just done was in a whole different ballpark.

Had this been something out of the ordinary for Rin or was this just another fuck for him?

Sousuke reached up and pushed off the mask. The light had changed, it would be sunset soon. Rin hugged Sousuke even tighter and kissed the back of Sousuke’s neck again.

Sousuke smiled at the gesture of affection. Rin had slept with other people, frequently too if his techniques were so good. It sucked to think about, but for the time being at least, Rin was spooning Sousuke, trying to comfort Sousuke. And wasn’t this what Sousuke had wanted for so long?

Sousuke rolled over onto his back so he could look at Rin properly.

Rin’s eyebrows were knit together and he was frowning, watching Sousuke. He was concerned.

“You alright, big guy?” Rin asked. Sousuke smiled and Rin’s face relaxed.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

“Hang on, I want to stop in here really quick.”

Sousuke looked between Rin and the convenience store near the beach, then nodded. Rin smiled and pulled him in by the hand.

As Rin had hoped, his favorite clerk was behind the counter.

With a smugly satisfied smile plastered across his face, Rin dropped Sousuke’s hand and marched over to the fridge where they kept the cans of soda. He grabbed a Coke and marched back to the checkout counter, dropping it with a metallic clank in front of the clerk. The guy raised an eyebrow and Rin’s smile grew even smugger.

“What are you getting?” Sousuke asked in Japanese from the entrance of the store. Both Rin and the clerk turned to look at Sousuke.

“Something for you,” Rin answered in Japanese. He turned his gloating face back to the clerk.

Rin was immensely pleased when the clerk raised both his eyebrows up and smiled down at the can as he scanned the bar code.

He probably didn’t even know Rin’s name, but the clerk had seen him come here, bawling his eyes out and buying cans of Coke often enough to remember Rin. Rin willed him to understand that the tall, beautiful guy and the Coke were connected and the stupid, shit eating grin Rin couldn’t hide was a direct result of the Coke and the boy being together in the same place.

“That will be 79 cents,” announced the clerk.

Dismayed, Rin fished out his wallet and plopped down coins, which the clerk deposited in the register.

“Thanks, come again.”

That was a disappointment. Rin had been hoping for the Clerk to ask him about Sousuke and
congratulate him. Rin grabbed the can and shoved it at Sousuke when he rejoined him.

“Don’t open it yet,” Rin instructed grumpily. “Not till we are on the beach. I’ll explain when we’re on the beach.”

Sousuke smiled and darted a covert look at the clerk before leaning in and pecking Rin on the forehead. Rin’s resulting blush was furious. As they were heading out of the store, Rin looked over his shoulder at the clerk. He was smiling and when he saw Rin looking back, he winked at him.

He must have understood! Rin likely would never see the clerk again, but this was just about the nicest way to leave things. Coming full circle and all that.

They walked to the beach and, by mutual, unspoken consent, gravitated to a secluded spot beneath a rise of the sand. No one was out on the beach as it had terrible waves, but even so, this spot felt private. It was a good place to have a chat.

Rin sat down first and Sousuke nestled in by his side. He placed the unopened can of soda between his legs and together they looked out to the sea. Sunset was coming, but the clouds rolling in off the ocean made the evening darker. Most likely it would rain tonight. The weather wasn’t perfect, but the desolate, brooding clouds made the evening more picturesque than a clear sky would have. A pair of birds flew together off shore and Rin watched them until they disappeared into the unknown.

“When I first came to Australia,” Rin said, his voice a soft murmur above the lapping of the waves, “I’d find beaches whenever I missed you and Haru. It had always felt like the ocean connected me to you two, my two best friends. I did that the whole time I was in Australia, the first time. Even after years had passed since we’d spoken to each other.”

Sousuke frowned, no doubt because he didn’t want to be in the same category as Haru. Rin snuck his hand into Sousuke’s and twined their fingers together. Sousuke relaxed when Rin kissed Sousuke’s shoulder and they both looked out to sea. For a long time, they listened to the gulls and the waves and watched as the sun dipped closer to the horizon.

“You were quite good today,” Sousuke finally broke the silence with a gentle murmur. “I think you are hands down the better one at sex.”

Rin snorted down a laugh. “You’re only saying that cause you don’t know what it’s like to be on your receiving end.”

Rin looked at Sousuke and sure enough, he was blushing again. He reached up and pecked him on the cheek.

“You liked it then?” Rin ventured to ask. He had thought so while they were in the middle of the act, but it was hard to tell because Sousuke had curled up into a ball afterwards, like Rin did when he cried alone.

“Yeah, it was so much better than I’d been expecting,” Sousuke replied. “I never understood why anyone would ever want to shove something up their ass, but I get it now. How was it for you?”

Rin hesitated and Sousuke noticed.

“It was really good,” Rin assured Sousuke. “Your ass was so freaking tight and you looked and
sounded like a goddamn miracle.”

“But…”

“Just, can we not do that very often?” Rin asked. “It felt really good and I’m really happy you enjoyed yourself….but…it was kind of hard for me as well.”

Sousuke’s eyes widened and he looked a little hurt.

“That’s not how I’ve ever had sex before,” Rin explained, his own blush eclipsing Sousuke’s. “I was so concerned with giving you a good experience and what you were doing, I wasn’t thinking about myself. Sex has never been like that before, it’s usually about me and I’m selfish enough to prefer it about me. And, I don’t know…” here, Rin began to stutter. “I usually am only ever thinking about myself and it’s good that I don’t with you. But I’m selfish and I like to be the center of attention. I guess I also kind of have a mental image of you being this big, strong force that can stand up to anything, so it was kind of jarring to see you so…submissive.”

Sousuke frowned and Rin could have slapped himself for sounding so dumb. That was absolutely the wrong thing to say!

“Not that there was anything wrong with you being submissive,” Rin sputtered, trying to save the situation. “It was actually really humbling that you allowed yourself to be like that in for me. I know letting go of control is not easy for you. It’s just I’ve known you my whole life and I’ve never seen you like that…and it was really…humbling…It was a really huge responsibility and I’m grateful you gave it to me, but I just…”

“I don’t think I could have sex like that very often,” Sousuke replied when words failed Rin. “It felt really good and I’m glad it did, but I felt so…exposed…and at your mercy. I would like to try it again sometime, because it’s insane how good it felt. But I have to work up to it again, you know? It will probably be a long time. Now that I know what it will be like for me.”

Rin smiled and relaxed against Sousuke’s side.

“I’ll work up to it too.” Rin agreed. “I liked it and it was very good thing for me. Plus I really liked seeing you get into the bondage stuff. It’s good to know my investment won’t go to waste. I have all sorts of stuff for you…”

Rin laughed as Sousuke went stiff.

“You bought things? For me, so you could…” Sousuke was too mortified he couldn’t finish his sentence.

Rin laughed again though he had the decency to allow Sousuke some privacy to digest how transparent his kink was.

“I wanted to surprise you and it was pretty adorable how you just dove right in. I’ve been doing some research and there’s all sorts of things we can do that I think you would really like. Mind, I don’t want to have sex like that all the time because yeah, big responsibility. And I won’t hit you or hurt you right now. Not when things are still new and I’m still remembering everything you went through in your letters. We can talk about that again later, when we’ve been together for a while, but not yet. So when you really want to have sex like that, I’m cool with it. I have an outfit for myself and everything.”

“You do?”
“Yeah, I’ll show you. I have a couple different outfits for us too, for different types of sex. Like role playing kind of stuff. I’m super into that.”

Despite his embarrassment, Sousuke laughed.

“That’s not very surprising either, I guess,” he said.

Rin snuggled closer against Sousuke.

“All the bells and whistles and accessories are fun,” Rin purred. “But you know what my number one fantasy is?”


“Me on my back with you inside me, my legs wrapped around your waist. Slow and sweet, with lots of kissing. Your hands would be soft and you’d say all sorts of beautiful, tender things. Nothing fancy. Just us together. And you all strong and sweet. That’s what I like most about you, how strong and sweet you are. There’s all sorts of ways we are going to have sex and we are going to have a lot of fun, but I think I’ll like that way the best.”

Sousuke leaned his head against the top of Rin’s head.

“That’s the least surprising thing of all, Rin-Rin,” Sousuke said quietly. “That way sounds pretty wonderful. Next time we have sex, that’s what we’ll do.”

Sousuke kissed the top of Rin’s head and Rin felt like melting into the sand.

“Drink your soda now, big guy. It’s going to get warm.”

Obediently Sousuke opened the can and took a sip. When he swallowed it, he offered the can to Rin, but Rin declined with a shake of the head.

“Are you going to explain the Coke thing to me?” Sousuke asked.

Rin looked out to sea and contemplated it. He’d had every intention of telling Sousuke about how he’d come here and offer a Sousuke offering to the ocean, in the hopes of Sousuke feeling it somewhere. But the sun was nearly to the horizon, painting the whole world with magic. Sousuke was by his side and there was nothing he needed to worry about anymore. There was no reason to make Sousuke feel bad for being gone, that was in the past.

Now they could look towards the future.

“Thanks for coming back, big guy,” Rin said instead. “I’m really happy you came back to me.”

Satisfied, Sousuke kissed the top of Rin’s head again.

“I was always going to come back to you, Rin,” Sousuke replied.

Together, they watched the sunset and Rin felt at peace. He was usually in some state of agitation, about swimming, or his friends, or Sousuke, or his grades, or whatever. But not now.

With Sousuke at his side, he was happy and at peace.

Only when the last rays of day disappeared did they stir. It was time for their future to begin.
“So what do you want to do tonight?” Rin asked as he helped Sousuke up off the sand. “I’ve got so many things to show you and we’ve already lost a day of your visit.”

Sousuke laughed and kissed Rin’s forehead.

“Tomorrow you can be the tour guide. I’m sure you are going to keep me just so busy. Tonight, I want to make dinner and watch a stupid, sappy movie that will make you cry, and fall asleep holding you.”

Rin smiled and kissed Sousuke back, feeling like the luckiest person on the planet.

“Sounds perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm baaaccckkk!!!! I know it's been ages, but new job and other important projects I'm working on. But here it is!!!! And there will be two more chapters of mostly fluff coming shorty. They need much more editing and it's better to not post a bunch at one time I think.

Thanks everyone for your patience! Hope you all have a lovely Christmas!!!!!!

http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/
Sam and Lydia came into the apartment at 10:21 PM and all the lights were out save the flicker of the TV. As Sam didn’t see anyone sitting on the couch, the blue flickering felt ominous. He touched Lydia’s wrist, silently asking her to stop while he checked out the situation. Maybe Rin had fallen asleep on the couch, after Sousuke left. Or maybe it was Chris, moping and watching sad, sappy movies to distract himself from Rin. But when he rounded the couch, he was pleased to find an entirely different scenario.

Rin was laying on the couch, but Sousuke was sprawled out on top of Rin, snuggling Rin’s chest in his sleep. Rin’s eyes flicked away from the screen towards Sam. His eyes were glossy and wet tearstains glistened on his cheeks. A quick look at the television showed a Studio Ghibli movie Rin had made them all watch once. It was *Grave of the Fireflies* and Sam understood Rin’s tears immediately. Rin gravitated towards love stories, but over the course of the years he’d lived with Chris and Sam, he’d also made them watch all of the Studio Ghibli movies. This one…Sam couldn’t remember crying harder in a movie.

What an odd movie choice for Rin to make; usually he went for sappy romantic movies, not tear jerking war movies. Sam would have guessed Sousuke had picked out the movie, but if he had he probably wouldn’t have fallen asleep. On the coffee table were two empty plates, streaked with leftover salad dressing, and two wine glasses, one a quarter full of white wine, one empty. They clearly hadn’t been fighting when they’d eaten dinner and, with Sousuke sleeping on Rin, Sam thought they probably had worked things out.

To check, Sam gave Rin an exaggerated shrug, silently asking if everything was alright. Rin stopped stroking Sousuke’s hair long enough to give Sam a thumb’s up and then motioned for Sam to go away. Smiling, Sam dragged Lydia away and they left Rin to his movie and his man.

Just before Sam closed his bedroom door, he looked back out to the living room. Rin’s eyes were back on the movie, but he brushed a tiny kiss on the top of Sousuke’s head. Then there was a shift in scene and Rin began to snuffle again. In his sleep, Sousuke burrowed closer to Rin.

Rin thrived on strong emotions and he was always looking for ways to experience them for himself.
He’d been miserable for so long and the fight with Sousuke had been brutal. Clearly, their reconciliation had worked, so Rin must also be quite happy.

In a weird, very Rin-like way, the movie choice made sense. He must be trying to prolong his intense emotions as long as he could and watching movies with people he cared about always made Rin three times as emotional. Watching a Japanese movie…that was guaranteed to make Rin a blubbering mess.

“Sam, are you coming?” Lydia asked from inside his room.

Sam closed the door, allowing Rin privacy.

“What’s that smile for?” Lydia laughed.

“From the looks of things, I think Rin is going to be really happy,” Sam replied.

At practice the next morning, Chris noticed that Rin insisted on leading their lane. He had been going last for the last few weeks. Not wanting to provoke Rin further, Chris dropped down to third, well away from Rin. During their kick set, Rin refused to look at Chris. His eyes kept straying towards the bleachers, where Sousuke was watching.

Chris could feel Sousuke’s eyes bearing down on him.

It was a really terrible practice for Chris.

Chris was out of the locker room before anyone else and consequently, nearly ran into Sousuke as he bolted away from Rin. The moment those teal eyes found Chris’, Chris’ whole face caught fire.

God, what was he supposed to say to him? He must know all the terrible things Chris had said, he must know the feelings Chris had been harboring for Rin for years!

Why oh why had Chris not pretended to be sick this morning!??
Sousuke’s eyebrows furrowed together. “Are you alright, Chris?” he asked in perfect English.

“I’m fine,” Chris lied.

Sousuke opened his mouth, but before he could say anything the locker room door burst open and out came Rin with Sam, Alec, and Ben, a few of their other teammates. Rin was laughing like he hadn’t in probably a full year, but when he saw Chris and Sousuke, his face turned stormy.

“What’s going on?” he demanded. He still wouldn’t meet Chris’ eyes.

“We were just talking about practice,” Chris mumbled. Rin still wouldn’t look at him.

“Well what did you think, Sou?” Rin asked, more to the other guys than Sousuke. “Quite good, right?”

His cocked a smirk at the other guys and waited to hear his virtues extolled in front of his friends.

“You were sloppy and you’ve fallen behind on conditioning,” was Sousuke’s curt reply. “You swam better when you were in Tokyo, after a week off. Your form was the worst I’ve ever seen it. You aren’t going to beat Haru with practices like that.”

Rin’s face went blank as the other guys snickered. It of course was true.

Sousuke smiled warmly and took out an energy bar from his back pocket.

“Here, eat this,” he instructed. “You go home and take a nap so you are well rested for afternoon practice. Just remember to leave the door open for me, would you? I’m going to go to the grocery store to pick up some things for a really excellent lunch for when you wake up. After afternoon practice, we’ll do something, yeah?”

Sousuke took Rin’s hand and put the energy bar in it, then turned to go. Before he rounded the corner, he said something in Japanese to Rin and waved goodbye. Whatever he said made the
dumbfounded Rin turn bright pink. When Sousuke was gone, he looked down at the energy bar, then back down the corridor that Sousuke had went down.

Ben slung an arm around Rin and punched Rin in the stomach.

“He’s right, you know,” Ben laughed. “You’ve not been swimming as well as usual lately. Quite a guy to blurt it out like that in front of your mates!”

Rin made a guttural growl but didn’t say anything, He probably didn’t know whether to be touched or offended. The other guys left, but on his way out Sam paused to ask if Chris was coming.

Instead of looking at Chris, Rin unwrapped the energy bar and began eating it.

“You all go on,” Chris mumbled. “I feel like a massive breakfast at Gina’s Café.”

“You want some company, mate?” Sam asked.

“No, no. Go on ahead.”

Three hours later, Chris decided it was safe to go home. When he did open the front door, Sousuke was doing dishes. He turned and smiled at Chris when he opened the door.

Not knowing how to react, Chris made a beeline for his bedroom. But he still saw the tray on the counter, mounted high with a scramble with tons of vegetables, a massive salad with chickpeas, and a luscious pile of fruit – a perfect meal for a swimmer. And on that tray was a massive bouquet of the most beautiful flowers. Chris didn’t know enough about flowers to name the individual species, but he knew that Rin was going to love them.

Without saying hi, Chris shut himself in his bedroom and slumped against the door, sliding down it until he was a heap on the floor. From the other side, he heard Rin speaking excitedly in Japanese.

Chris was definitely going to need to skip afternoon practice.
“Oh there they are!” Sam announced. Lydia followed Sam’s pointed finger with her eyes. Sure enough, she recognized Rin with his boyfriend Sousuke tagging along behind him. Sam waved until Rin saw him and waved back enthusiastically.

“That’s the boyfriend?” Imogen whispered into Lydia’s ear. “He’s looks like a model! Gosh and you can tell he’s been in a fight recently. How manly!”

Lydia nodded, though she frowned at the second part. Imogen hadn’t been at the bar the other night, though she had heard about what happened. How Sousuke had saved her from a bad situation. It was kind of a jerk thing of Imogen to say to Lydia. But that was Imogen. She’d been Lydia’s roommate since they were freshman in the dorms so Lydia was used to her tactless ways. At least she was on the track team and not the swim team.

“Hi everyone!” Rin greeted as he joined them. “Imogen, you didn’t meet Sousuke before. This is Sousuke!”

He thumped Sousuke on the back. Imogen wiggled a finger at him, causing Sousuke to blush furiously.

“Nice to meet you, Imogen.” Sousuke mumbled.

“Nice to see you again, Sousuke,” Lydia broke in. Sousuke gave her a small smile and a nod. His eyes raked over her, seeing if she was all right. Lydia flushed pink and gave him a tiny nod.

“Sit, sit, sit!” Sam ordered. “Dave and Brian went to get some food. They know you two were coming so I reckon they’ll bring back something for you too.”

Rin plopped down on the blanket next to Lydia and Imogen immediately. Sousuke hesitated, though, and when he did sit down, he kept distance between him and Rin. Rin was terrible at hiding his emotions and he clearly did not like this development, though he kept his mouth shut about it. Instead he began to babble about swimming.

