Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: M/M
Fandom: Free!
Relationship: Tachibana Makoto/Yamazaki Sousuke, Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Character: Tachibana Makoto, Yamazaki Sousuke, Yazaki Aki, Shigino Kisumi, Nanase Haruka, Matsuoka Rin, Original Female Character(s), Shiina Asahi
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Soulmates, background HaruRin, background AkiSei, background AsaKisu, Fluff and Angst, Makoto-centric, Alternate Universe - College/University, Pining
Series: Part 2 of Soulmate AU
Stats: Published: 2016-08-05 Completed: 2016-09-20 Chapters: 11/11 Words: 73941

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Summary

Makoto left Iwatobi after graduating high school to find greener pastures, meet new people, and discover more in life.

So on his first day of college, he didn't expect his Soulmates in Society class to be interrupted by Sousuke and Kisumi arriving late and saying "We're sorry, we got lost"

Notes

So the SouMako arc has finally started *w* I've been waiting so long to shout about this to people!!! This fic would really dive into the whole Soulmate idea more clearly so it's my playground of sorts.

Reading the previous story would be really helpful because that was where Sousuke/Makoto met but if you don't want to, it's also okay because this takes place in college and would focus properly on soumako. Most things you need to know are already mentioned here tbh.

PREVIOUSLY ON SOULMATE AU:
Haruka and Rin had a two-way telepathy Soul Bond (where they could read each other’s mind if they look each other in the eyes), the strongest kind there is, but because of a series of misunderstandings and drama, they almost broke it. With the help of everyone, they were able to reforge the bond and it became stronger than ever.

During that difficult time, Yamazaki Sousuke (Rin’s best friend and the vice-captain of Samezuka’s Swim Club) initiated contact by sending Makoto a text message asking for cooperation for a Joint Relay Practice. It then became an information-lending type of relationship, since they were both curious about what each other knew. This… did not work well for either of them, because Sousuke believed Rin would never break the bond and thus blames Haru for everything. Makoto believed in Haruka with everything he has. They argued a lot.

When they finally met during the joint relay practice between Iwatobi, Samezuka and Sera (Aki’s all-girls school), Makoto saw Sousuke and realized that Sousuke was his soulmate.

As always, thanks to Naya for being awesome and supportive and the literal best. And also Tiff for helping me with this chapter as well!
Lesson 1: Class Introduction and the Syllabus

Tachibana Makoto met his soulmate when he was seventeen years old. In fact, he met his soulmate three times before he found out they were soulmates. No, actually when he thought about it seriously, it was four times, wasn’t it?

He was 12 when he first heard his soulmate’s voice. He had a teasing tone, and he was focused solely on talking to Rin. “They call you Rinrin?,” he had said back then, laughing. His laugh had a nice sound, and for a moment, Makoto was curious. But they were on opposing sides of the locker and never even saw each other.

The second time, when they finally met face-to-face, was during a video chat. The feeling was there, but too weak to really comprehend. They were focused on more important things at the time, were too engrossed in worrying about their best friends to even consider the idea of having a soulmate of their own. Makoto felt his soulmate’s sadness then, felt the need to hug him and keep him safe, and it was raw and too intense to be normal, but he did not think much of it. They were all emotional, he and Haru and Rin and everyone, so it felt normal to have those emotions. (It wasn’t, not really.)

The third time was with them ignoring each other and never even looking at each other’s direction because, of course, he and his soulmate were angry at each other before even meeting properly. Makoto was annoyed at his soulmate for being suspicious of Haruka, and his soulmate was stubborn about his beliefs. They were on opposite sides of a huge fight. It was just Makoto’s luck.

It took four tries before the feelings in Makoto’s gut registered, four times before the realization set in. He had known him vaguely for five years already by then, and had constantly talked to him for at least a month. And yet. It took too damn long for him to understand the feeling.

Well, at least he knew. At least when they looked each other in the eye, he thought ‘oh, so this is why I feel this way’. Just one look into his eyes and Makoto already grasped at the meaning behind the nagging thoughts in his head since the video chat.

He was way better than his soulmate, who simply continued talking to him and maintaining eye contact without any reaction at all. His soulmate smiled at him and chatted about Rin like nothing had changed. Maybe for him, nothing did. Maybe he didn’t feel the pull at all, that feeling of rightness in Makoto’s bones.

Maybe the soul bond was just too weak to be relevant.

Then again, Yamazaki Sousuke hated the soul bond more than anyone Makoto knew. So maybe he just didn’t care.