A few minutes later, Dave and Brian returned with glasses of wine and hummus plates for them to share. Lydia and Sam introduced Imogen’s boyfriend and his identical, twin brother to Sousuke.

“So this is the boyfriend, Rincess!” Brian said enthusiastically as he took his place by Imogen’s side
and automatically entangling his fingers in hers.

“This is the boyfriend,” Rin agreed. He darted a look at Dave, warning him off Sousuke. Dave and Rin had a bad habit of sleeping with each other, especially when they were supposed to be sleeping with other people. The two barely liked each other as friends and they’d never dated, but they’d been opportunistic fuck buddies since they’d met as freshmen. It was actually through Rin that Imogen had met Brian last year. Lydia leaned back on her hands, looking between Dave and Sousuke. Rin sure had a type. Though if Rin really had been pining for Sousuke all this time, like he claimed, Dave was a pretty obvious choice in partner. Dark hair, teal eyes, the height, even the strong jaws. Dave and Brian looked a hell of a lot like Sousuke and Dave, well almost every gay guy at their university had been fucked by Dave.

“Good to know you, Sousuke. You a swimmer too, Sousuke?” Dave asked. His voice was sweet, but Lydia had known Dave long enough to recognize his techniques. He was a lot like Rin, he thrilled in the chase, not so much the act. The sweetness was a test, to see if he could wriggle Sousuke’s attention away from Rin.

Oblivious to all this, Sousuke shook his head. “I was through high school but I can’t now because of my shoulder.”

“Oh that’s me as well!” Brian chimed in, either ignoring or unaware of his brother’s tactics. You could never tell with Brian. “I used to swim too and after I had surgery in high school, I had to stop. Luckily Dave here was already into rowing and he brought me into the sport. Now we are in the top five in Australia for Men’s doubles!”

At the same time, Sousuke’s face crumpled into confusion as Rin’s lit up with an epiphany. Next to Lydia, Sam broke out into his gorgeous smile because Sam was always happy when Rin was like this. Rin whirled his head around and looked excitedly at Sousuke.

“Sou! How have I never thought about it before!?” he cried. “Rowing would be perfect for you! Oh my god, Dave, Brian, you have to take him to the boat house and give him a lesson while he’s here!”

“Yeah absolutely, mate!” Brian agreed. “Dave and I would be happy to give you a lesson, Rin can come too if he likes. We can talk to our coach about Sunday afternoon if that works.”

“Isn’t rowing bad for shoulders?” Sousuke asked.
Dave smirked at Sousuke. “Nah, it’s all about your legs. You can think of it as horizontal jumping, over and over again. There’s a surprising amount of technique involved, though. With the blade and all.”

Brian laughed and slung his arm around his brother.

“Don’t listen to Dave! He’s just a huge theory freak and he’ll talk you to death about entry angles and slide and ratio and all that. The best part of rowing is just closing your eyes and feeling yourself fly over the water. It’s magical!”

Dave frowned, but there was never any disguising his affection for Brian. Without Brian, Dave would be an insufferable asshole but he adored Brian and couldn’t hide it ever.

Rin said something to Sousuke in Japanese that had a bad effect on Sousuke. Sousuke scowled and replied back. He didn’t sound happy. Shocked to hear Rin speak anything other than his heavily accented English, the twins, Sam, and Imogen all watched as Rin and Sousuke’s Japanese conversation turned into a full blown argument, full of angry hand gestures. After a minute or two, Rin crossed his arms across his chest and began to pout, muttering something to Sousuke. Whatever he’d said was like a slap to Sousuke and he blinked a few times from the aftershock. But he liked whatever it was Rin had said because he smiled leaned forward to whisper something to Rin and kiss the shell of his ear.

They were in their own little world and Sousuke had forgotten to keep his physical distance. And that people were watching them.

Pouting Rin was a very familiar sight to everyone assembled, they’d all experienced the Rincess throwing a hissy fit. However they’d never seen anyone disarm the Rincess so quickly, with so few words. In a matter of seconds, Rin was a blushing mess and he buried his face in the crook of Sousuke’s neck. Sousuke laughed and said something more as he hugged Rin and kissed him again. Though Lydia couldn’t understand what he said, his voice sounded like a purr and even she melted a little at the sound of it. Oh why did they have to be speaking Japanese!? Lydia was dying to know what magic words Sousuke had said to Rin. This was so not Rin behavior! Or Rin hadn’t been himself for so long that Lydia didn’t know what Rin behavior was like?

“Um, so do you two want to have a rowing lesson?” Brian asked, interrupting the little love fest. Realizing they weren’t alone, both Sousuke and Rin turned a breathtaking shade of pink and backed away from each other a bit.

“Yes thank you,” Rin mumbled. “Sousuke would love to give it a try.”
After that, the two were too embarrassed to continue with the tittering and the kissing, but they did sit closer together than before. And Sousuke rested his hand on the blanket so his fingertips could touch Rin’s. While they waited for the movie to start, they ate the snacks and chatted about their various sports. Sousuke didn’t have much more to say after that, but he was happy to sit back, listen, and watch Rin with an absurd amount of tenderness. Rin was an active part of the conversation, but because of Sousuke’s presence, a smile never left his face and for once, he refrained from bickering with Dave.

Dave did not like that one bit, though Dave was a master at hiding his feelings.

The movie started and Lydia snuggled up against Sam’s side. Imogen and Brian did the same thing, leaving Dave, Sousuke, and Rin. But as Wesley told Princess Buttercup ‘As you wish’ for the last time before sailing away, Rin nudged open Sousuke’s legs so he could sit between them. Sousuke stiffened and darted looks around, to see if anyone was watching. But when Westley was climbing the Cliffs of Insanity, he relaxed enough to lace his fingers through Rin’s. All through the movie, Lydia kept peeking over at them and every time they did, they were closer together. Rin adored this movie, but he was paying it little attention. He was too busy tracing circles on Sousuke’s hands and arms and giggling silently when Sousuke brushed kisses on the back of his neck and behind his ears.

God, they were so cute she wanted to throw up.

The only one who didn’t seem to think they were cute was Dave. He was sitting slightly behind everyone else and through the whole movie, Lydia caught glimpses of him glowering at Rin and Sousuke. Not in a million years would Lydia have thought Dave capable of being jealous, the only person he truly cared about was his twin brother. But there it was, Dave was jealous.

“Alright Dave, spit it out,” Brian demanded on the ride home. “What’s wrong?”

Imogen looked in the rearview mirror at her lover’s gay double, pouting in the back seat. It was cute, really. Dave was so infuriatingly self absorbed and unfeeling, it was nice to see some genuine emotion.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Dave countered. Neither Brian nor Imogen bought it.

“You knew Rin’s boyfriend would be there,” Brian reminded him. “That’s why you insisted on coming along. What were you expecting?”
In the back seat, Dave huffed loudly.

“What I was expecting, dear brother, was a fucking fantastic threesome,” Dave grumbled. “That’s how it’s always been when Rin get’s one of his ‘boyfriends’, it benefits me as well. Rin and I double team some poor twat then I get to fuck Rin senseless in front of someone. It’s the best! But that’s not the case, is it? I should be in bed with them instead of stuck here with you two!”

The car was silent for a while as Dave pouted. Brian’s eyes didn’t leave the rearview mirror. Dave could feel Brian’s stare, they had that weird twinsie way about them. Imogen never knew what they were saying silently to each other, but she was always aware when they were having a conversation. Dave finally broke the silence with a groan.

“It just sucks to find out I was just a place holder for my favorite fuck,” Dave growled. “Rin and I have been sleeping together for years and yeah, I like having sex with him the most. He’s got such a perfect body and he likes to try things most people wouldn’t. He’s curious, you could say. It’s just really shitty to find out that he liked sleeping with me because I look like Sousuke. Now he’s leaving and I don’t even get a goodbye fuck because he’s suddenly decided he’s going to be all monogamous! Why did his boyfriend have to look so much like me?”

Imogen hid the smile that cracked her face because that was the closest Dave had ever come to a confession of love. Brian couldn’t see humor if Dave was in distress, but Imogen had had to listen to plenty of Dave’s booty calls when she spent the night at the apartment the twins shared. Quite a few of them involved Rin. She’d seen plenty of twinky tears as Dave coldly dismissed them without a second thought and the smile he had just for when Rin showed up, for sex or otherwise. She’d heard the blistering arguments between Rin and Dave and seen Dave sulk whenever he fell out of Rin’s favor – which was often. He always claimed he couldn’t care less what Rin did or who he fucked, but he fooled no one. In his own, completely selfish and immature way, Dave really did care about Rin.

Chris woke up from a four hour nap, feeling like crap. It was dark out and it probably would have been in his best interest to go back to sleep. He rolled onto his back and noticed blue flickering light shining into his room from the cracked open door. He heard gunfire and soft voices speaking a language he didn’t understand. Chris’ whole body filled with that sickly adrenaline he hadn’t been able to work out of his system since that night.

As quietly as he could, he slid out of bed to close the door. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Since their fight, Chris had been doing his best to disappear into oblivion whenever Rin was around. Rin was making it easy because he was acting like Chris didn’t exist.
Through the crack in the door, Chris could see them. Sousuke was intently watching the movie. Based on the sounds, Chris would guess it was some action movie. He was doing his best to ignore Rin, who was very bored and kept trying to make Sousuke pay attention to him. He poked, he nuzzled, he employed every means in his repertoire but still failed to claim Sousuke’s attention. From where he was sitting, he couldn’t see Sousuke’s smile, slanted away from Rin.

Before Rin began to mope, Sousuke caved in. Without an incomprehensible word of explanation, he slid off the couch and onto his knees. Rin looked surprised, but once Sousuke’s hands began to fumble Rin’s waistband down, his face melted into a puddle of affection and lust and admiration like Chris had never seen before.

Jesus.

Chris wanted Rin to look at him like that so bad.

Sousuke’s head bobbed down to Rin’s groin and Rin tangled his fingers in Sousuke’s thick hair. Chris really shouldn’t be watching this. Sam no doubt was at Lydia’s for the night and Chris had not given any indication that he was at home. Chris had been doing his best not to be at home.

He really shouldn’t be watching this, Rin would never forgive him if he found out.

But as Sousuke’s mouth began to work, Chris couldn’t take his eyes off Rin. He couldn’t stop listening to the gentle little gasps Rin was making.

Rin jerked and Sousuke straightened up again. They began speaking in Japanese and Rin grabbed Sousuke’s chin, manipulating it with his hand as he demonstrated an obscene movement he wanted Sousuke to perform. Then Sousuke began to chuckle and Rin talked louder, more defensively. That only made Sousuke laugh harder and he dropped his head down on Rin’s knees, his whole body shaking with laughter. Rin was obstinate and Chris expected, or wanted, Rin to push Sousuke off him. But Sousuke’s deep, body-rocking laughter broke through Rin’s stubbornness and soon he too joined Sousuke’s merriment. While they laughed, he stroked Sousuke’s hair.

Their laughter died down again and they spoke once more in Japanese. Rin demonstrated the movement again and Sousuke got back to work. The break, evidently, had drug Rin back down to a zero state so now, Sousuke had to bring him back up. Whether it was Sousuke’s poor technique or the laughter, it was a while until Rin’s breath became ragged and his body started quivering. When Sousuke finally brought him over the edge, Rin made a groan that was the single most beautiful thing
Chris had ever heard. Rin’s hand in Sousuke’s hair contracted into a fist and his whole body jerked through the spasm. He’d thrown his head back, so Chris was denied a view of that beautiful face in ecstasy.

For a minute or two, Rin lay back, panting, while Sousuke wiped off his mouth and watched Rin. When Rin’s body finally calmed down, Sousuke said a few more words in Japanese. Rin looked down and smiled at Sousuke. The light of the television washed out Rin’s color, but Chris would have guessed his cheeks were dusted with pink. Sousuke helped Rin pull his pants back up, then rested his arms and head on Rin’s knees so he could look up at him. Their conversation continued while shame began to seep into Chris’ heart.

He shouldn’t have watched that. It was a violation of privacy, for starters, but now he was going to have the sound of Rin’s ecstasy ringing in his ears, taunting him that he’d never produce that sound himself.

He really shouldn’t have watched them. He was a terrible person.

Chris was so sunk in despair, he almost missed when the two switched positions. Now Rin was on his knees and Sousuke was on the couch.

Chris had never experienced it himself, but other people – especially stupid, fucking Dave – had praised Rin’s blowjobs to the high heavens. One time last winter, the three of them had been at a bar and Rin had gone to the back with some guy. Dave had explained how Rin had been terrible at blowjobs the first time he’d given Dave one (approximately three hours after having met him freshman year, while passing the dorm room next door to his). His teeth, Dave explained, they were just so pointy. He’d never be good at blowjobs. Rin, however, was nothing but competitive and once Dave issued the challenge, Rin had made blowjobs his specialty. No way was Rin Matsuoka going to be bad at something! Though the small, emotional, pretty boys Rin dated got to enjoy Rin’s talents, the default receiver had, of course, been Dave. Which had been Dave’s goal all along.

Fucking Dave.

But it wasn’t Dave reaping the benefits of all that practice now and Sousuke didn’t look like someone Dave was capable of pushing around, like the others. Rin’s talented mouth made Sousuke into a moaning pile in under 75 seconds. Sousuke fell limp against the back of the couch and after Rin tugged up his pants, he curled up against Sousuke’s side. They began watching the movie again, both much more relaxed than before. But once Rin became bored again, he began tickling Sousuke which in turn led to a tickle war. Sousuke, apparently, was very ticklish and their combined laughter drowned out the sound of Rin’s orgasm ringing in Chris’ ears.
Chris crawled back to bed, feeling worse than before.

He could deal and deny his feelings for Rin with the earlier boyfriends and Dave around. They were always fleeting and the thing with Dave had only ever been physical. The stupid bastard wasn’t capable of giving emotions and Rin, he thrived on emotions. He wasn’t even sure if Rin would consider Dave a friend. But Sousuke was here now and he was different. Rin was different when he was with Sousuke. His attention had always been fractured on different people, but with Sousuke around, Rin had only one focus. Viciously Chris wondered what Dave made of Sousuke. He hoped he’d tried to pick them both up for a threesome as usual and failed miserably.

Fucking Dave.

“Thanks for dinner,” Lydia said as Sam opened the door to his apartment for her. It had been their first, official date and Lydia was riding high on it. This kid…he was so laid back and effortlessly cool and funny. Lydia didn’t even care anymore that he was shorter than her or that she weighed more than him. He was just great. She gave him a smile as she passed into his apartment, her mind distracted on the part she knew was coming next. Another first for them.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Sam sputtered after he shut the door behind him.

Sousuke had stopped in the middle of the living room with Rin on his back. Rin had a Nerg gun and was pointing it at a very ridiculous and large picture of some fish monster he’d obviously drawn. They were both wearing police uniforms. Not sexy, strippy ones, but actual police uniforms, with hats and everything.

Sam looked about ready to explode, which was incredible because Sam…he didn’t explode.

“Sorry about that,” Rin laughed as he slid off Sousuke’s back. “We’ll just go into my room. Come on O’Neil.”

He pushed a furiously blushing Sousuke into his bedroom and seconds after they were behind closed doors, Lydia heard them both burst out into laughter.
Sam grabbed Lydia’s hand and marched them to his room, angrily slamming the door behind him.

“Jesus, the nerve of Rin!” he spat as he slumped down on his bed. “How many times do I have to tell him I don’t want to see any of his weird sex shit!”

Lydia laughed and sat down next to Sam.

“I know,” she giggled. “But the thing is, it didn’t really look like sex shit to me. Maybe now it will be some sex shit, but out in the living room…I think they were just playing. Weren’t they friends when they were little?”

Sam finally stopped glowering.

“You think?” he asked.

Lydia nodded. “They drew a picture of their bad guy for Christ’s sake! The little tossers were playing a game like they were little boys!”

Sam laughed too.

“You know, I think you’re probably right, Lydia! What a couple of idiots!”

“Do we have to have a bon fire tonight?” Sam whined as Rin piled beach towels in Sam’s arms. “I just want to eat dinner and go to bed!”

“Yes we do,” Rin growled. “Sousuke has been all day at the beach and I bet he has made something really cool. Like a sand castle or something. I want his art to have an audience that’s more than me. Besides, I’m buying food to grill so you can just shut your mouth!”

Sam relented and together they went out to Sam’s car, to load it up with beach things.
“Sousuke makes things?” Sam asked as they went to practice. “I didn’t know that.”

Rin turned to Sam and smiled like he had when he won the 100 free at nationals last year.

“Sousuke is really talented! He learned how to weld when he was abroad because welding pays decent money. Sousuke always turned in mediocre stuff for art class in school, but sometimes when he wasn’t in his room or our dorm room, I’d snoop and find these sketchbooks filled with sketches he’d been practicing in secret. He was always really talented and it’s really great that now he isn’t hiding the stuff he makes anymore!”

Rin’s voice dripped with pride and Sam smiled.

“Why would he hide that kind of thing?” Sam asked. Rin’s smile fell.

“His dad didn’t think it was very masculine. I remember one time, Sousuke came over to my house when we were eight or so. He had a black eye. He told my mom that his older brother had accidentally elbowed him in the eye when they’d been wrestling, but I didn’t believe him. I knew his mom was out of town with his brother for a swim meet. Later, I forced him to tell me the truth. He said his dad had yelled at him for spending so much time drawing because ‘that’s not what real men do’. His dad had gotten carried away, Sousuke said. It wasn’t the first time. But Sousuke hid his art supplies after that.”

“Jesus.” Sam breathed.

Rin nodded. “His dad is a bastard but he’s careful. That was the only time I ever saw a mark on Sousuke. It wasn’t until we lived together in the dorms that I really started to get a sense of how bad things were with his dad. Sometimes he’d get these phone calls and he’d try to take them in places where he could be alone. I could always tell when it was Sousuke’s dad. I’d follow him sometimes, to listen. I could never hear what was said, Sousuke didn’t say much. But after those calls, Sousuke would always over work himself in swim practice or not show up at all. He used to be a nationally ranked butterflyer, you know. I never found out, but I’m pretty sure those phone calls were about what a disappointment Sousuke was. His shoulder, he overworked it and he hid it. He didn’t want me to find out about it, but he didn’t want his dad to…”

Rin paused for a moment, his thoughts lost in the past. Then he smiled, but there was no humor in it.