Two years of having his soulmate near him without ever showing signs of reciprocation was exhausting. Worse of it all was how Sousuke genuinely liked talking to Makoto, and even grew close enough that they messaged each other regularly. As with the start of their friendship, Sousuke sent him message after message to ask questions and connect with the people in Iwatobi. Sousuke felt like Makoto was a bridge, perhaps, and found it convenient to text him instead of Rin who was patently bad at keeping up with messages.

Having him that near, having him laugh and joke around beside him, was an exercise in patience.
Sousuke had a low vibrant laugh, had nice piercing eyes, and had a dry humor that always made Makoto smile. He was a better person than Makoto initially thought. Being around him simultaneously made Makoto happy and made him hurt.

Makoto learned to balance it out by talking to Sousuke as much as he could, but making excuses when asked to meet up with just the two of them. That was his rule. Around other people, Makoto could easily control his feelings. He could focus on Haruka’s expressions and Nagisa’s bright smiles and Rei’s rants. He could subtly get away from Sousuke when it felt too much. It was easier.

For his own sanity, he needed to have the right amount of space between them at all times.

He’d break otherwise.

Two years was also enough for him to realize that he needed to get away. Not just from the soul bond, because it wasn’t *that* bad really, but also from the stability of Iwatobi. His hometown was a safe space for him. It was the place that made him feel at ease and made him want to stay forever. It gave him the feeling of inevitability. (It made him feel unchanged, unable to move forward.)

He needed to step outside of that. He needed to challenge himself. He needed to *grow*.

If his soulmate, the person most suited to him, his inevitable partner, didn’t reciprocate those feelings, then he needed to be strong enough to survive change. He needed to take hold of his own destiny.

(Beyond that, he needed to stop following after Haruka’s back. Haruka was also his safe place, was maybe his best sanctuary in life, but Haruka had fought and learned, and was now on his way to his own dream. Makoto needed to find his.)

In the end, he chose a university in Tokyo with a good educational department.

During the summer of his third year in high school, Coach Sasabe asked him to help out in the Iwatobi Swim Club and since he had nothing else to do, he agreed. It was surprisingly something he could imagine himself doing for years to come, the kind of work that really gave him a sense of fulfilment. Knowing that he was good with kids, and that he loved helping them learn, was a good first step in finding his own path.

Another part of searching for his own dream was following his instincts and pushing forward no matter how scared he was. That’s why he travelled around to visit different universities as much as he could. The other third years even joined him at times. Out of all the cities, he settled with Tokyo because it was far away enough that he needed to live elsewhere, but not too far that he won’t be able to go back home when he was needed. Besides, he had a really good feeling about this university when he visited it with Aki during the exams period. It just felt *right*.

Finding housing was relatively simple because of Haruka’s parents owning multiple apartment complexes, one of which was near the university. They helped him find a vacant room in his price-range. It had a small kitchen connected to the living area with a couch and a TV, and two tiny bedrooms. He could easily rent the other room to someone, or use it as a storage in the future.

The original plan was to get Aki to be his roommate, since they were both going to the same university, but a room opened at the girl’s dorm and she couldn’t pass up the opportunity, so
Makoto was left with an empty room. The rent was really cheap though; Makoto was sure they were renting it out to him for a discounted rate. He could survive renting it on his own.

Being alone in his apartment was lonely, but it was just one other thing he had to survive in Tokyo.

Having somewhat of a clear plan in mind, choosing subjects for his first year in university was relatively easy. The curriculum had most of his required subjects listed out, and the only choice he really had to make was his free elective.

There were a lot of choices, from language electives (he’s always wanted to learn a new language), to ones that might help him in his course in the future (specifically the psychology subjects about children).

Out of all the subjects he saw though, Socio 204 was the one that caught his attention the most. Its course title was “Soulmates in Society”, and most of the reviews online for the professor and the subject were positive. [You’ll learn more about yourself!] one such review proudly proclaimed.

He had always been interested in soul bonds even before he met his own soulmate, so it felt right to click it on the university’s enrollment website.

Unfortunately, as it was a popular course with a lot of people vying for it, he didn’t get in on the first list.

Fortunately, he had promised to assert himself here more. He might as well use this chance to try harder.

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“Why do you want to get into my class?”

Professor Mika Iwamoto was a small woman, almost a foot shorter than Makoto, but she had a look in her eyes that made you feel like she was bigger than you. She had short black hair and sharp brown eyes. She squinted at Makoto like she could see right through him.

(When Makoto asked how he could get into the class, if there was a petition or something to sign, he was just lead to Iwamoto’s office and told to “convince her”. Apparently, she always left 5 slots free in her class for the people she thought needed the class more. They explained that it was a way to make class discussions more interesting. The people at the enrollment center cackled as they said that.)

Makoto floundered, wondering what he should answer. He really wanted to take this class, but he hasn’t even told his parents or Haruka about meeting his soulmate. It was a secret he kept close to his heart. Saying it out loud felt like too much.

“I’ve always been interested in soul bonds,” he said, slowly. It felt wrong, though, to stay safe. Didn’t he promise to get out of his comfort zone? He took a deep breath. “And, um- when I was very young, my best friends accidentally almost broke their bond, and it took them five years to reforge the bond. That made me want to learn more about it. I felt helpless for so long before we were able to fix it.” He cringed inwardly, berating himself. Saying it was too hard, even now. This was a half-truth, though, and he hoped that would be enough to convince her.

Iwamoto nodded, looking thoughtful. “That’s interesting,” she said, eyeing him with narrowed eyes. “So did that make you want to meet your soulmate or did that scare you?”
He looked down, intimidated by the way she watched him. It felt like she could prod his secrets away if he wasn’t careful. “Both,” he answered honestly. “I wanted to meet him, but it scared me that he might break it off like that. My best friends… they were really hurt.” *I don’t want that kind of pain*, he thought.

“Hmmm.” Iwamoto hummed and went silent for a full minute. Makoto could feel her staring but he refused to look back. “Interesting,” she repeated, and this time it sounded amused. “You’re in, Tachibana-kun. Welcome to Socio 204.”

Makoto bowed his head and thanked her. When he left the office, he still felt like he just admitted something he’s never told anyone before.

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Socio 204 was a medium-sized class in a large lecture hall. There were more or less forty people in the class. It felt too big and vast, like their words would echo if they talk. Much like their professor, it was an intimidating classroom.

Predictably, Makoto was the most nervous about this class. It was new and not in the plan. It felt like a larger step than the other ones he’d done to get here. He was invested in the subject, but also scared of Professor Iwamoto’s gaze. It was terrifying to think of how she might uncover every single secret he had by the end of this semester. (But there was a part of him, a tiny part he refused to listen to, that yearned it. Being cracked open sounded like another kind of freedom.)

He arrived about thirty minutes too early because of his nerves, and since no one was there yet, he had free reign to choose which seat he could get. He surveyed the room, thinking of the possibilities each seat would entail. He walked around and sat on a row in the middle to check the view.

“Ugh,” he groaned, standing up and walking closer to the front. His vision was already getting worse by the end of their high school, and he should probably go to a doctor soon to get his eye prescription. For now, he needed to sit in the first row. Going all in, he sat right at the aisle seat in the middle. Right in front of their terrifying professor’s podium. *Great.*

Professor Iwamoto arrived exactly at 10:00 am, striding into the room like she was a queen. The classroom, initially abuzz with murmurs, quieted down immediately. She had quite the aura for someone so small.

“This is Socio 204, also known as Soulmates in Society. But you might know it as ‘that ridiculous subject everyone really wants to get’.” She smiled at them and scattered laughter echoed around the room. “Now, I need you to know that this course is very hands-on. We will pry into your feelings about soul bonds and we will discuss all of it. There are reports, essays, debates. Every single one of you *will* talk. Prepare yourselves.”

When she said that last part, she seemed to be speaking to Makoto, looking directly at him. He gulped and nodded nervously.

She smiled more softly then, and her voice took an almost gentle tone. “Don’t worry,” she told the class. “You’ll learn more about yourselves. You’ll like it.”

The murmurs started back up, quiet but excited.

“I’m so nervous,” the girl beside him said, hands moving restlessly in front of her.
He smiled in commiseration. “Me too.”

“Ah!” She smiled and ducked down, blushing. “I’m Sakura. We’ll be seatmates, huh?”

“Nice to meet you, Sakura-san. I’m Makoto.”

They both looked in front just as Professor Iwamoto finished picking up papers from her bag. She took a pile and walked towards Makoto, putting it down in front of him. “This is your syllabus. It will guide you on what we’ll do so be sure to keep it safe. The rules of this classroom and additional requirement are all written at the back.” She smiled at Makoto and patted the pile. “Get one and pass.”

Passing it around took a few minutes, most of which were spent discussing the contents with their seatmates. The class had a good feeling, like they could be all be friends by the end of this semester. At least, that was what Makoto hoped.

“As the course title says, the class is centered around what Soul Bonds and Soulmates mean in society. We’ll delve into its history, its meaning, its media exposure, and most of all, its effect in our society.” Professor Iwamoto pointed at the back of the syllabus. “As I’ve said, it will be very hands-on. I need you all to think for yourselves. This is not a class primarily about research and we do not do memorizations here. I need you to reflect and explain these concepts in the context of your own experience.”