“When I think about it, it makes me feel sick. Sousuke…he’d never shown any interest in any girls.
The only one he’d ever cared about at all was Gou, but she was basically his little sister too. I think I always had a feeling he’d never like a girl, just like me. We never talked about it, but we started developing feelings for each other in high school. Or rather, the feelings we’d always had for each other—they weren’t so confusing and we understood what they meant better. When we graduated, I knew myself enough to know that I was in love with him…like really in love. We didn’t say anything about it, but it was like we were both spiraling down, closer to each other….it was just a matter of time....”

Sam parked the car in the usual stop, but he didn’t get out. He didn’t want to interrupt Rin because obviously Rin had needed to tell someone these things.

“But Sou, he wrote me these letters….about how he felt about me and the future he dreamed of sharing with me…he saved them and I read them later. When he came back. But only then. His father….he found them…the letters…his dad hadn’t hit Sousuke in a long time because Sousuke had gotten so big. You don’t hit a Great Dane because they could rip your throat out. But when Sou’s dad found the letters….it was the first time he hadn’t been careful. It was the first time that Ichiro saw and knew what things had been like between them. After that, Sousuke left because he believed all the things his dad said about him. About how Sousuke was a disappointment and not a man. It took him a long time to be able to shut his dad out of his head. He tattooed over it, but his shoulder. The scars there make a kanji that means ‘traitor’. He did it to himself. He didn’t want to be alive.”

Tears splattered on Rin’s hands, clenched in tight balls on his thighs. Sam didn’t know what to say.

“He’s come so far,” Rin said as he wiped away his tears, his voice sounded strangled. “I was so worried about him for so long. But now, we’re really together and he’s doing his art and letting people see it and he’s writing stories. And the lesson for rowing went well and he said he’d be interested in finding a club team to join when we get back to Japan. I’m just…I’m so proud of him. His life is starting to resemble the one he’d always dreamed about and he’s done it all himself. He’s worked through years and years of horrible shit so he could make his life into what it is…He’s…he’s really inspiring. I’m so lucky that he dreamed of having his life with me…”

One of their teammates banged on Sam’s window, making them both jump.

“Time for practice,” muttered Sam.

“Please don’t tell anyone any of the stuff I told you,” Rin asked. “Sousuke would be mortified if people knew about the crap with his father. Really, he’s a very private person…I shouldn’t have…”
“Don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul.”

Rin had been doing a lot better at practice since Sousuke arrived. Everyone could see it. That afternoon, Rin attacked every set and finished first for everything. From the conversation they’d had in the car, Sam had a new perspective on Rin’s relationship with Sousuke. Those fast times Rin was posting…Sam understood better how Sousuke tied into everything.

Rin, Sam, and Lydia went to the beach after practice and found Sousuke, completely absorbed in a ten foot stature made of driftwood. It was incredible, really. Sousuke had scoured the beach and found driftwood to make a genderless person, leaping into the air, their arms flung back behind them. Rin of course dissolved into tears almost immediately and plastered himself against Sousuke’s side, silently weeping into his chest. Sousuke looked both embarrassed and pleased. He only extricated himself to take some pictures of his finished statue before dismantling it to build a fire.

It was a pleasant night. There weren’t many people at the beach this time of year and the stars twinkled above them. Lydia was really impressed with Sousuke’s statue and with Rin by his side, Sousuke felt comfortable enough to talk about his art and his writing and his aspirations for the future. Some of the things he said were apparently new to Rin as well. He never left Sousuke’s side and his smile never left his face.

The reason Sam got on so well with Rin was because Rin was such an interesting character. Rin loved having sex, but he never could be like Dave because he loved feeling things deeply. But Dave and all the other boyfriends had never been able to claim Rin’s heart completely. Rin was a dreamer and his heart had never found its counterpart in that regards. Dave liked beating people and he was going to go to law school so he could argue with people all day. And the other boyfriends, their aspirations were small and passionless. At least when Sam compared them to everything he’d learned about Sousuke.

They ate and Lydia and Rin began to talk about their swimming goals. Sam had his own goals, but he stayed silent so he could watch Sousuke without being noticed. The firelight flickered on his handsome face, riddled now with the tiny cuts from the bottle.

Sousuke had eyes only for Rin. His expression as he listened to Rin talk about his dreams for the Olympics was the same as Rin’s had been earlier in the car. He was proud and he was so very very in love.

Sam laid back on the towel and looked up at the stars.
A lot of things made more sense about Rin now. The boyfriends, Dave, and the exhaustion he’d seen in Rin over the past six months or so. Rin had found sex and he’d found emotions, but he hadn’t found someone to dream with.

Sam smiled up at the universe, feeling warm inside.

Rin was the type to ask the universe for things and Sousuke, he was the universe’s response to Rin’s pleas. How else could such a perfect counterpoint for Rin exist? But that kind of magic wouldn’t have worked for Rin if Sousuke hadn’t also been asking for Rin as well.

Cause now Rin understood that Sousuke was that kind of guy too.

“Your English is so much better than Rin’s,” laughed Alec, their genius backstroker.

Both Rin and Sousuke turned beet red, one from rage the other from embarrassment.

“That’s not true!” protested Rin, as Sam had predicted. “I’m fucking amazing at English! Better than Sou!”

Alec gave Rin a devilish smirk that infuriated the shit out of Rin.

“Not from what I’ve seen,” Alec disagreed. “You’ve been living in Australia for how long and your accent hasn’t gotten any better.”

“That’s bull shit!” Rin yelled. “Here, I’ll prove it!”

Rin snatched the microphone out of Alec’s hand and stood up from his spot on the couch. He furiously punched in a few numbers until the words ‘Beyoncé’ and ‘Superpower’ came on the screen.

Oh God. Here they go.
Thank goodness they’d been able to snag a private room for karaoke. Better to keep Rin’s Beyoncé within four walls and among friends.

Rin was a great singer, but he got really into the performance and his hand motions became a bit ridiculous. As far as the English went, he hit every word spot on, but his accent sounded like him, not like Queen Bey. When he was through, Alec and Ben erupted into hoots and claps. Rin looked smug as shit when he handed Sousuke the microphone.

“Alright, your turn!” Alec laughed.

Sousuke stood up and took the microphone from Rin.

“What song you want mate?” Alec asked.

“No music,” he said.

Sam sat back and watched as Sousuke began the performance that completely obliterated Rin. Sousuke not only hit every syllable perfectly, his deep voice was soft and melted around the words, like they were precious treasures he was showing the room. His accent was the poshest, most beautiful British accent and it was flawless. But what did the accent matter when his voice trembled and caressed each word with so much feeling. Sam knew little of Sousuke’s history, but the emotion with which Sousuke spoke those words…:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur’d like him, like him with friends possess’d,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contended least;
Sousuke walked over to Rin and lightly touched Rin’s cheek, looking down with him with tender eyes.

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;

He leaned down and brushed the lightest kiss on Rin’s forehead, making Rin instantly dissolve into tears. Rin tried to wipe away his tears, but Sousuke caught his wrist to stop him. He fell down on his knees and smiled at Rin as he finished off the poem.

For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my states with kings

When he finished, his hand dropped away from Rin’s hand and he set the microphone on the bench. Sam held his breath waiting to see what Sousuke would do next. Alec and Ben were doing the same thing. Rin sniffled a few times.

Sousuke smiled deviously and chuckled.

“I win.”

“Oh Sousuke you absolute bastard!” Rin howled as he slapped Sousuke. Laughing harder, Sousuke grabbed him and kissed Rin’s cheeks despite Rin’s upmost to wriggle free. They tustled a bit until Rin’s flailing legs knocked over Ben’s drink. It spilled all over the table.

“Oi!” he shouted angrily. Sousuke and Rin froze and finally Sousuke let Rin go.

“Sousuke will get you another drink,” Rin growled as he slump back against his seat. Still laughing, Sousuke pushed the button to summon a server and ordered another round of drinks for them all.
Soon, everyone was singing karaoke and laughing as before except for Rin. He was still sulking.

“Ah cheer up, mate!” Ben laughed as he shoved the microphone in Rin’s face after a really excellent rendition of Sam Smith’s *Take Me Home* they’d all sung. Rin snatched the microphone and after singing three Adele songs in a row, finally stopped pouting. When he sat down, he pushed the microphone into Sousuke’s hands.

“What else you got, big guy?”

Sousuke smiled and accepted the microphone. He remained seated next to Rin and before he began, he tucked Rin’s hair behind his ear with one of his long fingers. Then, he spoke to Rin in Rin's own language:

長閑なる折こそなけれ花を思ふ心の
うちに風はふかねど

Sam had no idea what Sousuke had said, but whatever it was had been like an electric attack on a flying Pokemon – super effective. Rin was sighing and blushing and his eyes had become glossy again. Pleased with Rin’s reaction, Sousuke kissed him on the cheek as he giggled and Rin pushed his face away with his hands, making Sousuke giggle harder. The two weeks was nearing its end and all the hesitation and consciousness they’d had at the beginning was long gone. When Rin was with Sousuke, he was lost in a world entirely their own.

Jesus Christ.

Out in the flat, Chris could hear Rin’s goodbye party in full swing. The swimmers were all there, as were members of the rowing, track, and tennis teams. All the people Rin wanted to say goodbye to before he left with his love the next morning.

Rin hadn’t expressly banned Chris from the party, because Rin hadn’t acknowledged Chris’ existence for weeks now, but Chris knew he was unwelcome out there.

Chris wished he’d thought to bring some vodka into his room to drown out his sorrows. Rin hadn’t talked to him since that night and, with him leaving tomorrow, it was unlikely that he ever would. Noticing Chris’ misery, Sam had offered to talk to Rin, but Chris had begged him not to.
He didn’t want to make things worse.

Chris rolled over onto his side and covered his ears with his hands. He was glad he’d turned off the lights before people had started arriving.

His hands didn’t do much good. They couldn’t even block out the sound of his door opening.

Chris turned around and saw the last person he’d ever expect to see.

“What the fuck do you want, Dave?” he spat.

Dave closed the door behind him.

“Why are you in here by yourself in the dark?” Dave laughed. Chris cringed at each of Dave’s footfalls as he crossed the room towards Chris’ bed.

The bed sunk a bit as Dave sat down.

“Fuck off, Dave.” Chris said half-heartedly. The last person he wanted to talk to was Dave, because Dave was a stupid man whore and an ass. But Chris had been dying of loneliness since Sousuke arrived and no one else was around.

“You’ve always been in love with him, haven’t you?” Dave asked.

Chris didn’t answer, he didn’t want to give Dave the satisfaction. Though his silence was as good as a yes.

“Thought so,” Dave laughed. “You were always so fucking jealous whenever I’d come over. I always thought it was a bit hilarious.”

Anger conquered Chris’ depression and he finally sat upright, ready to clock the motherfucker. But
Dave, for once in his life, wasn’t wearing his stupid, shit eating grin. If anything, he looked as happy as Chris did.

“Truth is, I was just as jealous of you as you were of me,” Dave said, his voice quiet. “He was always going on about the movie nights you two had and how you’d let him sleep in your bed if he had a nightmare. He kicked me out of bed a number of times, so you two could go shopping or some other stupid shit.”

Dave laughed again.

“Whenever he’d scream we’d never have sex again, it would make me excited because I knew he’d be back again and the sex when he came back… it was always the best. Not like the other times, when it was in a threesome or it was just a quick and dirty fuck. The way he’d look at me during those times, the way he’d touch me. God I loved it. I wished we could fight all the time so we could have more sex like that.”

Jesus. Was Dave really so dense, he couldn’t understand that this was the last thing Chris wanted to hear.

“I had half a thought that one day, after we had sex like that, that he’d turn to me and ask if I wanted to watch a movie with him. I’d call him an idiot and protest, but I had a whole list ready to suggest, just in case he ever asked. It was only ever sex, that’s all he saw in me. I used to think you were so pathetic, but now I’m realizing that at least you got to watch those movies with him.”

Dave rubbed the back of his neck.

“Fucking Sousuke came and ruined it for both of us, didn’t he? From what Sam was saying, it doesn’t sound like Rin wants to watch anymore movies with you and he sure as hell doesn’t want to sleep with me anymore. He wouldn’t even let me ask for a threesome. I was just a replacement for that motherfucker. I was someone to have sex with who looked like the person he really wanted.”

For a long time, Chris wasn’t sure what to say. Was this… a confession? From fucking Dave? Dave was always so arrogant and egotistical and an asshole, but he’d never been… pathetic looking, like he was now.

“Don’t say that,” Chris said. “It was more than that.”
Chris couldn’t believe he was trying to comfort Dave. About Rin!

“Rin told me once why he liked having sex with you so much,” Chris said. “Despite what you might think, it wasn’t the size of your cock. Or that you were willing to do whatever the hell his kinky ass little brain could come up with. Or that you looked like Sousuke.”

Dave looked up and Chris swore his eyes were glossier than they’d been before. He didn’t say anything snarky either, he just waited for Chris to go on.

“He told me he liked having sex with you because that was the only time he saw who you really were. Beneath your bull shit. He said it was incredible, what you were like during sex, because you were this whole, different person. You were kind and sweet and your smile wasn’t fake as shit, like usual. He said it was the only time he ever saw you happy and when you were really happy, you were intoxicating. But the second the orgasm had worn itself out, you’d panic and put that mask back on. He said, you’d worn that mask so much you didn’t realize it wasn’t who you were. It made him sad, you know, having sex with you. Not because of regret, but because you refused to be yourself anywhere outside of sex. Well, and Brian of course. He likes you best when you are with Brian. For all your bravado, Rin wondered if really, you weren’t just really shy and self-conscious when it came down to it.”

Dave looked down at his fingers. Though he was sitting up straight with his usual, perfect posture, he looked slumped and deflated. He finally understood Rin’s attraction because this was the first time Dave looked, like a person.

Dave looked back up at Chris with those beautiful green eyes of his. Sometimes they looked more blue, but they were definitely green. Of course the twins were beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. But Chris had always ever been an asshole and his beauty had always been like a weapon he used to mock people with.

In slow motion, Dave leaned forward and pressed his lips against Chris’. Chris closed his eyes and allowed it, savoring the contact because, in all honesty, it had been almost a year since he’d felt it. It didn’t matter that it was ass hole Dave because Chris…he’d missed human contact like this so much. Dave kissed him again, this time pressing his tongue into Chris’ mouth.

This wasn’t right. This was fucking Dave!

Chris jerked back.
“What are you doing, Dave?” Chris asked. “Haven’t you said, on more than one occasion, that I’d be the last person you’d ever touch?”

Dave grimaced with the memory. Yes, he’d said that. Plenty of times.

But Dave knew how to get what he wanted and later, Chris would wonder and wonder if he’d been manipulated or if that was real Dave.

“My heart’s breaking tonight and your heart’s breaking tonight and they’re breaking for the same guy whose leaving tomorrow with someone else. Tonight…I think we both need to be with someone and maybe together tonight won’t hurt so bad. I know it’s been a long time since you’ve been with anyone, but I promise I’ll be really gentle with you.”

The thumping of the music drowned them out from the rest of the party and most everyone forgot about them. But Brian asked Sam to keep an eye on his brother before he left with Imogen. Brian was worried, as he always was about Dave. Rin and Sousuke finally went to sleep and just before Sam went to join Lydia in his room, he peeked into Chris’. They were both asleep and in each other’s arms, a sight Sam thought he’d never see. He let them sleep because he could see what had happened and he had a good idea of why it did.

He closed the door and wished them both pleasant dreams because, in the morning, they’d wake up and Rin would be gone.

Chapter End Notes

The poems Sousuke reads are Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29 and a poem I found on Wikipedia by Izumi Shikibu, a 10th century courtesan and poet. The translation for the poem I found goes like this:

There is not even a moment of calmness. In the heart that loves the blossoms, the wind is already blowing.

A very fitting poem for Rin :)

Hope you all enjoyed and next chapter, they’ll be back in Tokyo with everyone and some new characters will come into the story :D Thanks for reading and thanks everyone for your patience with the sporadic updates. My life is quite busy these days with a full time job and rowing (I'm on a team :) and what not, I don't have much time to write fic :) I haven't forgotten about the fic though and I will still be updating :D
Homecoming

Chapter Summary

Without further ado....Rin and Sousuke come back to Japan and reunite with friends, old and new!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haru fit his key in the door, unlocking his home. It was just after noon and Haru couldn’t remember the last time he’d been home so early. School and swimming had always eaten up a lot of his time, that wasn’t new. But the internship was. Already, Haru barely had time to breathe and fall classes hadn’t begun yet. He hadn’t been able to cook anything in a few weeks, he hadn’t been able to enjoy any solitude. Worst of all, he hadn’t been able to spend any time with Makoto.

The front room was empty when Haru stepped inside. He hadn’t seen the apartment in the daylight for quite some time and he was appalled at the state of it. No one had swept the floor or dusted recently and the sink was full of dirty dishes. With a heavy sigh, Haru set down his bag near the front door and started tidying up. It wasn’t Haru’s mess, he hadn’t been home enough to make a mess, but he wouldn’t be able to rest until his home was clean.

It wasn’t something he could control about himself. He’d spent a long time taking care of himself and cleaning had always calmed him down. His mother had drilled into him that visitors would only come if the house was clean. People often overwhelmed Haru and he usually regretted wanting visitors almost as soon as they showed up. People made noise and growing up in such a silent home made Haru adverse to noise. But what Haru hated more than noise was the dead silence of complete solitude. Sometimes he needed to be quiet to gather his energy or think about things, but he knew who to call if he wanted to break his silence or spend it in the company of someone else. There was a difference between that kind of silence and the other. One was necessary, the other fatal.

Things were different now than when Haru was young. He lived with lots of people. There was always noise and commotion, especially if Kisumi was involved. Sometimes Haru found the noise of his home unbearable and he had to get out of the house, find somewhere quiet where he could hear himself think. But Haru usually didn’t mind the noise. This is what real homes were supposed to be like. He never wanted to go back to the silence of solitude again because he knew he’d drowned in it if after knowing what a real home felt like.