There was a shift in the atmosphere, a silence so potent that you could probably hear a pin drop. It was obvious that there were a number of people who were just as nervous as him at the prospect of explaining their own experiences. Soul Bonds were a sensitive topic for a lot of people, after all.

“To start off, let’s have a class introduction! One by one, now!” Professor Iwamoto grinned.

Just like that, the tension broke. A few people audibly groaned in disbelief. Class introductions were so elementary. This was the first time Makoto saw a professor asking for a class introduction.

Professor Iwamoto looked gleeful too, like she knew exactly how childish the activity felt after the tension earlier.

She raised her hand and said, “Me first then. Let me show you how it’s done.” She cleared her throat, making an act of it. “I am Professor Mika Iwamoto.” She gestured to them. “Now say ‘Hello Mika!’.”

They blinked. As a class, they just stopped and stared. “Hello… Mika?” Most voices were too quiet and sounded confused. Makoto wasn’t able to answer at all.

She rolled her eyes. “Louder! Hello Mika!”

Spurned into action, they chorused: “Hello, Mika!”

“Good!” She nodded approvingly. “Now I say: ‘I believe…’ and my personal philosophy about Soul Bonds.” Her expression turned serious once again, that intimidating aura returning. “I believe that Soul Bonds are a legitimate topic of discussion in the sociological, psychological and general scientific fields and we, as humanity, should be educating our children about this phenomenon more clearly. I believe it is a huge part of our society, and thus we should take it seriously.” She looked around as if daring them to disagree. “That’s why I’m teaching this.”

She pointed at Makoto. “Now, you. Introduce yourself.”
With shaking legs, Makoto stood up. He felt all cold and shivery. “I’m Makoto.”

“Hello, Makoto,” Professor Mika and the whole class greeted back.

“I believe…” He gulped, head empty of thoughts. He was too nervous. “I believe that Soul Bonds are chemistry and biology coming into play to make sure the most compatible people gets to communicate the way they should,” he answered, reciting the definition Rei had told them repeatedly for two years. It was an easy way out. “I want to learn more about it.”

Professor Mika narrowed her eyes at him but nodded. “Next.”

It went on like that, with every person saying their name and explaining their beliefs. Despite the whole introduction thing being corny and seemingly childish, the way they did it felt important. In the span of a class, he’s learned most of his classmates’ names and the kind of person they were, at least according to what they believed in.

Sakura, for example, had gotten into the class because she believed that Soul Bonds are precious and should be protected. It was obvious she wanted to meet her own soulmate someday. There were a lot of that type in class, blushing and sharing that they wanted to learn more to make sure they would be a good soulmate in the future.

On the other hand, there were others who were the exact opposite. A girl called Touka said, very insistently and with clear passion, that “Soul Bonds are the devil’s work and it is a cage that evolution has made for optimum offsprings”. A few people agreed with her, albeit quieter and not as intense.

For the most part, there were quite a number of people who went with the neutral route like Makoto. “Soul Bonds are interesting and I would like to learn more,” was the most common answer.

When the introductions reached the last row, the door at the back suddenly opened loudly, and the class went silent as they all stared at the newcomers.

“Sorry we’re late!!!” It was someone Makoto knew very well and was not expecting to see here. “We were a bit lost, weren’t we, Sousuke-kun?” He grinned at the person behind him.

“Shut up, Kisumi,” Sousuke sighed as he stepped in, bowing slightly. “We’re sorry for causing trouble. I couldn’t find this building.”

Professor Mika just waved a hand. “Come in, then. Sit wherever you like. Watch how the introductions are made and you’ll be the last two.”

Kisumi dragged Sousuke inside and to an empty seat right at the back. Makoto couldn’t stop staring. Why was Sousuke here?!

The last time they talked, just after graduation, Makoto checked where Sousuke would be studying. He properly did it, because he really wanted a new start. He was going to have a new life! A new university! New friends!

Sousuke was supposed to be in the college associated with Samezuka. He was given a full scholarship and all! Rin was so proud he bragged about it for days!

Makoto needed to calm down.

He needed to just-
“Are you okay?” Sakura seemed to notice Makoto’s inner turmoil.

“Um.” Makoto took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He nodded, more to convince himself than anything. “I just saw someone I knew.”

Sakura let it go, but she looked concerned still.

Next thing Makoto knew, it was already Kisumi’s turn.

“Hi, I’m Kisumi Shigino.” He grinned widely as the class greeted him back. He looked the most excited out of everyone in this class, which was quite a feat. “I believe that Soul Bonds are important tools we could use to find the person who would make us happiest. From my own experience, my Soul Bond made it possible to bridge the gap between me and my soulmate. Without it, I don’t know what might have happened.”

The class suddenly erupted in talk, excited whispers exchanged between seatmates. They were all excited to hear that someone with an actual soulmate was with them. Makoto almost forgot how rare it was to meet people who openly talked about their Soul Bond. He was probably spoiled by having Nagisa around him in High School.

“Oh, you’re in a relationship with your soulmate, Shigino-kun?” Professor Mika had a look like she was planning something evil, but Kisumi appeared to not notice it as he simply nodded.

“We’ve been going out since we were in High School,” he explained.

“And you’re free to talk about this with the class?” They could almost see the gears in her head spinning.

Kisumi tilted his head to the right, thinking. “Weell~ I want to talk about it so it’s fine?” He blinked, and Makoto could easily see how much he hasn’t changed at all from middle school. He was still the frank boy who openly showed his affection.

Professor Mika nodded. “Okay, then. Thank you, Shigino-kun. Last one, Yamazaki-kun.”

Sousuke stood up with a sigh, looking bored and almost petulant. “I’m Sousuke.” He waited a beat while the class greeted him and then continued, “I believe that Soul Bonds are not the be-all end-all of relationships and we shouldn’t treat it as such.” He sat down just like that, without even waiting for anyone’s reaction.

Kisumi hit him on the arm, but jokingly, like he knew already that it was Sousuke’s philosophy.

Makoto also knew that much, but it still stung to hear him say it out loud.

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“MAKOTO!!!”

Makoto cringed as he looked up to see both Kisumi and Sousuke waiting at the side of the door for him. He thought for sure they didn’t notice him. He was hoping to slip out and calm himself down at least before greeting them. He was not prepared for this at all.

“H-hello,” he greeted shakily, walking over to their side. “I didn’t know you were in this university too?”

Kisumi blinked. “We haven’t seen each other in a while! What’s up with that face?” He surged
forward and pulled Makoto in by putting his arm around Makoto’s shoulder just like always. “That makes me lonely~”

Makoto forced his face into some kind of normalcy. “I was just surprised, that’s all!”

“If you just contacted me, I would have happily told you!”

“I- well, it was really hectic with getting into this college and all,” he explained apologetically. It has been a hard few months, so he’d only really talked with Haruka (because he always talks with Haruka) and Nagisa (because Nagisa was just the best one at keeping in contact with everyone).

Sousuke nodded in agreement. “I was the same,” he said. “I forgot you were going here.”

Makoto looked at him, not being able to stop the small smile on his face. It has been a while. If he didn’t think too deeply, Sousuke’s presence was still something that made him feel lighter and safer. “I thought you were going to that Samezuka-affiliated school? How about your scholarship?”

“Well,” he started, rubbing the back of his neck, “I was scouted by this university. It has better facilities and they offered me a scholarship too. It was decided pretty late, but I like it better here.” He smiled. “And since you’re here, it’s not as lonely now.”

*It doesn’t mean anything*, Makoto thought immediately, pushing down any traitorous feelings in his chest. He smiled softly, not even having to fake it. He was happy to have familiar people near, even though Sousuke was one of the people he had decided to escape. He could work with this. He survived high school, didn’t he?

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said honestly.

“How about me, then?!” Kisumi shook him a little, still with his arms around Makoto’s shoulder.

Makoto laughed. “I’m glad you’re here too, Kisumi-kun. It’s livelier now that you’re here.”

Kisumi grinned. “It’s actually really great that you’re here. Now I can leave Sousuke with you.”


“He’s new so he’s especially bad at directions right now,” he said, leaning closer to whisper at him as if Sousuke wasn’t right there listening in. “He’ll get lost if you don’t show him the way. Imagine how grumpy he’d be if he doesn’t find the cafeteria in time!”

“I can find my way there,” Sousuke said stubbornly, frowning.

Makoto would beg to disagree. He had seen Sousuke get lost on the way to the Iwatobi Swim Club the first time they all went there together. He wasn’t sure how, since Gou had helpfully drawn a map for him. They looked back at the end of the group and just noticed Sousuke missing. Once they found him loitering by a nearby convenience store, Sousuke adamantly denied being lost despite the look of relief on his face when he saw them.

“I don’t have a class after this, either,” Makoto told Sousuke casually. “Do you want to eat lunch together? Aki might meet us there. I think she’s free too.” He knew exactly how to talk to Sousuke now. He’s had had two years to learn his moods and quirks. “She’d really love to see you again.”