So Haru cleaned the house up to his standards, only feeling a little annoyed to be cleaning up after Makoto and Kisumi. He didn’t put it in so many words, not even in his head, but the whole time he swept and washed dishes, he felt that if he didn’t clean, everyone would leave him. Those thoughts
were always whispers in his mind, but he was off kilter and the feeling was worse than usual.

When he was finished, Haru went to his and Makoto’s room and was surprised to find his beloved napping on the bed. Makoto was supposed to be teaching this afternoon, but Haru wasn’t about to complain. Any resentment Haru had felt about the house evaporated upon seeing his Makoto, sprawled out and dreaming peacefully. He was sweet like this.

How many times, before they became a couple and after, had Haru watched Makoto sleep? It was during those nights, when the only sound in the house was Makoto’s rhythmic breathing, that Haru had slowly discovered that his feelings for Makoto weren’t just platonic. Makoto liked to talk about the first time Haru had kissed him and how wonderful it had been, but in truth Haru had kissed Makoto a few times before that. Their real first kiss had been in high school, at nationals during their third year. Haru was extremely embarrassed and never told Makoto about it, but the night before their last relay together, he’d kissed sleeping Makoto between his eyebrows, then, with an uncharacteristic flash of boldness, very lightly on his lips. In hindsight, it was kind of creepy, but Haru had been so overwhelmed with feelings of love and gratitude for Makoto. He hadn’t wanted to wake him and he could think of no better way to express the thoughts of his heart.

This was a problem Haru often faced; there weren’t words adequate enough for Haru to tell Makoto how much he loved him. He couldn’t describe the full body exhilaration Haru got whenever he saw Makoto. Or the swell of relief he got whenever he woke up in the morning and Makoto was still there. Haru thought that since they’d taken their relationship beyond being just friends to being lovers, the violence for his feelings for Makoto would have normalized. But those feelings became stronger every day and they were too overwhelming for Haru to put into anything coherent.

Haru slid into bed and snuggled up against Makoto’s side. He was so warm and soft and he smelled so, so good. Next to him, Makoto stirred and draped an arm around Haru, allowing Haru access to burrow deeper next to Makoto.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be back until this afternoon, Haruka,” Makoto yawned sleepily. Haru smiled into Makoto’s chest. Haru-chan was annoying because it sounded so babyish, but Haru really liked it when Makoto called him Haruka.

“I took off work early,” Haru replied. He put an arm around Makoto and hugged him closer.

“Oh so you can come with me to pick Rin up at the airport?” Makoto asked, a little more lucidly. Makoto rolled on his side to better hug Haru next to him.
Haru groaned in the back of his throat. Yes, technically he’d requested the day off from his internship because he wanted to go with Makoto to pick Rin up from the airport. But the caveat with Makoto was the real reason. He hadn’t done anything with Makoto in weeks. His soul ached for its other half.

“On the way to the airport, let’s go to that one café, yeah?” Haru suggested. “I want to buy you chocolate cake. My treat.”

“Oh, Haru!” Makoto perked up, “That would be really nice! Yeah, we can go now if you are ready!”

Makoto moved to get up, but Haru wouldn’t let him. Makoto laughed and put his arms around Haru again.

“Not yet, Makoto,” Haru whispered.

“Okay then!” Makoto said, squeezing Haru closer. “We can wait a little bit longer before we go to the airport. It’s nice to lay here like this with you! Haru-chan has missed me it seems!”

Tears began to pool in Haru’s eyes unexpectedly because Makoto had hit it spot on. He missed Makoto so much. It was much nicer being with Makoto than being at his internship. He enjoyed the work and all and he knew the internship would help him later on, but the price he was paying was already so high. He didn’t know what he was going to do when classes resumed again. Haru had to take comfort in the fact that the internship wouldn’t last forever.

Sensing Haru’s distress, Makoto began to rub circles of comfort against Haru’s back. Makoto knew him too well. He knew that that was the best way to calm down Haru when he was feeling stressed.

“Sorry, Haruka!” Makoto consoled. “The internship won’t last forever and when it’s over, we can take a trip together. Does that sound nice?”

“We can’t afford a trip,” Haru argued. “Not if you are coming to the Pan-Asian games with me.”

Makoto laughed and squeezed Haru closer. Then he brushed a kiss on the top of Haru’s head.
“We’ll figure out something special to do to celebrate, then.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Of course.”

Makoto was full of cake and very happy. Partly because he was full of cake, but mostly because he was holding Haru’s hand and Haru seemed a lot happier than when he’d come home that afternoon. Haru could be happy because they were waiting for Rin to come out of the airport terminal, but Makoto selfishly hoped it was because they’d had some time to themselves. With classes starting next week and Haru’s internship, Makoto didn’t know when he was going to be able to spend a whole afternoon alone with Haru again.

It wouldn’t last, Makoto knew. But even this happy afternoon wasn’t perfect because Makoto knew it would be the last one for the foreseeable future. Haru was there, standing next to him, holding Makoto’s hand, and Makoto’s body was aching from missing him.

“There he is,” Haru announced. Makoto scanned the crowd and found a familiar red head popping up and down in the crowd.

Makoto forced himself to smile and waved Rin down. When Rin actually saw them and began waving in his usual, energetic way, Makoto’s smile became more natural. Though he’d spoken with Rin on Skype a few times during the past two weeks and Rin had apologized to them for his behavior, it was still a relief to see him in person. Makoto hadn’t realized how worried he’d been about Rin until he saw him here. Seeing him lifted a huge weight off Makoto’s shoulders.

“Hi guys!” Rin greeted as he joined them. He first wrapped Haru into a nice long hug then did the same with Makoto, “It’s great to finally be here!”

“Yeah it’s great to see you too!” Makoto agreed. “Did you have a nice flight?”

“Oh yeah, it was fine. Slow though.” Rin smiled and rubbed the back of his head with a hand, reminding Makoto a lot of when Rin was in elementary school. “It was the slowest flight I’ve ever had! I guess I was just excited to see you guys again!”
“Sure you were,” Haru said. “Us and a big, dumb stupid idiot named Sousuke.”

Rin gave a nervous laugh, but he didn’t deny it.

“How is the big guy?” Rin asked. “He called me three times today while I was going to the airport to make sure I was coming. He sounded like he’d been pretty upset.”

Haru rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue. “How should we know?” he asked. “We haven’t seen or heard from him for a month and a half.”

Rin frowned deeply. “He hasn’t been back to the apartment yet?”

“He has,” Makoto broke in, “I’ve been watering his plants and I saw that he unpacked his things and some of yours. We haven’t seen him though.”

Rin’s scowl made Makoto feel bad for mentioning it, but in truth Makoto had been sick with worry about Sousuke. He wished he could just talk to Sousuke, but Sousuke hadn’t let them know how to contact him besides the phone he wouldn’t answer. He’d left notes in Sousuke’s room too, asking Sousuke to call him, but nothing. With Haru spending all his time at his internship and Sousuke out of contact, Makoto had never felt so powerless and nervous. Even when Rin had called during Sousuke’s stay in Australia, he hadn’t actually seen or spoken with Sousuke. Part of Makoto wondered if Rin was faking Sousuke’s visit. That was crazy, of course, but Rin sometimes straddled that sanity line, especially with things he was passionate about. And Sousuke definitely qualified.

Sensing Makoto’s distress, Haru squeezed Makoto’s hand.

“Let’s go to the baggage claim, Rin.” Haru said.

Kisumi’s room was sweltering. If he’d been alone, the heat would make Tomo miserable, but he wasn’t alone. He was lying on Kisumi’s bed, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and his best friend. Clad with only his underwear, their skin stuck together with sweat. Kisumi’s arms cradled Tomo’s head and his fingers rubbed lovely circles into Tomo’s scalp. Kisumi’s face was nuzzled in the space between Tomo’s neck and shoulder and one of his knees was pressed up against Tomo’s groin. Unable to resist, Tomo’s hands were roving over Kisumi’s sweat drenched back, through his soft, cotton candy hair. Every time Tomo’s hand brushed against a certain spot on Kisumi’s lower back, Kisumi jolted and his thigh rubbed against Tomo’s crotch. Tomo was hitting that spot more often than he should.
Today was supposed to be a study day but their books lay abandoned on the floor. A part of Kisumi felt guilty that they were wasting time doing this…whatever this was…but that part of him definitely did not live in his crotch.

“We should study now,” Tomo suggested half-heartedly. Kisumi chuckled. His breath caressed Tomo’s neck, making him shiver.

“That’s the attitude that will win you the Nakamura Scholarship,” Kisumi whispered against the shell of Tomo’s ear. “Remember me when you are a hot shot doctor.”

Yasutomo smirked and stretched his neck back. He could feel Kisumi’s breath fluttering against his skin. A visceral flash of desire shot through Tomo and he was momentarily overwhelmed by the desire for Kisumi’s mouth against his skin. It wouldn’t be that hard for Kisumi to do but they both knew it wasn’t going to happen. Before things got too difficult, Tomo gently pushed Kisumi away. Taking the hint immediately, Kisumi rolled off him and settled down next to him. Unwilling to relinquish the contact completely, Kisumi’s arm remained draped over Tomo’s chest. The absence of Kisumi’s weight and the pressure of Kisumi’s knee between his legs Tomo missed instantly. To compensate, Tomo put his hand over Kisumi’s and Kisumi twined his fingers between Tomo’s.

“You have a better shot than me of winning it,” Tomo pointed out. “If either of us is going to win, it’s you.”

“That’s just not true, is it Tomo?” Kisumi laughed. “We both know you are the better student. If either of us has a shot at the Nakamura Scholarship, it’s you.”

It was true that Tomo’s grades were slightly better than Kisumi’s, but Tomo had seen Kisumi’s application and Kisumi’s was by far the stronger candidate. He wanted Kisumi to win. He’d only applied because Kisumi had insisted.

“You’re the smartest person I know,” Kisumi whispered. “It would be a great injustice if you didn’t win.”

Injustice.

Tomo wished Kisumi had picked any other word but injustice.
He shook his hand away from Kisumi’s and rolled over on his side so his back was to Kisumi. Kisumi’s arm wisely fell away.

When they’d defined the limits of their relationship, Kisumi had decided that personal boundaries no longer existed. This intimate touching that never led anywhere and excluded their mouths was the result. It was sexual, but it was sexual in a way they both knew would never actually become sexual. They petted, they pawed, but there was no sucking, no biting…no release. No satisfaction. Because of the stuff they were doing behind closed doors, Kisumi had been glowing for weeks and Tomo, by association, felt himself glowing as well. Kisumi had been starving for intimate physical contact and it had made him feel really important that he was the friend who was giving that to Kisumi.

The delusion tended to slip away during those rare times when Tomo and Kisumi weren’t together.

At first, Tomo tried to trick himself into believing this was enough. But each night, falling asleep in Kisumi’s arms, was harder than the night before. At first Tomo had been just as hungry for the cuddling and the petting. For the feeling that there was someone next to him who loved him, even if it was just as a friend. But at the edge of this rosy vision was the seductive truth that called clearer and clearer to Tomo each day.

This wasn’t enough for Tomo. He needed more.

Lying in bed, facing the door and contemplating running, Tomo felt that call deep inside him. He would wait for it to pass, as he’d been grown accustomed to, but every time it took longer and longer for that voice inside of him to vanish. The voice wanted him to seduce Kisumi, to fuck him senseless, to make him scream with pleasure.

When he was alone in his own bed, he ached for the warmth of Kisumi’s body and his dreams were laced with Kisumi’s scent. But in his fantasies, Sousuke lingered at the back of his mind, his beautiful teal eyes demanding that Tomo be honest with himself. Tomo knew what he wanted and what he wanted was to be wanted. What he had with Kisumi, it was a form of love, but it wasn’t the kind he really, really wanted.

What they were doing, it had to stop.

The front door opened and Yasutomo sat up. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed deeply.
“You alright Tomo?” Kisumi asked. He gently put a hand on Tomo’s back. Tomo stood up and put his shirt back on.

“Let’s go meet Rin.”

Rin’s only visit to his new home had been brief and very distracted, so when he stepped over the threshold, it was like he was stepping into somewhere completely new. He smiled wide as he took in the apartment, in all its homey Japanese glory. This was his home now and he was going to be living here with the love of his life and some of his oldest and best friends. He was shaking with excitement.

“Rin-rin!” called a familiar voice. Rin smiled as he connected the voice to Kisumi. Beaming, Rin walked up to Kisumi and gave him a huge hug. It was crazy how Kisumi still looked exactly like he did when they were in elementary school. Same floppy hair, same mischievous smile, same everything. Well maybe not body, he’d certainly grown an awful lot. He wasn’t as big as Sousuke, but he might be as big as Makoto now.

“Good to see you!” Rin laughed as he broke away from their hug. Kisumi was blushing hard and Rin wondered if he’d done something wrong. He peeked at Haru, who was looking away as if uncomfortable.

Was it the hug? God, it had been such a long time since Rin had been in Japan, he’d forgotten that people weren’t as physically familiar with each other as he’d grown accustomed to. Rin would have to work on that.

“It’s good to see you too,” Kisumi laughed after a second. “Here, let me introduce you to my friend, Matsuzaki Yasutomo.”

He stepped aside, revealing a rather pretty guy with dark purple hair and big green eyes. He looked disheveled and embarrassed and for some reason Rin didn’t understand, he was glaring at Rin like he wanted to punch him in the face. Sousuke had talked a lot about Yasutomo, he’d told Rin how honest and smart and kind he was.

“It’s nice to met you, Matsuzaki-san! Sousuke’s told me wonderful things about you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Tomo stuttered. He looked away quickly.
Ah, this was disappointing. Rin had really been looking forward to properly meeting Yasutomo.

“So Rin!” Makoto said excitedly, “You said you wanted to have a little party tonight, right?”

Glad for the interruption, Rin turned away from Kisumi and his sulky friend.

“Yes,” Rin agreed, “I’ve invited Seijuro Mikoshiba and Aichiro Nitori over, if that’s all right. I haven’t seen Seijuro in two years and Ai just moved back from Canada. You guys don’t mind if they come over?”

“Not at all!” Makoto said happily. Haru gave Makoto a sidelong glare. “And Sousuke will come back tonight too?”

A sudden pang of doubt stabbed at Rin’s heart as his mind took a split second to consider if Sousuke actually would show up. But it only lasted a second before Rin reasoned with it.

“Yeah, he’ll be back after he’s done with work,” he said with every confidence in the world. “Just… don’t be too mean to him…Haru.”

“I have no reason to be mean to him,” Haru said quietly. His glower said otherwise.

“Well I feel bad that he hasn’t talked to you guys at all yet and that he’s been back for a few days,” Rin explained. “Makoto I know you’ve been really worried and if Makoto’s worried, Haru isn’t happy.”

The wonder couple exchanged a brief, blushy look that confirmed Rin’s assertion. Rin quirked up a smile. These two…over the years, Rin had come to the conclusion that things had worked out how they should have for Haru. He’d stopped regretting Haru’s rejection a long time ago because it was obvious no one would ever love Haru so well or thoroughly as Makoto did. Before Sousuke came back into the picture, Rin had always compared relationships he had with Makoto and Haru’s relationship and every fling, date, or long term boyfriend had always come up short. Rin’s relationship with Sousuke was the only one Rin had never subconsciously compared to Makoto and Haru’s and Rin thought that was the very best sign. Sousuke had always been his and the way he loved Rin, it couldn’t be compared.
“He should have called you back, Makoto,” Rin apologized. “I’m sorry he didn’t. But you know Sousuke, he doesn’t like to be around people when he’s feeling weak. I think he’s just been really freaked out.”

“Weak!?” Makoto cried. “Why would he be feeling weak? Is he alright?”

“He’s fine! Promise!” Rin forced a laugh and a smile and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. Now was not the time to talk about the stabbing. “It’s…we…well you and Haru should understand, it’s hard sometimes when your history is so long and you know someone so well. And you two have always stayed together, where Sousuke and I…well we haven’t…and it’s…I know how much he’s been hurting and…”

**He’s afraid it’s too good to last, though Rin. He’s been in love with me forever and he’s afraid he’ll wake up from the dream. That’s what he expects of me; that I’ll leave him behind again.**

“I’m going to go unpack some of my things, if that’s all right. I told Seijuro and Ai to come over around 7, if that works for everyone. I’ll go down and get some snacks in a bit but for now I’d like to unpack.”

Though the man was not present, there was no mistaking whose room Rin had walked into. The art, the books, all of it. For so long, Sousuke had hidden these things about himself, but now they were on display. He wasn’t hiding who he was any more.

Rin walked around the room, drinking in every detail and beaming with pride.

Sousuke had unpacked the books he’d bought in Australia, Rin recognized their spines on his bookshelf. He found the caricature portrait Rin had insisted they had done in Australia hanging on the back of the door. It was impossible for Sousuke to look bad, even if drawn in caricature, but the artist certainly had gotten the broody part down. Rin was a different story though; his teeth looked downright terrifying. The artist had thought it would be super hilarious to draw Rin snapping his teeth at a very concerned Sousuke. Rin clicked his tongue in annoyance and contemplated taking the stupid thing down. But he didn’t because it was a picture of the two of them and clearly Sousuke treasured it.

On the window sill were several sea shells they’d collected and Rin thought this a much better souvenir. One shell, a cone that was the color of coral, was held in a spot of honor. Rin picked it up
and put it to his ear. Rin had found it, one afternoon as they’d taken a walk on the beach near Rin’s old place. He could still hear the ocean in the shell, still feel the weight of Sousuke’s hand in his, still picture the relaxed and happy smile Sousuke had worn. He tenderly put the shell back on the sill and let his fingers linger over the shell’s gentle curves. That had been a really good day.

Not all the souvenirs were happy ones. On the desk was a note Makoto had written to Sousuke in his absence and Rin frowned as he read Makoto’s frantic worry. Sousuke shouldn’t have ignored this note. That was behavior Sousuke would have done before and he was supposed to be over that by now. Rin would have to talk to him about it and ask why he hadn’t come home. But Rin would have to be careful not to sound accusatory. They were a couple now; it was Rin’s job to be on Sousuke’s side.

The most notable difference in Sousuke’s room wasn’t the souvenirs or the note. It was the smattering of Rin’s things that Sousuke had brought with him back to Tokyo. He’d brought a bag back for Rin and he’d unpacked everything for him. There were a few pairs of Rin’s shoes, lined up next to the few pairs Sousuke owned. There were some of Rin’s clothes folded neatly next to Sousuke’s. Great thought had gone into the placement of each of Rin’s possessions, like even his ratty T-shirts were sacred objects.

This room wasn’t just a room, it was a place where the desperate dreams of Sousuke’s heart met reality. He’d clawed his way out of despair to make a place for himself in the world, and it was Rin he was ecstatic to share his place with.

Sousuke wasn’t even around and he was overwhelming Rin with the feeling of being wanted.

Choking back tears, Rin unzipped the big duffle bag he had brought with him and began unpacking the rest of his things. He was glad he was doing this alone because there was a weird combination of crying and smiling going on. He hoped that the next time Sousuke came into their room and saw Rin’s things fully unloaded, he’d finally believe that Rin was here to stay.

Just as Rin finished unpacking, his phone buzzed in the duffle bag. One new text:

*Off work, on my way home. Can’t wait to see you, love*

Rin’s whole face blazed and his heart felt like it would beat straight out of his chest.
They’d only been apart for a few days, but today would be the first time they’d be together without a goodbye hanging over their heads.

Rin made towards the door, because he had snacks to buy, but he stopped when his hand was on the handle. He’d nearly forgotten the present!

He went back to his duffle bag and brought out the last item inside, a white binder with a big bow on top. He put it on top of the desk and spruced up the bow so it looked better. He didn’t cover up Makoto’s letter though, he wanted Sousuke to see it too. A gentle reminder that Sousuke needed to make things right with Makoto. Smiling at his handiwork, he dashed off to go get ready. He had to hurry. There was no way he was going to miss seeing Sousuke walk through the door of the home they now shared for the first time.

“Sousuke!” Rin cried, jumping up from the kotatsu. “Sou!”

Sousuke hadn’t even had time to drop his bag before Rin jumped on top of him. Once Sousuke realized what was going on, his face melted into the happiest, stupidest smile Haru had ever seen on him. Rin kissed Sousuke on the cheek, making Sousuke chuckle.

“Hi Rin,” he greeted. “You made it!”

Rin laughed and slid out of Sousuke’s arms.

“Course I did, you big oaf! Now you won’t be able to get rid of me cause we’re living together again!”

Sousuke laughed again and kissed Rin properly. Haru felt a little indecent seeing it. He’d never kissed Makoto like that in front of people. Makoto hadn’t ever really kissed Haru like that period.

“As if I’d ever want to get rid of you,” Sousuke chuckled.

Haru grumbled in the back of his throat.
“Sousuke!” Makoto greeted. “It’s nice to see you!”

Haru looked away as Makoto gave Sousuke a big hug in greeting. He didn’t like it when he saw Makoto hugging other people. Haru knew Makoto’s heart was the kindest, warmest heart there was and that it meant nothing beyond the realms of friendship, but he couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy. If Haru weren’t around, Makoto would be so much more popular. He probably could have anyone he wanted.

“It’s nice to see you too,” Sousuke replied. “I hope you’ve been well.”

“He’s been worried about you,” Haru spat before Makoto could answer. “We haven’t heard from you in over a month and Makoto and Yasutomo just about killed themselves trying to figure out where this mysterious studio of yours is.”

“Haru!” Rin cried. Haru was too busy glaring at Sousuke to see Rin’s outrage. Haru couldn’t help it. Sousuke had strolled into the apartment like nothing was wrong.

“You were looking for me?” Sousuke asked Makoto.

“Tomo did too,” Kisumi interjected.

“Oh it’s alright,” Makoto stuttered, blushing fiercely. “It’s not as bad as Haru made it sound. Tomo and I were worried about you because we couldn’t reach you or Rin. If you don’t mind, it would be really nice if you could give us the address of your studio. It’s fine if you feel like you need to escape every once in a while, but it would be nice to know where we could find you in case we need to.”

“You left so suddenly,” Tomo added. “We’d thought something bad had happened to you or that you’d run away again.”

Sousuke frowned and he had the decency to look ashamed of himself.
Sousuke was a complete sack of shit and he didn’t deserve friends.

He’d thought no one would care about his absence, but Haru had attacked him almost as soon as he’d walked in the door. Rin cared, but he’d never considered that anyone else noticed if he was around or not.

He was starting to feel a bit choked up.

“I’m really sorry if I worried you guys,” Sousuke said quietly. “I um…didn’t think…”

His voice trailed off as words failed him. For a long minute everyone waited, but Sousuke didn’t know what to say.

“We’re just really glad you’re home safe and sound!” Makoto finally offered with a big warm smile. “Welcome home!”

“Welcome home, idiot!” Kisumi replied cheerfully. “It’s good to see you.”

Sousuke looked around at his friends’ faces and couldn’t see any malice between them. They were glad to see him. Even Haru was watching him with interest. A warmth he was unaccustomed to radiated out from his chest.

“I brought you a present, big guy,” Rin said, patting Sousuke on the shoulder. “I’m going to get ready for our guests, so why don’t you go find it in our room?”

Our…room…

The words resounded in his heart as Sousuke opened the room to the room he would now be sharing
with the love of his life. Rin had inhabited the place for only a few hours, but already the place belonged to him as much as to Sousuke. Their caricature on the door, the seashells on the windowsill, the clothes and music and shoes nestled next to Sousuke’s things; Rin was etched in every detail. The warmth grew brighter inside Sousuke’s heart.

It was infinitely better than the gaping, frozen void he’d lived with for so long.

Rin’s present was easy to find. The white binder was hard to miss with the massive, gaudy bow on top. His fingers hesitated on the binder’s cover. Sousuke couldn’t fathom what was inside, but knowing Rin it would undoubtedly be sentimental and sweet. Wasn’t Sousuke feeling enough without this?

He picked up the binder and brought it over to his bed, where he sat down. For a minute or two, he stared down at the bow and then took a deep breath. Then, he flipped open the cover.

Inside Sousuke was looking down at the first letter he’d written Rin when Rin went back to Australia after graduation. He blushed, reading it. God, he had really sucked at writing. It was so sappy and melodramatic. The sentiments were true, but still…Sousuke flipped the page and found the next letter in the sequence, followed by the next two. Sousuke was about to close the binder, because honestly who wanted to read those letters, when he found something he hadn’t written. Something entirely new to him:

Sousuke,

*Man I haven’t seen you in so long. I promised myself I wasn’t going to go on and on about how much I miss you, so I won’t send this. But it’s still true. I miss you a lot. We talk on the phone and everything, but it’s not the same. Since I know I’ll never let you read this, why can’t I let out what’s truly in my heart?*

*I’ve never been interested in girls, only boys. Phew! What a relief! I’ve never told anyone that in so many words, but if there’s anyone I can tell it’s you.*

*There’s more…this part is harder…*

*I’m not interested in any old boy, but I’m interested in you.*
There! I said it! You happy!!??

I’m happy J You make me happy. You’re beautiful and strong (despite what you may think) and we really seem to be made for each other. This year was really confusing because I used to have feelings for Haru (not like I have for you, I admire and cherish his purity but the raw grit is what’s made it hard for me to sleep in the same room with you and what I long for). I shouldn’t tell you about this in a confession letter, but I want to lay everything bare for you because I know how much I hate it when you lie. I confessed to Haru, in Australia, and he rejected me. He rejected me because he’s in love with Makoto (big surprise, but it’s a secret so don’t tell anyone!) Then we talked about my feelings for you the rest of the night. He helped me sort out the confusion that’s been in my heart for so long and he helped me realize that I didn’t just want to have sex with you and I didn’t just want to be your best friend. I wanted both. Haru helped me see that you are the best person I could ever be with and I just love you so much. Don’t be jealous of Haru, he’s a good friend and he showed me I was in love with you. You should thank him!

I know I’ve not been the best to you and I know how much more you deserve, but I hope one day, maybe the next time we see each other, I can tell you what’s in my heart. I want to know what’s in your heart too.

You’ll always be my sunshine, so please don’t take my sunshine away.

Love,

Rin

Sousuke flipped through the rest of the binder. They weren’t as numerous as the letters he’d written Rin out of the depths of his despair, but there were a good number of e-mails Rin had written and never sent to Sousuke. Some were long and gave updates about Rin’s life, detailing how lonely he felt among his friends and how unfulfilling he’d found his relationships with boyfriends. Some were short and angry, begging Sousuke to tell him where he was. The worst were the melancholy ones that speculated whether or not Sousuke was still alive. Every last one of them were precious.

After carefully examining each of Rin’s e-mails, Sousuke finally reached the end. At the back of the binder was a page stuck to the back cover. It had beautiful cursive English letters that were flanked on all sides by hearts.

Our story was never one sided, it read, and now that the two characters are together, let’s put this book on the shelf so we can write the thrilling sequel together. I love you Sousuke. I always, always have and I always, always will.
There was noise out in the main room and the sound of an unfamiliar male voice, but Sousuke wasn’t paying attention. He was flipping back through their chronologically assembled correspondence and drinking in Rin’s words.

What craziness, seeing the Iwatobi kids and Rin again! As he looked around the room at old and familiar faces, Seijuro couldn’t help but smile so wide, he felt his face would crack. He’d recently made it to the Japanese national team and his life was saturated with chlorine. If only his family were a little less proud of him, he might have felt able to relax a little and pursue his other favorite hobby – girls – more. But as his parents were always assuring him, he had all the time in the world to chase girls but he wouldn’t be in peak physical shape forever. The ghost of a twinge in his shoulder agreed. Besides, the girl he really really wanted didn’t live in Japan at the moment, so he was fine waiting.

“Mikoshiba-san, I still can’t believe you made it to the national team!” Makoto gushed. “That’s really impressive!”

Seijuro smiled approvingly at Makoto. He’d always liked Makoto the most of the Iwatobi boys. He didn’t have the raw talent of Haru, but he was a hard worker and he was sweet as could be. He’d treated Gou really well, back in the day.

“Thanks, Tachibana-san,” Seijuro laughed. “It took a lot to get there and I was thrilled when the recruiter approached me. But I still have a long way to go. I’m on the national team but I’m far from the best. Hopefully Rin and Haru will join me, once they graduate.”

Makoto looked at Haru and gave him the sappiest, mushiest, proudest look imaginable. Seijuro’s eyes involuntarily widened as Makoto leaned over to give Haru a peck on the cheek. Rin had told Seijuro he was gay when they met up at New Year’s break Seijuro’s sophomore year of college. It had been kind of a weird experience for Seijuro, because he’d gotten the sense that Rin wanted his approval. He’d told him about the huge crush he’d had on Haru for a long time, but quickly followed it up with how happy he was that Makoto and Haru were finally in a relationship together. And then came the even longer confession about how much he was in love with Sousuke. Seijuro had no idea everyone was gay!

They were the first out gay kids Seijuro had known. They were definitely the only swimmers he knew to be gay. He was always happy to see people in love because that’s what he wished for himself, but it was new for him to see that love spring between two guys. Or maybe it wasn’t new, maybe he just hadn’t been paying enough attention.
“How is Momo?” Rin asked, drawing his attention away from Makoto and Haru. “The kid can’t pull himself away from his beetles long enough to text me back, it seems.”

Seijuro chuckled because he experienced the same thing.

“Oh you know, once pretty Michiko joined his entomology course, it’s became pretty impossible to get him to pay attention to anyone else! From what I can tell, he’s as enthusiastically happy about life as ever. More so now because he’s found a girl who loves beetles as much as he does!”

Rin smiled like the proud senpai he’d always be. Seijuro smiled at Rin like the proud senpai he’d always be.

One of the bedroom doors opened and Seijuro’s eyes flicked away from Rin towards the movement.

Sousuke.

They’d interacted rarely during Sousuke’s one year at Samezuka so what Seijuro knew of Sousuke came mostly from Momo, Rin, and Ai. It was really because of Sousuke that Rin felt compelled to come out to Seijuro and ask his advice, but it hadn’t mattered. By then Sousuke had been gone for several months. Rin had a reputation for being an overemotional cry baby, but Seijuro hadn’t ever witnessed it. Rin always kept himself composed in front of Seijuro. But that night, when Rin unburdened his heart about his missing friend, it had been the first time Seijuro had seen Rin break down.

Rin had told Seijuro he’d come back and that they were a couple. He’d gone to great lengths to explain Sousuke’s reasons and justify his actions. Again, like he needed Seijuro’s approval. Seijuro was trying to keep an open mind and give Sousuke the benefit of the doubt, but the fact remained that he’d left and Rin had suffered for it. From the little they’d interacted before, Seijuro had gotten a pretty dark vibe off the kid. Leaving and running away from his life only furthered that impression.

Seeing him again, after so long, Sousuke’s eyes had shot straight to Seijuro’s and his body had become rigid. Like a caged tiger ready to pounce at the slightest provocation. Seijuro had done nothing, but he felt like Sousuke would attack him if he said a word.

Seijuro’s impression wasn’t made better.
“Sousuke!” Rin cried, oblivious to the charged air as Sousuke and Seijuro sized each other up. “Did you like it?”

Sousuke’s eyes lingered on Seijuro for a fraction longer before he turned to Rin. With his attention refocused on Rin, the tension in his body evaporated and he gave an involuntary and completely sappy smile. He came to sit down beside Rin at the kotatsu and kissed him on the top of the head.

“It’s perfect,” he mumbled.

With that, Rin and Sousuke wandered into a world of their own and they were lost to the party. They may have been there physically, but the looks and the hand holding and the smiles made them completely oblivious to anyone else.

Seijuro softened a bit towards Sousuke. Clearly, the boy was in love. Well if appearances were correct and Sousuke loved Rin as much as it appeared, maybe Seijuro should hold off forming an opinion of Sousuke until he knew him better. Time would tell and with Rin back, he would be seeing a lot more of Rin and Sousuke.

“So Shigino-san and Matsuzaki-san,” Seijuro said, “tell me all about how you plan to save the world!”

Though he was having a lively conversation with Mikoshiba Seijuro, Kisumi’s full attention was focused on Tomo. How was he feeling now that he’d spent a full hour in the company of Rin and Sousuke? They weren’t overly disgusting with the affection, but at no point had they broken physical contact with each other and they looked at each other with eyes gooey with the first thrills of love.

If only everyone else would leave, he could ask Tomo. He’d put his arms around him and feel the blazing warmth of Tomo’s skin against his. Tomo was surprisingly warm.

Rin said something, distracting Seijuro’s attention away from Kisumi, allowing him a moment to look at Tomo. He was staring down at his hands and his eyebrows were pulled together as if in deep thought. A flood of affection and concern coursed through him. He’d been acting weird earlier, when they were together in Kisumi’s room. He was acting weird now. Seeing Sousuke being all lovey dovey with Rin must be too much for him. There hadn’t been enough time for Tomo to recover. As if he’d heard Kisumi’s thoughts, Tomo stood up and gave a very weak smile to the table at large.
“I think it’s time for me to head home,” Yasutomo announced. “Thank you very much for a lovely time.”

“Really Tomo?” Kisumi blurted. His voice was full of desperation. “You can stay here if you want to!”

Tomo shook his head and tried to keep smiling. “No, no, my mom wants me to go to the market with her tomorrow. She wants to go early.”

“It was nice meeting you,” said Rin. “Thanks for coming!”

“See you soon, Tomo!” said Makoto. Tomo smiled and gave him a small wave.

“Are you sure you want to go, Tomo?” Kisumi insisted. “It’s really no trouble for you to stay here.”

“Thanks but I really should be heading home,” Tomo said. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He left. Kisumi stared at the front door for a few seconds before following him out.

“Hey wait up,” Kisumi called, stopping Tomo on the stairs outside. Tomo lurched out of Kisumi’s grasp and didn’t turn towards him right away. Panic seized Kisumi.

He’d been trying his best to distract Tomo’s mind away from Sousuke, but apparently it hadn’t been enough. He still loved him and he must be hurting seeing Sousuke and Rin together.

“Everything alright?” Kisumi asked.

Tomo still wouldn’t look at him. Instead, he looked to the side and Kisumi could see tears glistening in his eyes.

There had only been one time a girl had broken up with Kisumi and Kisumi had the same lump in
his throat now as he did back then. Oh god, what had happened?

“Tomo?” Kisumi said weakly, his voice quavering under the pressure of trying to keep himself together.

Tomo finally faced him and Kisumi choked at the look on his face. He wasn’t crying, but he looked destroyed.

“You don’t have to leave,” Kisumi muttered, not really aware of what he was saying, “You can stay here with me. But if it’s too hard seeing Sousuke again, I understand.”

Tomo’s face broke into a smile that had no humor in it. He kept his tears back.

“Kisumi it’s not because of Sousuke that I can’t stay,” he said.

“Then what?”

Kisumi would never forget the look Tomo gave him. It was equal parts love and despair and it made Kisumi quake down to the core.

Tomo laughed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, as if to force the tears back where they belonged.

“I can’t do this,” Tomo said in a whisper.

“What?” Kisumi’s voice cracked over the single syllable like an egg being dropped. Oh god! Tomo was the best friend he’d truthfully ever had and he was going to leave Kisumi!

“We decided I can’t be your everything so I can’t be your everything. I can’t stay with you anymore.”

“Oh Tomo,” Kisumi reached out a hand again and Tomo backed away, out of reach. “Tomo, it doesn’t mean anything.”
“But it does.” Tomo countered. “I…I can’t…”

His voice trailed off as he hung his head. He took a few ragged breaths and gathered himself. When he looked back up, he wore a smile that was serene and sad and beautiful.

“I’m happy for Sousuke and Rin,” he explained. “How can anyone see them and not be happy for them? But it breaks my heart too because I want what they have, Kisumi. I want to kiss someone and have them kiss me back like that. I want to hold someone’s hand and have them squeeze it back. And if I continue to stay with you like we’ve been doing, touching you like we’ve been doing, the more I’m going to want you for the other things. I just…I just can’t do it anymore, Kisumi. I love you and I know you love me. But you won’t be my everything and we have to quite pretending that you will. We have to be friends and not the quasi-lovers we’ve been playing at.”