Sousuke stared at him for a moment, studying his face. Makoto tried not to squirm. “...okay,” he agreed with an air of defeat. “But I really can find my way.”
Makoto nodded seriously. “Of course, Sousuke-kun.”

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The walk to the cafeteria was largely uneventful. They walked naturally in step with each other as usual and talked about the classes they already had. Makoto took that chance to exchange schedules with Sousuke, with the pretense of keeping in touch, but mostly because he was equal parts worried about the other boy and his sense of direction, and anxious of any additional time he might spend around him. It was a paradoxical feeling. Did he want to stay by Sousuke’s side to make sure he was safe or be as far away as possible to keep himself safe?

Soon enough, they reached the university’s main cafeteria, which was packed with students for lunch. They didn’t have to look far to see Aki sitting at a corner table, looking as proper as always. She had commandeered the whole table by placing down her bag on one side and an empty tray on the other.

“Aki!” Makoto stopped at the side, feeling at ease as soon as he was near. Having another person as buffer between him and Sousuke was always the optimal plan. Besides, he was really glad to see her. She was the only one he went to this school with before, and they’ve grown closer during the whole enrollment process. Not to mention, she was a captain just like him, and just like Sousuke was, so the three of them used to meet up for joint meetings all the time. This felt familiar in a way that made him relax fully.

“Hey—” She stopped and stared at Sousuke, expression turning from pleasant to shocked. “Why are you here?”

Sousuke simply raised an eyebrow at her. “I didn’t know you hated me this much, Aki.”

“I do, actually. With all my heart,” she deadpanned with narrowed eyes. “But seriously, why are you here?”

“I study here too,” he said, pushing her bag away and taking the tray so they could sit down. He even pulled the other seat and offered it to Makoto, which was a ridiculous move to make. It was so unnecessary and nice that Makoto wanted to hit his head on the table immediately. Sousuke didn’t seem to notice. “I’m a late enrollee.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us that?” Aki frowned at him, clearly displeased. Makoto wasn’t sure why she was in such a bad mood. Maybe she had a bad first day.

Sousuke shrugged. “I forgot you were both here.”

“Yeah,” Makoto said, to defuse the tension. “I was surprised too when I saw him. We’re in the same Socio class.”

Aki’s frown deepened even further. “The soulmate class.” She groaned and massaged her forehead with her hand. “That’s just great.”

Sousuke looked as confused as Makoto now. “What’s the matter with you, Yazaki?”

“Nothing!” She shook her head and sighed. It took her a few seconds before she added, “I wanted to get into that class too, you know? Just my luck that you two got in.”

Makoto blinked. “You wanted to get into that subject…?” It was the first time he’s heard of that.
They checked their schedules together, and she never mentioned anything like that. They could have tried to convince Professor Mika together, if that was the case.

She glared at him, clearly telling him to shut up. “Anyway,” she said, facing Sousuke, “you’re here. So you’re in the varsity?”

He nodded. “Full scholarship. You?”

Laughing, she shook her head. “I’ll join the tryout next week. I’m not as gifted as you, Yamazaki.”

“You’re the fastest one in your team though,” Sousuke offered. “You’ll definitely get in.”

“Yeah,” Makoto agreed. “You’re almost as fast as Haru.”

Aki scoffed. “Okay, that’s too much praise. Haruka is better than me and Sousuke combined.”

“True,” Sousuke said, nodding. “It still pisses me off.”

Makoto narrowed his eyes at Sousuke, and Sousuke laughed out loud, vibrant and out of the blue.

“I’ve missed that look,” he said, an answer to Makoto’s questioning expression. “You get so angry at the smallest comment I make about Nanase.”

“I don’t!”

“You do!” Sousuke was still laughing. “I bet you forget sometimes that we’re friends now.”

Makoto felt like pouting. It wasn’t his fault he was protective of his best friend, and that he knew Sousuke had reasons to not like Haruka. It didn’t help either that Sousuke and Haruka had the weirdest relationship, with them barely talking and often having opposite opinions. The only time they really bonded was when Rin was doing something ridiculous and they empathized with each other as the two people closest to him.

“Oi.” Sousuke poked him on the arm, offering an indulgent smile. “I was kidding.” He then stood up, pulling his wallet from his bag and gesturing to the counter. “Let’s buy lunch? My treat, since it’s been a long time.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I insist,” he said, pulling at Makoto’s wrist. He looked at Aki but did not let go of Makoto. “What do you want, Aki?”