Tomo said something else, but Kisumi didn’t hear. Tomo left, but Kisumi was frozen.

Tomo wiped his eyes as he left the apartment that had been essentially his home for the past few weeks. His heart ached and it took all his will power to keep his feet going forward and not run back to Kisumi. But he felt Ichiro with him, encouraging him to put one foot in front of the other.

He was doing the right thing.

Ichiro’s spirit heard the wish of Tomo’s heart. While he’d sat and watched Rin and Sousuke and Haru and Makoto, the internal wish grew in pitch until it drowned out everything else.

He wanted his own version of what they had. He wanted to find someone who could be his everything.

And that someone just wasn’t Kisumi.

Distressed and giddy, Tomo stumbled to the train station. Somehow, he managed to find the right train and board without any mishaps. He stood by the door opposite the one he’d entered.
He felt Ichiro with him and his anxiety ebbed away. He’d be fine. He needed a bit of distance from Kisumi, but they’d work it out. Maybe before this month he would have been worried that a fight would result in the end of their friendship, but Kisumi was his best friend. He was the best friend he’d ever had and he believed that with his whole heart.

He and Kisumi would be fine. They’d help each other find the people who could be their everything. They’d find a middle ground to love each other safely from.

The train rumbled on and stopped at the next station.

Tomo looked out the window and saw the people in the opposite car. The world was full of people, after all. It had felt like chance that Kisumi had come into Tomo’s life; he’d found him when he most needed him.

The train went onto the next station.

13.3 million people lived in Tokyo. On all sides, Tomo was surrounded with literal millions of hearts. Not all of them were gay male hearts, but enough were. If Tomo’s heart could have found Kisumi among the millions of hearts, it would find one that could complete it. He was capable of great love, Kisumi proved it.

Ichiro wanted to climb mountains. Tomo wanted to find the heart whose shape fit his.

The train pulled into the next station and came to a halt.

Kisumi and Tomo would both be alright.

People packed in and Tomo was pushed closer to the glass. He looked out and watched as the train on the opposite platform glided to a halt across from him.

That train was less crowded, but there was one person in the car standing up. He was holding onto the bar above his head and looking down at his phone. Like Tomo, he was facing the doors that weren’t in use. His clothes were prim, his body slender and elegant. His gray hair, even craned over his phone, was shaggy and stylish.
Transfixed and drunk off emotions, Tomo willed the boy to look up, to see what he looked like. To his everlasting delight, it worked.

Sensing he was being watched, the boy turned a pair of big blue eyes up from his phone. They met Tomo’s.

He was beautiful. He was beautiful in a way that sucked the oxygen out of the train and burned Tomo’s face. He was short and so unlike anyone before, but he was stunning. His eyes were kind and he had an adorable air to him. Maybe Tomo’s reaction was a result of the charged emotions from Kisumi and Ichiro’s spirit, but for just that brief moment, his whole soul belonged to the boy on the train.

Seeing Tomo gawking, the beautiful boy curled his pretty thin lips into a smile that pierced Tomo’s heart. Unconsciously, Tomo smiled back.

And just like that, the moment vanished as the trains went their opposite directions.

Later that night, Tomo would use the image of that boy with his beautiful smile and his big blue eyes as fodder for self pleasure. Spending so many nights with Kisumi had made it difficult to indulge and he’d never thought about a complete stranger like this before. But there had been something special about the boy.

Besides, it wasn’t like he’d ever see him again. Masturbating to the image of him was more a celebration that yes, Yasutomo could find love in a stranger if only for a night. If he could do that, he could certainly find love.

After his shower and tending to the healing stab wound, Sousuke opened the door to their room later that night to find Rin sitting on the bed, leafing through the binder with Sousuke’s letters and Rin’s e-mails. Sousuke sensed Rin’s melancholy right away.

“What’s wrong, Rin?” Sousuke asked as he padded over across the room in nothing but a towel.

Rin gave a weak laugh and wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. God, he was so beautiful when he was being tragic.
“Nothing, nothing, it’s just,” Rin looked back down at the open binder, “I was just thinking.”

Sousuke sat down on the bed behind Rin and hooked a finger around the strap of his tank top. He tugged it down and kissed Rin’s bare shoulder.

“What is it my love?” Sousuke purred against Rin’s skin. “Didn’t you have a nice time catching up with Ai and Seijuro?”

“Of course I did,” Rin sighed. “I was just looking over these letters though. I can’t help thinking how close I was to losing you. You make me so happy and I love you so much. What if you’d left me…”

Rather than allow Rin to wallow in what ifs, Sousuke brushed a feather light kiss against Rin’s cheek, where the tears had fallen. Smiling, he did the same thing to the other side. Then he pulled back and tucked Rin’s hair behind his ear and kissed the shell of it.

“Stay here a second,” he whispered, sending a delightful shiver down Rin’s spine.

What an idiot Rin was, crying over a past that had never happened! Why couldn’t he have done anything else but look at their letters while Sousuke had taken a shower? Rin berated himself as he watched Sousuke cross the room. Rin really needed to work on his self control.

He watched as Sousuke bent down at his desk and began rummaging through a desk drawer. He emerged a minute later, clutching a pile of papers. Sousuke crossed the room and dropped the papers into Rin’s lap.

“Our story wouldn’t be complete without these,” he said. Rin picked up one of the papers and began to read.

So, yeah… cheer up! You always look so grumpy… you should smile sometimes! Whenever we were competing over stuff… I think you looked really good then! Well, it’s nothing compared to me, of
Hey, Sousuke…the ocean connects the world together. So you’re over here with me too, Sousuke. That’s what I think whenever I look at the sea. It’s the same for you, right? You don’t have to tell me, I know. But… even though we’re connected…with your body, Sousuke… it’s impossible for you to swim all the way across to Australia!

Even if we don’t meet in person, when I close my eyes, you are always there in front of me! You’re always in my heart! You’re my sunshine! It’s in your heart too, right? The sunshine made up of our memories! Our friendship will never change no matter where we are! It’s our ETERNAL SHINING MEMORY that will shine forever! So please, don’t die! Don’t you dare die, Sousuke!

“Oh my god, you kept these!?”

Sousuke laughed and slid behind Rin, wrapping his arms around Rin’s waist.

“Of course I did,” Sousuke replied. “I read all of your letters a thousand times at least!”

Vexed, Rin tried to show his annoyance by escaping, but that only made Sousuke laugh and hold him tighter. After a brief tussle, Rin was on his back and Sousuke had him pinned down by the wrists. Rin scowled up at Sousuke, who smiled at him super smugly. But the smile didn’t last long.

“You’ve always been in my heart too, Rin,” he said quietly. “I’ve always been yours. You told me, all those years ago not to die. So I didn’t die. I know I’ve done stupid and dangerous things,” Rin’s eyes flicked down to the bandage on his torso, “but because of you I didn’t die.”

Rin stopped struggling and drank in the serious, stern face hovering above him. Encouraged, Sousuke dipped his head down and kissed Rin tenderly.

“When I close my eyes, you’re always there in front of me,” Sousuke quoted. “With you by my side and our hearts together, let’s put these worries in the binder and close the book on the past, yeah? I don’t want you to worry about me dying anymore because, Rin, you give me the greatest reason to live. And we aren’t going to leave each other again. Now, let’s think about our future, together.”

With what inevitably followed, neither Rin nor Sousuke lasted long. They were both too happy to be reunited. When they were done they lay together naked. In the imperfect darkness, Sousuke’s hand glided over the landscape of Rin’s body. When he caressed Rin’s butt, Rin buried his head in Sousuke’s chest.
“I kept your letters too,” Rin blurted.

“Hmm?” Sousuke hummed, too euphoric to pay much attention to the concerns of the world.

“The letters you sent me in middle school,” Rin explained. “They’re at my mom’s house. I’ll get them at New Years so they can be with yours.”

Sousuke mustered energy for round two. After that orgasm, they both fell asleep straight away.

Kisumi had done a good job keeping himself together after Tomo left, but as Kisumi lay in bed that night, he felt fully the chasm that Tomo had left behind. Why did Kisumi feel like he had been broken up with? Did he…was he in love with Tomo after all?

Had he lost Tomo because he’d not wanted to have sex?

Was Tomo….gone?

Hi Gou,

I can report back that your brother and Sousuke are both safe and sound in Japan. I couldn’t believe it at first when you said they were together, but goodness gracious, are they a couple! So gooey and lovey! Makes me jealous, to be honest :D

I gotta thank you for reaching out to me. I know I wasn’t the first person on your list to help find those two idiots, but it was such a nice surprise to hear from you. It had been so long.

I’m going to be pretty forward for a guy who hasn’t seen you in three years. I was really happy when you e-mailed me because, this will come as a shock, I had a huge crush on you in high school. I don’t hold out much hope now, but will you let me take you out when you are next in Japan? It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’ve not met your equal since high school. Seeing how happy your
brother is with Sousuke, it made me a bit sentimental and jealous. I want to find a girl I can make that happy and I’ve always held out hope that maybe, one day, the person I made happy would be you. So what do you say? Will you go out with me?

Waiting anxiously for your reply,

Seijuro

Ai was pacing up and down his tiny apartment, trying to calm himself down. He’d been working himself up so much about seeing Rin again, but Rin and Sousuke hadn’t been the highlight of the night. Who was that guy from the train? It was like the universe had taken the mental picture he’d formed of his perfect mate and conjured it up for just that train ride.

Ai threw himself down in his bed, imagining what it would be like to have that guy with him. No doubt he would be an excellent boyfriend. He had a very kind face and his eyes, while being beautiful, were also kind of sad. Feeling only slightly embarrassed, Ai reached his hand down his boxers and closed his eyes.

That boy was probably smart. His smile was gorgeous so he laughed probably. He looked like he might like the outdoors, like hiking or mountain climbing.

Ai smiled as he sunk deeper into the pleasure and the fantasy.

He was better at imaginary relationships than real ones and the train guy, he was a most excellent fantasy lover.

Too bad Ai the chances of actually meeting train guy were one in a million.

Haru could hear Makoto’s light snoring. He always fell asleep after sex. Haru usually did too, but not tonight.
The light from the aquarium cast strange shadows on the wall and made Haru’s skin glow blue. He squeezed his eyes and felt the tears trail down his cheeks.

Today had been such a rare and lovely day. Haru had really been looking forward to having sex with Makoto. In his mind, he’d imagined Makoto kissing him passionately and long. Like a kiss Rin and Sousuke would share.

It was never like that with Makoto though. If Haru wanted something, he had to do it. It was nice and he loved how Makoto’s caring and considerate nature came out during sex. But there was a limit.

They’d been physically intimate for years and so far, Haru hadn’t sensed the same whirlwind of feeling in Makoto as Haru felt for Makoto when they were having sex. Makoto had always been passive and only ever did what Haru asked him to do. He never initiated anything himself.

Elsewhere in the apartment, Haru could hear the banging of a headboard. There was no lack of passion with Rin and Sousuke. They were so noisy.

A dark thought that Haru hadn’t allowed himself to think crawled its way out of the depths of Haru’s mind.

Did…did Makoto want to have sex with Haru?

Was Makoto just humoring Haru?

Did he want to be lovers?

Chapter End Notes

Looooonnnng over due, but I hope everyone enjoys! I'm very busy and it's beautiful outside, so I don't know when the next update will come. I haven't forgotten it though and I'm excited to have certain characters meet :) Thanks to all my lovely readers who have waited so long!!!!! Feel free to look me up/chat me up on tumblr :D

http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/

Peace!
The Nakamura Scholarship

Chapter Summary

Sousuke tries a new activity, Kisumi and Yasutomo find out who won the prestigious Nakamura Scholarship, there is dancing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sousuke was trying his best to hold it together until he got home to Rin, but he was struggling. He wanted desperately to be alone to process the outcome of the afternoon, but a million people must be between him and home. He blinked as he looked up to the metro’s ceiling and it surprised him how close he was to breaking down in tears. God, he’d become so weak. He didn’t want to be alone. He desperately, desperately wanted to see Rin and to tell him what had happened.

Why wouldn’t the fucking train go faster? Sousuke needed to be home and he needed to be home now.

The last four hours was beginning to set in and his composure was starting to crack.

Sousuke needed Rin.

Rin scrunched his nose at his math homework, willing the problem to solve itself. Numerical analysis shouldn’t be giving him any issues, but practice had been tough that morning and Rin was tired. Maybe he should take a nap and retry his homework later. Rin sighed and leaned back in the desk’s chair. No, that wasn’t a good plan. Sousuke would be home soon and he wanted to be free so they could do something. Sex, for sure, but probably something else too. Rin smiled up at the ceiling then turned back to work. Yeah, he wanted to be available for Sousuke so he’d power through.

Twenty minutes later, the door to their room opened and Rin’s heart lurched. With a big smile, he turned away from his homework prepared to greet his lover with enthusiasm. But seeing Sousuke, he froze.

His face was contorted in an expression completely foreign to Rin and he looked terrified.
“Everything all right, big guy?”

Sousuke stared at Rin for a full minute before coming in and closing the door behind him. With growing alarm, Rin watched as Sousuke padded across the room, then collapsed to his knees right in front of Rin. He hugged Rin around his knees and buried his face between Rin’s knees.

“Sousuke what’s wrong?”

For a painfully long time, Sousuke said nothing. He just kept squeezing Rin’s legs like Rin was the only thing anchoring him to reality. Not knowing what else to do, Rin ran his hands through Sousuke’s thick hair and tried his best not to panic.

It must have been fifteen minutes later that Sousuke finally lifted his head up from Rin’s legs and turned his face towards Rin. In Australia as a middle school student, Rin had read part of the *Iliad* in English class. He’d always quite liked Helen of Troy, who was so beautiful she set off a thousand ships. It had always amused Rin to think that someone was as beautiful as all that, but how realistic could that be? Little did he know that his best friend would grow into the epitome of masculine beauty. And the way Sousuke looked at him now, why Rin knew he’d wage wars for those smoldering eyes, the ghost of a smile, the intensity of every angle he possessed.

Did Sousuke have any idea how divinely beautiful he actually was?

He ran his hand through Souske’s hair, down his face, relishing the man who was his while willing him to divulge whatever new torment plagued his soul.

“Rin,” Sousuke’s voice was soft and strained.

“How did your rowing class go?” Rin asked. “Was it that awful? If you hated it that much, you don’t have to do it anymore. You tried and that’s what matters, yeah?”

Sousuke’s beautiful lips curled into a real smile.

“It wasn’t awful,” he said. “It was…Rin.”
Sousuke buried his face in Rin’s lap, his arms still tight around Rin’s legs.

“Rin, I haven’t…”

He looked up again and he was beaming.

“I’m not broken, Rin.”

Rin exhaled. What a relief! For a few weeks now, Sousuke had been fretting about this lesson and making all kinds of excuses as to why he shouldn’t do it. His chief justification being that his shoulder wouldn’t be able to handle the new motion.

“You were right,” Sousuke continued as he rest his chin on Rin’s knee. “Rowing doesn’t use the same motions with the shoulders and I can row on starboard side so I don’t have to pull with the bad one. I can do this! My legs…the instructor said I was a natural!”

Smiling, Rin bent down to kiss the top of Sousuke’s head.

“I’m so happy to hear it, sweet heart!”

When Rin was sitting upright again, Sousuke released Rin’s legs and jumped up to his feet.

“I need to write,” he was saying as he snatched his laptop up from the desk. They had to share the desk, but it hadn’t caused any issues yet. “You know the best part about butterfly is feeling like you’re soaring over the water. At least that’s how it was for me.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Rin agreed. At his heart, Sousuke was a water child, just like Haru, just like Rin. It was such a blessing being with someone who understood that connection, that joy that only water can give.

“I thought I’d lost it forever, that feeling of soaring. But that’s what you are doing with rowing. Flying. Oh Rin!”

Here, he paused, leaned down, and kissed Rin sloppily on the mouth. When he pulled away, he
looked ecstatic. Since their reunion, Rin had seen Sousuke happy on a number of occasions, but not like this. He knew he made Sousuke happy, and he could tell that all those other smiles had been the product of Rin’s words or actions. But this, this was Sousuke bursting with joy because of himself, Rin had little to do with it. Sousuke was happy for his own sake.

A happy, Sousuke-generated smile was a million times better than one Rin had inspired. A tear rolled down Rin’s cheek. Even as kids, Sousuke had had trouble finding happiness for himself.

Caught up in his own joy, Sousuke catapulted onto the bed and began furiously typing on his laptop. Rin turned back to the final math problem and tried to finish his homework, but Sousuke was like a sun that he couldn’t turn away from. After a few minutes he crawled into bed and hugged Sousuke around his back. Sousuke stopped typing and twisted around so Rin was hugging his chest. He stroked Rin’s hair and Rin felt like his face might crack from smiling.

“I signed up for a novice team,” Sousuke said. “I’ll have practices four days a week starting next week. It’s all in the legs, really. I barely have to use my shoulder at all. I’m really not broken, Rin!”

“You never were, big guy. I’m so happy for you! I love you so much!”

“I love you more, Rin-Rin!”

Kisumi had been staring at the subject line of the e-mail for a solid five minutes and he still hadn’t worked up the courage to open it.

_Nakamura Scholarship Announcement_, it read.

This scholarship could make life a lot easier and better for Kisumi. He had tried to act like he wasn’t thirsty for that scholarship, because he knew Yasutomo was stretched thinner than he was financially. That didn’t stop him from checking his e-mail obsessively over the last five days. And here it was, the long awaited e-mail. Would it be better to call Yasutomo and they could open it together?

No. That was a bad idea.

Things weren’t good with Yasutomo and it was Kisumi’s fault. Whenever they were studying
together, his mind went into overdrive, wondering if he had fallen in love with his best friend or if he just really, really liked him. Platonically. If it was just platonic, then why had it felt so right, so wonderful when they’d been spending each night together? But if it was romantic and sexual, why did Kisumi have such a gut wrenching sense of wrong when they’d kissed? It was all so confusing and overwhelming. When he had seen Yasutomo, he could have killed himself for being the most awkward person in the universe because he had no clue how he should act. Maybe Yasutomo could be his everything? Maybe he couldn’t? Yasutomo had made it clear that he couldn’t be physical as they had been unless they were going to go further, be more. Yasutomo didn’t deserve being jerked around while Kisumi figured things out.

Kisumi had been sort of avoiding Yasutomo. It wasn’t fair for him to force himself on Yasutomo until he figured out what he wanted. But in the space they’d been giving each other hadn’t made things clearer.

Best to open the e-mail alone. Before he did so, he silently wished both him and Yasutomo luck. It would be really something if either of them won.

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*We received an overwhelming number of applicants, the e-mail read, so this was an exceptionally difficult year for us to make our selection. After a long debate, the scholarship committee has selected Matsuzaki Yasutomo as the recipient of the prestigious scholarship. Congratulations to Matsuzaki Yasutomo and thank you to all the applicants who made this decision such a difficult one.*

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Yasutomo had to read the e-mail a second, then a third time.

He won?

“Mom,” he called. She stepped out from the kitchen and into the living room.

“Yes, Tomo?”

“Here,” he flipped his computer around so she could see.

It was exactly 47 seconds before his mother’s whole face lit up. She flung her dish towel onto the kotatsu and wrapped her son into a bone crushing hug. In another 23 seconds, she was weeping with joy.

“Oh I’m so proud of you,” she blubbered. “You’ve always been such a smart boy and look at this! With this scholarship, you are sure to get into medical school!”
Tomo smiled into her shoulder. Since Ichiro had died, his mother had had precious little to celebrate in terms of her sons. The money was going to help tremendously, maybe even make it possible for Tomo to move closer to his university and his friends. But beyond the money and the boost to his medical school application this scholarship was sure to bring, he was glad to have won this for her and his father.

She released him and wiped away some tears.

“Oh, let’s go out for a celebratory dinner!” she declared. “I’ll call your father to meet us at that nice French place we took you to for your birthday!”

“Ma, that place is too expensive! It’s not such a big deal!” Really, that restaurant was delicious but it was an indulgence with which he didn’t want to obligate his parents.

“It is a big deal!” his mother insisted as she stood up and picked up her dishtowel. “I’m going to go call your father right now. Maybe Mitsuki will answer his phone and meet us there. How about your friend Kisumi? Why don’t you call him too!”

“No!” Yasutomo blurted. His mother’s smile fell a fraction of an inch. Her expression made him feel like he’d just slapped a kitten.

“Kisumi applied for the scholarship too,” Tomo explained. “I don’t know if he’s read the e-mail yet, but I don’t want to rub it in his face.”

It was half the truth. The other half was that he’d destroyed his friendship with Kisumi forever and now they felt like strangers. Sure, Yasutomo was the one who had said they couldn’t be doing what they’d been doing, but it didn’t stop him from missing Kisumi each and every night. That silver haired boy from the subway had been a distraction for one night, but his pretty face had already passed from Yasutomo’s memory. Had Tomo been an egotistical ass for thinking there was only one interpretation for the way he and Kisumi had started being with each other? Had he destroyed the best relationship he’d ever had with a non-family member, so much so that Kisumi could barely look at him anymore, because he was so conceited? His mother, however, only got half the truth and she nodded sympathetically.

“Well what about your friend Sousuke?” his mother asked. Yasutomo smiled.
“Ah, he can’t be pried away from his boyfriend ma, remember I was telling you about them?”

His mother smiled and put a hand on Tomo’s shoulder.

“Such a beautiful story,” she sighed. Tomo had told his mother all that he knew of Rin and Sousuke’s long and complicated relationship and she’d lapped it up. She read too many romance novels not to be delighted with them.

“Let’s keep it to family, mom. Maybe Mitsuki will pick up his phone.”

She smiled and he saw her eyes flick up to Ichiro’s picture.

“Alright dear, maybe Mitsuki will pick up his phone.”

When she left, Yasutomo followed his mother’s example and looked up at Ichiro’s picture. Tomo had had years to rebuild his life around the Ichiro-shaped hole in his heart, but just then he felt the missing part more keenly than he had in a very long time. Ichiro had always been the best person to tell good news to.

Mitsuki did not pick up his phone, as usual, and so they went out to dinner without him. The meal was fabulous, but Tomo could tell that his parents’ felt the absence of the brother left behind. None of them had heard from him in a few months and when his mother had called earlier, there was a message that told them the line had been disconnected. His parents, bless their hearts, tried to keep up the stream of happy chatter, but Tomo knew they were thinking about Mitsuki. That was fine, Mitsuki could claim his parents’ attention. Tomo needed to think about what to do about Kisumi, specifically in regards to the scholarship. While they ate, he half listened and participated in the conversation at hand while he thought up strategies. He didn’t want Kisumi to think he was bragging or he thought he was better than him, so he couldn’t just outright tell him about the scholarship. But surely he’d read the e-mail by now.

During dinner, Tomo excused himself to go to the bathroom and began a total of three text messages to Kisumi, but he deleted them all. During dessert, his pocket buzzed and as discretely as he could, Tomo took out his phone. The message was from Sousuke:

Yasutomo, congrats on the scholarship! Come over to our apartment later and plan on staying over tonight, that’s what Kisumi said.
Relieved and amused for more than a monosyllable, Yasutomo smiled and typed a reply.

“Mom, dad, if it’s alright with you, I’m going to go out tonight. I’ll come home to get ready, but I’ll probably come back in the morning.”

Mitsuki wasn’t going to ruin this night for him.

“Rin-senpai, is it really okay that I’m here?” Ai asked for the twelfth time that night.

Rin raised an eyebrow at Ai and Ai internally kicked himself. Rin hadn’t been his senpai in years, but it had still been quite difficult for him to kick the habit. ‘Come on Nitori’, he scolded himself, ‘get your act together!’ Recognizing Ai’s squirming, Rin only smirked.

“The more the merrier,” Rin’s friend and roommate Kisumi growled. In the hour since he’d arrived at Rin’s apartment, Kisumi had transformed the living room with balloons and a big congratulations sign.

“He applied for the scholarship too,” Rin whispered when Kisumi had stalked off to buy champagne. “I think he’s trying to show how much he doesn’t care that he didn’t win.”

“No, that’s not it,” Sousuke said but Kisumi had returned before he could explain himself.

Now that everything was all set, Kisumi was pacing nervously by the door, waiting for a knock that announced his friend Yasutomo. Ai hadn’t met this Yasutomo yet, but he must be someone incredibly special to Kisumi for him to go through all this trouble. Again while Kisumi had been gone, Rin had speculated that they were maybe secretly dating, but Sousuke again squashed that thought and this time refused to explain himself. Now they were just awkwardly sitting there, waiting for the guest of honor to arrive.

“How do you like living in Tokyo, Nitori?” Makoto asked. He really hadn’t changed much since their high school days. Ai hadn’t known him very well back then, but he’d always seemed so big and friendly. Now, he was smiling warmly at Ai like he was very interested to hear Ai’s response.

“It’s really great to be speaking Japanese again,” Ai gushed. “And it’s a very nice thing that I have so many old friends near me again.” He looked at Rin and Sousuke and smiled at both of them. He left
out the jarring reverse culture shock and the feeling rootless because he’d been in Canada for so long. And the part where he didn’t know if he’d really come home because he didn’t know if Japan was home anymore. He also left out the part about how much he’d liked being a cute novelty with the guys in Canada and the crushing hopelessness that he’d ever stand out in Japan, where he was just another gay kid in a sea of gay kids. He left out how lonely he was by himself in his tiny, tiny little apartment. He left out how ecstatic he’d been to receive the invitation from Rin and Sousuke because he didn’t have any other friends here. Even for him, five straight nights spent with the memory of that pretty boy in the subway and the guys in his smutty magazines was a bit depressing.

“Will Haru be joining us?” he asked Makoto.

Makoto had always been like a great golden retriever and it was upsetting to see the shadow that passed over Makoto’s face at Ai’s question.

“He’s very busy,” Makoto said. “I called to see if he would be joining us tonight, but he said he has to stay late at his internship. I’ll probably come back when he gets off.”

There was a knock at the door and Kisumi flew to the door and flung it open.

“Tomo!” Kisumi cried, “Congrats!”

The whole way to Kisumi’s apartment, Yasutomo had been dreading how Kisumi was going to react to the news. He’d been standing outside the door for a good fifteen minutes, building up his courage to finally knock. But when Kisumi answered the door, Yasutomo realized there hadn’t been anything to fear. He knew Kisumi well enough by now to see that the smile was genuine.

For a second they stood there, looking at each other, then Kisumi opened his arms. Without hesitating or even thinking about how he’d recently told Kisumi they couldn’t be physically close anymore, Tomo pounced on top of Kisumi.

Things had been so awkward and weird between them but as Kisumi twirled him around and hugged him, it felt like they were shedding all those layers, leaving only the pure truth of what they were. They were best friends and they did love each other. They were still figuring out how exactly, but they loved each other.

“Congrats,” Kisumi whispered in Tomo’s ear when he set him down. “I’m glad one of us won and you deserve it!”
Tomo smiled into Kisumi’s shoulder and hugged him hard. They backed away from each other and Tomo took in the rest of the room.

At the kotatsu sat the boy from the train, no doubt about it.

Rin elbowed Sousuke lightly in the ribs and Sousuke answered him with a barely audible grunt. Yeah he was seeing this. How could he not? For a full ten seconds, Nitori and Yasutomo had been gaping at each other, each blushing a ferocious shade that Sousuke had never seen on either before. Did they know each other? Sousuke couldn’t imagine that they did, Nitori had just returned to Japan after a lengthy stay in Canada and Yasutomo, well Sousuke hadn’t gotten the impression that he knew tons of people generally. The only other explanation for this reaction was attraction and that made Sousuke smile. He hadn’t seen Nitori in love before but from how Rin described him, this reaction seemed to fit. But Yasutomo…Sousuke had been on the receiving end of Yasutomo’s attraction and he hadn’t acted anything like this. He’d been so cool and collected, Sousuke hadn’t even noticed until Yasutomo had spelled it out for him. Kisumi seemed completely oblivious, he had an arm draped around Yasutomo’s shoulder and he was too busy chattering away about their plans for the night to notice. Rather than let this awkward pause stretch on any longer, Sousuke thought it was in everyone’s best interest that he intervened.

“Congratulations Yasutomo,” he said a bit louder than necessary. “Kisumi told us all about the scholarship. It’s quite an honor.”

Yasutomo turned away from Nitori and blinked a few times at Sousuke.

“Yes,” he said quietly, his eyes still on Ai, “Thank you so much.”

Eager to help, Rin jumped in: “Right, Yasutomo, you left before Nitori came to my homecoming party a few weeks ago. This is my best friend from Samezuka and our teammate on the swim team, Nitori Aiichiro,” Rin added, “Ai, this is Matsuzaki Yasutomo, he’s…”

Nitori jumped up to his feet.

“I’m Nitori Aiichiro,” Ai shouted, the blush growing deeper, “but most people call me Ai so please call me that too. Pleased to make your acquaintance!”

He bowed deeply at Yasutomo, who was unaware of how abnormal it was for Nitori to tell a stranger to call him Ai. Sousuke had lost contact with Nitori after high school, because he’d cut off contact with everyone, but even in high school he’d never called Nitori Ai. Nitori had always been such a stickler for those kinds of things. He darted a quick side-glance at Rin and was delighted by the look of complete, almost angry confusion he was giving Nitori.

“I’m, ah, hmmm…” Yasutomo stuttered, surprising Sousuke. Really? E tu, Tomo? What the hell!? “Pleased to meet you Ai, I’m Matsuzaki Yasutomo, like Rin said. But people call me Tomo, so you can too…if you want.”
Nitori snapped up straight and burst into a great big smile, which Yasutomo mirrored. For a few more seconds, they smiled at each other like there was no one else in the room. Of course they weren’t alone and Kisumi was always greedy for Yasutomo’s attention. He slung his arm around Yasutomo’s shoulders, breaking the spell.

“Come on Tomo,” he said. “I think it’s time for some champagne!”

“Oh brother,” Rin muttered under his breath, in English. Sousuke chuckled at his sour face. Kisumi had made them all swear they’d go out dancing with him and Yasutomo tonight. Dancing was alright, Rin certainly seemed to enjoy it, but Sousuke had a hunch that this evening was going to be a lot more entertaining than he’d anticipated before Nitori and Yasutomo had met.

‘Don’t panic’, Kisumi told himself as he lifted his champagne flute up to his lips. ‘They just met, it probably doesn’t mean anything.’

Nitori had been a painfully obvious puppy and since they’d laid eyes on each other, he’d been looking at Tomo as if he were the most incredible person in the universe. An opinion Kisumi generally shared. That was fine, that was okay. Kisumi wasn’t attracted to guys, after all. Just because he’d never seen anyone else mirror this sentiment didn’t mean that Tomo was incapable of attracting guys. Kisumi’s interactions with Nitori had been pretty limited, but with the added element of Tomo, Kisumi was having a hard time not hating Nitori.

What really stung wasn’t the way Nitori was looking at Tomo, it was the covert glances and the tiny little smiles Tomo was giving Nitori. The blush on his cheeks probably had nothing to do with the champagne. How could Tomo go from Sousuke to Nitori!? Nitori was small and a bit too perky. Maybe his face was cute, but Kisumi couldn’t really see what the big deal was. Sousuke at least radiated a dark and feral sexuality that had its effect on everyone. Kisumi understood that. Maybe in a dark and purposefully unexplored region of himself, he might understand why people would want to be the prey to Sousuke’s predator. Hell, Kisumi understood the attraction guys might have to all his friends: Makoto was a big, loveable golden retriever who anyone would want to cuddle with, Rin was a vixen and could probably bring anyone to their knees, Haru was very pretty and no doubt was a kinky son of a bitch just below that cool and collected surface of his. Tomo was the greatest person ever. But Nitori? What was so great about Nitori!?

‘Stop,’ Kisumi commanded himself. He forced a laugh at some punchline to a joke Rin had told. ‘Just stop.’

He had no right to be jealous

“Alright, I think it’s time to go dancing!” Kisumi declared. Makoto could tell he was already half way drunk. Everyone began to get up, but Makoto remained seated at the kotatsu. Rin noticed.

“Come on, Makoto,” he giggled (he too was a bit tipsy, though he’d only had two drinks. Sousuke had been teasing him about being the biggest light weight all night long).

Makoto smiled at him.

“That’s alright, you guys go on ahead.” He looked to his bedroom door and felt the emptiness of
space on the other side. “I think I’ll clean up and wait for Haru to get home.”

Rin scowled.

“Oh come on!” he insisted. “After practice this morning, Haru said he had an errand to run after work and he wouldn’t be back until after midnight.”

“Oh.” Makoto said quietly. This was news to him,

“It’s not going to do you any good moping around,” Kisumi added, “and tonight we are celebrating Yasutomo! Come out for a little bit at least, then you can come home to Haru.”

Makoto frowned. They were right; he knew that. If he stayed in, he would feel incredibly lonely and he’d been feeling lonely all week. He could go for a little bit and come back before Haru got home. Maybe he could pick up some fresh mackerel on his way back so that Haru could have it for breakfast tomorrow morning.

His decision made, Makoto stood up.

“Give me a sec,” he said as he darted into his empty bedroom. He grabbed his phone and typed out a quick message to Haru:

Going out with the guys, text me on your way home and I’ll come back to be with you. Love you!

Feeling better, Makoto slid his phone in his back pocket and left with everyone else a few minutes later. The forgotten detritus of their get together littered the kotatsu. It wasn’t until they were already half way to the bar that Makoto remembered that they shouldn’t have left so quickly, that Haru probably wasn’t going to like coming home to the mess.

‘I’ll leave at 11:30,’ he promised himself, and Haru. ‘If I leave by then, I will have enough time to pick everything up.’

Ai was lagging behind their procession to the Bulge on purpose, so he could better observe Tomo. It wasn’t often that reality presented Ai with better guys than the ones he created in his fantasies, but Tomo…he was kind of amazing. For the past two hours, he’d been listening to Tomo’s friends gush about his accomplishments and he’d delighted in watching the ebb and flow of Tomo’s blush as he received each new wave of praise.

Ai had learned a lot. First, Tomo was studying to be a doctor and he was obviously doing a pretty bang up job of it. Second, the scholarship would give Tomo the financial flexibility to move out of his parents’ house, which was quite far from campus. Third, and this had obviously been news to Rin and Makoto as well, Tomo was really grateful that he had won the scholarship for his parents because his oldest brother had died when he was in middle school and he hadn’t seen his parents so happy since Ichiro’s death.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear about your brother, Yasutomo,” Makoto had said. “I had no idea!”
The mix of emotions in Yasutomo’s return smile…it had done things to Ai.

“Thank you, Makoto. I don’t tell many people about Ichiro. Sorry, my parents and I were just talking about him at dinner so he’s on my mind. Anyways, he died a long time ago. But you know, he’s been dead for so long but I don’t think he’s ever stopped being our older brother. He died climbing Mt. Everest, not of some long drawn out disease or a car accident. I think because of how he died, it’s easier to think of his spirit still being on that mountain. I know I still feel it and I try to live by the example he gave me. I know my brother Matsuzuki feels his spirit even more than I do.”

His answer revealed a way of thinking that appealed to Ai very much. But his answer came at the cost of that wonderful smile. It disappeared behind a shadow that Ai wished with all his heart and soul to understand, then banish. But Tomo didn’t elaborate. Kisumi came to his rescue by changing the subject.

While they’d drank, Tomo had steered the conversation to Ai, which had been really exciting. Not that there was too much exciting information to tell, but it was exciting that this beautiful, intelligent, kind guy was listening with great interest about Ai’s rather humdrum life. Tomo asked about his now finished swimming career and he asked about living in Canada. It had been particularly entertaining to give an English demonstration to everyone and to watch him scrunch up his nose when his English comprehension abilities failed him.

“Ai, you really learned a lot!” Rin gushed, in English.

Sousuke laughed and kissed Rin on the cheek. “Yeah, he might be better at English than you are, Rin-Rin.”