“I already ate,” she said, eyeing the two of them with a thoughtful look. “You can just treat Makoto-kun. You probably owe him lots of lunch by now.”

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It was surprisingly pleasant to wait in line with Sousuke. Makoto knew how easy it was for them to talk, but it still surprised him whenever it happened. As he tended to run away from any chance of them being alone together, they did not often do this.

Sousuke talked about the facilities of the school and why he chose this over his initial choice college. He shared about meeting the coach, and knowing for sure that this was the kind of environment he wanted. There was something about this university that felt pleasant, he said.

After that, as they took their lunch trays and ordered food, Makoto asked how exactly Sousuke and
Kisumi ended up together this morning.

“Oh, that.” Sousuke looked embarrassed. It was a funny look on his usually composed face. “I was in the East building. Kisumi was running late from the dorms. He saw me and asked where I was going.”

Makoto hid his laughter in his hand. Their Socio 204 class was in the West building, in the second floor. So he really was lost! He probably didn’t want to ask for help from Kisumi either, but had no other choice. Makoto could imagine his expression clearly, that one where he was frustrated but relieved, with a crinkle in his brow that slowly disappeared.

“You’re laughing too much, oi.”

“It was a good thing Kisumi-kun found you, didn’t he?” Makoto smiled, leading the way to their table. “It would have been bad if you were absent on the first day of class.”

When they sat down, Aki was too busy with her phone to even look up.

“Texting Sei-senpai?” Sousuke grinned teasingly before he started eating. Aki shot him a glare but did not answer. It has been a running theme of their friendship that Sousuke would tease Aki about his ex-captain, who Aki found out late in her second year was in fact her soulmate. Sousuke found the whole thing hilarious, despite hating the idea of Soul Bonds. He enjoyed Aki’s disgruntled replies and Sei’s enthusiastic flirting. He once said that it was “the most entertainment the swim club had”.

“Mikoshiba-san has an apartment near here, right?” Makoto asked the two a few minutes later, remembering something Momo mentioned before. He wanted to make sure back then that Sei won’t be angry if he asked Aki to be his roommate. Momo had said that their parents refused Sei’s proposal for them to live together, saying it was too early for either of them.

“Yeah,” Aki agreed with a sigh. “He’ll be so annoying.”

“Is that why you chose to live in the dorm? Because he’s too annoying?” Sousuke looked genuinely curious.

Aki shrugged. “Not really. I already promised to live with Makoto before I knew about his apartment.”


“She lives in the dorms now,” Makoto offered. “We were going to be roommates but a room opened up in the girl’s dorms so she took it.”

Sousuke turned to him, still with that scandalized expression on his face. “You were going to live with Aki?”

Makoto nodded, unsure why it was such a big deal.

“Are you... are you trying to steal Aki away from Sei-senpai?”

“...What?” Both Makoto and Aki looked at Sousuke like he just grew a second head. It never even passed through their minds that someone could think that way. How could Sousuke even insinuate that? It was such a weird idea.

“You were going to live together,” Sousuke hissed, like it was all the explanation they should need.
“It’s a two-room apartment,” Aki explained, rolling her eyes. “Sousuke, I can’t believe you’d think that of Makoto.”

Makoto laughed. “Or of you. Sousuke-kun, Aki-chan is loyal to Mikoshiba-san.”

“That’s arguable,” Aki said, smirking. “Makoto-kun is way better than Sei, so the temptation is pretty big.”

“Aki-chan!” Makoto exclaimed, embarrassed, while Sousuke nodded at Aki. “Right,” he said, “Makoto’s definitely better.”

Makoto felt like his face might explode from the blood rushing into it. “Come on, guys, stop that.”

“I mean, we’re just saying the truth,” Sousuke said. “You’re way nicer and Sei-senpai can get pretty annoying.”

“He’s exhausting,” Aki moaned. “Makoto-kun is a calming presence.”

“Like a scented candle,” Sousuke added. “Or a warm futon.”

“No! Stop!” Makoto raised both hands up. “No, no. Stop.”

Aki and Sousuke laughed, amused at his reaction.

“How about Sousuke-kun? Where are you staying?” Makoto would strongarm them into changing the subject, if that was what it would take.

Luckily, Sousuke immediately reacted, frowning and slumping down his seat in obvious discontent. “I live with my uncle. He’s the worst.” He poked at his food, finishing off the few bites left. “He has a son in law school so he’s all high and mighty, saying I don’t have a future and such.”

Makoto felt annoyance rise up in him so fast, it surprised even him. “He shouldn’t say that!” Sousuke was talented, and he had a bright future ahead. Everyone who saw him swim could see that.