Rin scowled and jabbed Sousuke hard in the ribs.

“My English is wonderful!” Rin pouted, his accent cracking.

The one unclear thing about Tomo that Ai was trying to figure out on their way to the Bulge was what the status on his relationship with Kisumi was. All night, they’d found ways to touch each other. There was the hug, which was the best real life example of a Studio Ghibli hug that Ai had ever seen. And then Tomo’s hand on Kisumi’s shoulder when he got up to go to the bathroom. And the arm slung around Tomo’s shoulders as they were walking now. Sousuke and Rin were like that, always touching, but it was very clear that they were in a relationship and that their relationship involved a ton of sex.

Rin was a dancer and the moment they arrived at the Bulge, he dragged all the gay boys out on the dance floor, leaving Kisumi, the lone heterosexual, to procure drinks.

“Thanks for getting the first round, Kisi!” Rin called over his shoulder. “Sousuke will get the next two!”

The bartender took Kisumi’s drink order almost immediately, even though there were plenty of other people who had been waiting longer. A very small and cute girl slid up next to him and put a hand on his arm.

“The bartender must have a thing for pretty boys,” she shouted to him over the music. Perplexed, Kisumi just stared at her dumbfounded and she erupted into a fit of giggles.
“Where’s your boy?” she gasped between peals of laughter. “Such a handsome guy can’t be single!”

“I’m not….” he stuttered, but the bartender returned with the first two of Kisumi’s drinks. The girl leaned over the counter and told the bartender to order another.

“I’ll help you carry them and then I’ll buy your next one, sweet thing,” she laughed when Kisumi began to protest. “It’s good to make friends with the prettiest boy at a gay bar, the service becomes infinitely better!”

“I’m not gay,” Kisumi blurted, a bit loudly. The girl gave him a Cheshire cat grin.

“My best friend and my roommates all are,” Kisumi explained quickly. “Tomo won a big scholarship today so we are celebrating.”

The girl laughed and cupped Kisumi’s very hot cheek.

“You just keep getting better and better! Tonight will be a very good night for you, I can tell!”

Such brazen tactics would normally have Kisumi running for the hills, but he looked back to his friends and saw them all dancing. Rin was at the center and clearly knew what he was doing. Sousuke and Makoto milled around a bit on the edges, Sousuke because he obviously felt a bit awkward and Makoto because he was obviously thinking about Haru. But on either side of Rin were Nitori and Tomo and they kept looking at each other….and smiling.

“Here are the rest of your drinks, kid,” the bartender shouted over the thumping of the music. Kisumi gave the man his credit card and turned towards the girl.

“Shall we?” he asked and gave her a lopsided grin that had worked well in the past.

“Yes, I think we shall!” she replied. Together they grabbed all the drinks and headed towards Tomo and the others.

Dancing wasn’t something Makoto was very good at, but tonight he was having a fun time. Rin and Sousuke weren’t clinging to each other for once and it was a lot of fun for everyone to dance in a big group. Everyone that is, except for Kisumi. Somehow he’d found the only straight girl in the entire place and they’d been dancing and kissing all night.

“Water please!” Makoto called to the bartender. He filled a glass for Makoto and handed it over with a wink. “Tall drink of water for a tall drink of water,” the bartender laughed. Flustered, Makoto gulped down his water and set the glass down on the bar again. He never knew how to respond to people when they made comments like that.

“You want anything else, cupcake?” the bartender asked when he saw Makoto lingering. “Last call is in half an hour, so now’s the time to order something.”
“Last call?” Makoto mumbled. The bartender nodded.

Quickly, Makoto grabbed his phone out of his back pocket.

1:32 am

There were three new messages. A pit opened up in his stomach as Makoto pulled up the message screen. They were all from Haru. In and of itself, three messages from Haru was an unprecedented occasion. This was not good.

11:27 - *Coming home. I’m excited to see you.*

12:22 - *Where are you?*

12:53 - *I’m going to bed.*

“Shit!” Makoto cursed as he put his phone back in his pocket. Rin had brought him out of his funk with his energy and he’d begun to enjoy himself. Time had slipped past them without Makoto noticing. And how had he not felt his phone buzz when he received the messages?

He dashed over to where he’d left his friends. Kisumi had wandered a little ways away and was making out with his companion for the evening and Rin and Sousuke were engaged in a similar manner. Makoto hesitated because he didn’t want to get in the middle of their tongue jostling, but Haru was home and he was mad and Makoto needed to leave now.

Makoto cleared his throat. When that didn’t work, he tapped Sousuke on the shoulder. Sousuke wheeled around, ready to punch the person who’d interrupted him, but his face relaxed when he saw it was Makoto.

“What’s up?” Rin asked as he peered over Sousuke’s shoulder.

“It’s late, I need to go,” Makoto blurted. From the looks on his friends’ faces, he knew he sounded distressed.

“Why, what’s going on?” Rin asked. He extricated himself from Sousuke’s arms so he could talk to Makoto in a less awkward manner.

“It’s 1:30,” Makoto explained. “I wanted to be back before midnight. Haru…”

Rin nodded, he understood.

“Oi Kisumi!” Sousuke shouted. His voice boomed over the music. Kisumi looked up from his lady friend wearing a big goofy smile.

“We’re leaving!” Rin called out. “You coming?”
Kisumi looked down at his lady and whispered something in her ear. She giggled and nodded. Kisumi looked back up, wearing an even bigger, doofier smile, and gave Sousuke a thumbs up.

“Great,” Rin said. “Now where did Ai and Yasutomo disappear to?”

Tomo was leaning against the railing of the upstairs bar. It wasn’t so crowded or loud up here and the space was a welcome relief after the press of people downstairs. Not that he hadn’t been enjoying himself, but clubs were always hard for him to deal with after a while. From here he had a perfect view of the dance floor. He had a perfect view of Kisumi and the girl.

He wasn’t jealous, how could he be if he was the one who had rejected Kisumi’s physical affection? But the sight of Kisumi kissing that girl made him feel ill. Of course, it could have been the effect of the champagne and the multiple drinks of various genres all his friends had been buying him throughout the night, but Tomo didn’t think that was all of it.

The only Kisumi kiss Yasutomo had any experience with was the one they’d shared and his memories of that particular instance weren’t great. But Kisumi looked like he was enjoying this girl. He had his hands in her hair and even while they kissed, he was smiling.

Jealousy wasn’t the right label for what Yasutomo was feeling, it was something more akin to concern. All night, Kisumi had been overly bright and excited, so much so that Yasutomo could see right through to how fake it all was. This was Kisumi putting on a brave face and Yasutomo knew exactly why he was doing it. They hadn’t talked about the Nakamura scholarship too much until today, but Yasutomo knew Kisumi had wanted it. He was disappointed and angry at himself for being disappointed. On top of the difficulty of their relationship, it was a lot for anyone to deal with. Yasutomo polished off his drink.

He hoped that Kisumi was enjoying himself and wasn’t kissing this girl to prove some point. Tomo loved Kisumi more than anyone outside of his family and he wanted Kisumi to be happy. He wanted Kisumi to find someone that made him happy, just like he hoped for himself. But this girl…she wasn’t the one.

“Tomo?”

Tomo turned around to find Ai standing behind him, holding two drinks. One look at the shy yet hopeful smile Ai wore and Tomo’s anxiety about Kisumi dissipated, swept away by a pleasant, warm breeze stirring that was completely foreign to Tomo.

“Yes, that’s me,” Tomo replied, lamely. Mentally he gave himself a face palm.

“Sorry, yes, hi!”

Amused, Ai smiled a bit brighter and Tomo couldn’t help but relax. For a few breaths, they stood facing each other but it wasn’t awkward, at least from Tomo’s perspective. Honestly, he could look
into those beautiful big blue eyes all day and not grow tired of them. Whether it was the effect of the flashing dance hall lights or the heat from the multitude of bodies grinding against each other below, Tomo couldn’t tell, but he relished the slight blush that crept up to Ai’s cheeks the longer they sat looking at each other.

Unfortunately, Tomo’s stupid brain decided to remind him about what he’d done to the mere thought of this beautiful boy, when Tomo was alone at night. How he’d imagined what it would look like to have him underneath him, to be inside him, to feel that pretty mouth of his around him. Now it was Tomo’s turn to blush and he was so embarrassed at the memory, he finally broke their gaze.

“It’s a bit less crowded up here,” Tomo commented. So lame, he chided himself as he leaned back against the railing.

“I needed a breather,” Ai said as he leaned against the railing next to Tomo. Close, but not close enough.

“Oh I got you this,” Ai held out one of the drinks. “I hope you like it.”

As he accepted the ice-cold glass, Tomo’s finger tip grazed Ai’s and his whole body was suddenly very hot.

“Thanks!” Tomo said. Ai beamed and took a sip of his own drink and Tomo’s mouth fell a little open as he watched the straw between Ai’s lips, the beads of moisture running down the side of the glass.

God, why was he suddenly so parched?

Tomo took a sip and the first drop was crisp and cool and just sweet enough. Mojito.

It wasn’t the fanciest drink in the world, but it was Tomo’s favorite and Ai had guessed it. Smiling to himself, Tomo cupped both hands around the glass and watched as the ice in the drink bobbed up and down. Why was this, being surprised with his favorite drink, making Tomo so stupidly happy?

“What’s the matter?” Ai asked. Tomo didn’t trust himself to look up at him.

“Nothing, nothing just…. Tomo paused and smiled even harder at the glass, “Thanks for the drink. It’s…um…my favorite.”
Ai leaned closer and Tomo held his breath as Ai clinked his glass against Tomo’s.

“You’re welcome!” he said, just loud enough so only Tomo heard..

Tomo needed a second to regain his composure. He’d only just met this kid, officially anyway. He didn’t want to weird him out.

“So how do you like being back in Japan?” he asked. Innocent enough topic and one Tomo was actually quite interested in hearing the answer to.

“It’s different, that’s for sure. It’s taking a lot more getting used to being back home than I realized! But I forgot how easy it is to speak Japanese. There isn’t the panic every time I’m at a store that I won’t understand what I’m being asked. And being around old friends is really nice.”

Tomo couldn’t help himself, he had to look at Ai. He was smiling, sweetly and Tomo...he felt like a lost man.

“It’s nice to meet new friends too.”

Oh god! Tomo swallowed, turning away quickly. What a stupid thing to say! Ai leaned over a millimeter closer, making Tomo hyper aware of how close they were.

“Is it?” Ai asked, even quieter this time.

Tomo gulped, hopefully not very noticeably. “Yes, very nice.” He took a moment to gather up his courage, he took a big swig of his drink. Then, he turned towards Tomo who was, frankly, beautiful.

“Ai,” sputtered Tomo, “would you like to dance?”

Ai’s mouth fell open slightly and maybe it was a trick of the lights, but Kisumi swore he blushed harder. His lips curled up into a little smile and he looked down at the drink in Tomo’s hand. God, Tomo was lost…
“Yasutomo!”

Both Ai and Tomo jumped and swiveled their heads around, annoyed for the intrusion. Sousuke was like an icebreaker in the Arctic, sailing towards them, parting the crowd. When he reached them, he clapped a hand on Tomo’s shoulder and gave him a bit uncharacteristically big smile. Sousuke was definitely happy and definitely drunk.

“We’re leaving,” Sousuke said. “Rin said you were both staying at our apartment tonight? Time to go, Makoto is in trouble with the Mr.”

“Okay thanks,” Ai peeped. Satisfied and grinning knowingly at them, Sousuke turned around, expecting them to follow him on his journey back to his love. Clearly deflated, Ai downed the rest of his drink and fidgeted on his feet.

“Guess there isn’t time for a dance,” he said.

He turned those big blue eyes to Tomo and, with uncharacteristic suaveness, Tomo gave him what he hoped was a reassuring grin.

“I owe you one, Ai,” he said. Ai smiled, Tomo smiled, and together they turned to follow Sousuke, standing as close together as they could without actually touching and blushing like fiends.

The walk home was bleary for Sousuke, but when he finally flopped down into their bed, the lines of the world became a lot sharper because he was looking at Rin and Rin was what made his world beautiful. Drunk off his love’s beauty as much as the many drinks he’d consumed, Sousuke leaned over and sloppily cupped Rin’s cheek with his hand.

“It was a good day today,” he said, his face hurting from smiling.

Rin smiled and tilted his head so he could kiss Sousuke’s palm.

“It was,” drunk Rin agreed. “You are going to be a rower and Ai is going to fall in love with Tomo!”
Sousuke frowned, though he wasn’t blind. Tomo was going to fall in love with Ai just as hard.

“Poor Kisumi,” Sousuke said when Rin gave him a concerned look. “He seemed a little…intense today, didn’t he?”

Rin nodded and scooted up so he could hug Sousuke around the chest.

“It’s kind of weird he brought that girl home,” Rin said. “She seemed a bit foreful, didn’t she?”

Sousuke nodded and for a moment, they contemplated the trainwreck Kisumi had been that night. But then, Rin started kissing Sousuke’s neck and Sousuke forgot Kisumi, Tomo, Ai, and everyone else in the universe. Rin gently pushed Sousuke down so he was flat on his back, then he climbed on top of Sousuke. Rin leaned down, to continue kissing Sousuke, but Sousuke stopped him. Rin backed off, looking down at Sousuke, confused.

“Rin,” Sousuke croaked, feeling for the second time in 24 hours that he might want to cry, “I am happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life. I love you, so so much.”

Rin beamed like the sun and kissed Sousuke.

After a few big glasses of water, Ai was feeling less drunk but even more aware of Tomo, lying on the other side of the kotatsu in the apartment. Ai was in agony trying to figure out what he should say. At the Buldge, they’d had a moment and Tomo had promised him a dance in the future, but the spell of the club had vanished when they’d stepped out into nighttime Tokyo and everyone had done their best to calm down a panicking golden retriever.

Should Ai ask about Tomo’s brother? Should he ask more about his scholarship? Should he ask about Kisumi? What about if he had a boyfriend? But what if he wasn’t even gay!? How could a guy be so perfectly beautiful, but be straight!?

Before Ai could make up his mind, Kisumi’s bedroom door opened and out stormed the girl Kisumi had brought home, followed closely by Kisumi in just his boxers. Without saying a word, she flung open the front door and slammed it right in Kisumi’s face. Kisumi hung his head and cursed loudly.
“What happened?” Tomo, his loyal friend, asked. Kisumi looked at Tomo and tried to muster a smile but couldn’t.

“She has a boyfriend,” he said miserably. “We were kissing and she pushed me away and said they’d gotten in a huge fight and she’d been trying to get back at him. But she couldn’t follow through so she left.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tomo said. Kisumi nodded and wished them goodnight.

Five minutes passed in utter silence while Ai agonized over what to do. But before he decided what to say, Tomo jumped off his futon.

“I’ll be back,” he said as he pulled on his pants. “Please don’t lock the door.”

And then he was gone.

Ten minutes that felt like an eternity passed and Ai tried to fall asleep, disappointed that he’d missed tonight’s chance with Tomo. But his mind kept buzzing with the exciting revelation that the beautiful guy from the train, to whom he’d masturbated several times already, was someone that was now in his real life. It wasn’t uncommon for Ai to become completely smitten with strangers for a spell, but he’d never had the opportunity to meet one of these crushes in real life!

And Tomo had seemed so pleased that Ai had guessed his favorite drink…

The front door opened again and Tomo tiptoed in with a plastic bag in his hand, supposedly because he was worried about waking Ai. Ai sat up, to show him there wasn’t any reason to be quiet. The room was dark except for the glow of the streetlight through the curtains. Tomo strode over, his long, sinuous body and his hair that just kissed his jawline just visible in the low light from the street. He leaned down and whispered, very quietly.

“It was a pleasure to meet you tonight, Ai. I hope you enjoy this.”

He took something out of the bag and placed it on the kotatsu next to Ai.
“Goodnight,” he whispered before striding across the living room and into Kisumi’s bedroom. Ai watched the door for a minute, wishing he’d come back out, before turning his attention down to the thing Tomo had given him.

An Anzubo, the apricot ice cream bar Ai had been obsessed with since he was a child. Tomo had guessed his absolute favorite ice cream ever.

“Tomo!” Kisumi hissed when Tomo opened his door and came inside. “What are you doing?”

“Coming in to see you,” Tomo answered as he slid out of his jeans and threw a plastic bag at Kisumi.

Kisumi panicked. They’d agreed they weren’t going to do this anymore! It was better that they didn’t….Tomo should be outside with the guy who was clearly interested…

Tomo slid into bed next to Kisumi and grabbed the plastic bag. He pulled out two Anzubos and handed one to Kisumi.

“Want to watch a few episodes of Sailor Moon? I had a really great time tonight and I’m feeling the power of friendship tonight, even if I’m no magical girl.”

He smiled at Kisumi and the whole disaster of the evening melted away.

“I love you,” Kisumi blurted before he realized what he was saying.

“Love you too,” Tomo returned.

Without saying another word, Tomo grabbed Kisumi’s laptop off his night stand and Kisumi pulled up where they’d left off of Sailor Moon R. They ate their ice creams and despite the myriad of feelings that had made this a particularly bad night for Kisumi, it ended perfectly.
Makoto slid into bed next to Haru as quietly as he could, but sleeping Haru still stirred. He had hoped Haru would be asleep when he came home too late, but Makoto wasn’t surprised he wasn’t.

But despite being awake, Haru didn’t say anything.

Makoto had had a few too many drinks and he usually was a very sleepy drunk. But tonight there was a chasm between him and his heart and he didn’t know what he could say to make things better. He knew that in the morning, Haru would have to go to work at his internship early so Makoto tried to go to fall asleep, so he could catch him and tell him how sorry he was for abandoning him. But it was all in vain.

He turned over, his heart aching for Haru who was only inches away, but those inches felt like miles.

Chapter End Notes

This is a VERY long time coming, but fear not I have not forgotten about Sousuke and co.! Yuri on Ice reminded me I had work left to do ;) Thanks everyone for being patient, I know this has been MONTHS coming. Just been very busy working on my book and working and living life :) Enjoy!!!!

Tumblr is: http://tornadoquakes.tumblr.com/. Feel free to chat me up here, there or anywhere :)

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