“Well,” Sousuke said, “it’s his house. His rules. He’s annoying and he doesn’t let me eat dinner at their house but—”

“He doesn’t let you eat dinner?!”

Sousuke’s expression softened, kicking lightly at Makoto’s leg under the table. “Hey, calm down. It’s nothing. I just eat outside.”

Makoto frowned. That still didn’t feel right. Sousuke had a meal plan that he religiously followed. He was one of the strictest people Makoto knew when it came to stuff like nutrition. Eating out wasn’t a solution. “You should move out of there,” he said impulsively, letting the irritation speak instead of thinking.

“I enrolled late so I couldn’t search for a place,” Sousuke said. “I don’t think I could find a cheap one now that the semester has started.”

“I have a free room,” Makoto offered, and then pursed his lips, regretting the words immediately. He looked down, eyes wide as he realized what he just did. Wasn’t he trying to limit their contact?

“It’s pretty cheap,” Aki added helpfully, oblivious to Makoto’s panic. “And it’s a good place. We
got it at a discounted rate because of Haruka-kun’s parents.”

“You’ll… That’s okay with you?” There was cautious hope in Sousuke’s voice when he spoke. Makoto looked up to see him staring right at him. He looked like he really wanted it. He must have really hated his uncle’s place. “I don’t want to be a bother but—”

“You won’t be a bother,” Makoto immediately said, because at least that he knew for sure. Sousuke was nice and considerate and organized. He would be a perfect housemate. “You can live with me, if you want.”

Sousuke’s smile was so bright Makoto felt like he was going to be blinded.

Oh no, he thought, what have I gotten myself into?
Lesson 2: Definition of Terms

Chapter Notes

I haven’t said this so: fyi, Makoto not understanding that they were soulmates until everything was fine and they were all friends again is a tribute to the fact that Makoto and Sousuke didn’t even meet before episode 13 (which wasn’t even an actual episode, it was a beautiful dream we all simultaneously conjured as a fandom). And then when they met they immediately jumped to first-name basis? Obvs soulmates.

As always, thanks to Naya and Tiff, who were super supportive even when I’m sick and barely alive. You rock.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Soul Bond** |ˌsəʊl bɒnd|
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*noun*

A connection between two specific people (called Soulmates) which causes various physical and mental effects that signal optimal compatibility.

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Graduation was a sad affair, since it meant separation from the people they have spent the last few years of their lives with. For Makoto, it meant being an ocean away from Rin. It meant not having Haruka by his side. It meant having to watch Rin and Haruka be far away from each other once again. It meant leaving Nagisa, Rei and Gou behind. It meant having to pass the swim club’s mantle of responsibility to their underclassmen.

It was painful, laid out like that. Goodbyes always were.

“*You shouldn’t cry so easily,*” Haruka said, eyeing Rin with a frown. “*You haven’t changed at all.*”

Rin pouted and didn’t answer, simply staring him in the eyes. It was obvious how indignant he was though, so even Makoto could see what he was feeling. *His* eyes were still red from bawling earlier, after all.

Haruka looked back and raised an eyebrow. He had been getting better at compartmentalizing what feelings Rin was leaking and what he felt himself. The last year had been good for them, both with getting used to the telepathy and with handling the intensity of their bond. “*You’ll be fine.*”

Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, Rin shook his head. “*We’ll be fine,*” he corrected.

“*Yeah,*” Haruka agreed easily with a small smile. He looked at Makoto, then, narrowing his eyes. “*You, too.*”

“I’m not crying,” Makoto offered, chuckling a bit. *He* was nervous, but seeing Rin crying his heart
out always made him feel calmer. Seeing someone else panic really does ease the nerves.

Rin looked at him too, expression serious now. It wasn’t that effective, since his eyes were still puffed up and his cheeks were still red, but the effort was good enough. “But you will be fine,” he said, voice full of confidence. He has that tone sometimes, like he completely believes in them and would bet everything on them. It was a heady feeling to have that.

“I will.” Makoto nodded. He felt infused with their confidence, felt energized by their trust. “Don’t worry about me.”

Haruka rolled his eyes. “You’ll worry about us,” he said, matter of fact.

It was true. He’d always worry about them. “You’re both pretty worrying.”

This time, it was Rin who rolled his eyes, almost a mirror image of Haruka’s action. It was funny how much they’ve rubbed off on each other. “We’ll call and skype. You do, too. We can handle this shit.”

Makoto laughed. “Of course we can.”

.After the ceremony, Makoto went with his family to celebrate, leaving the couple to their own celebration with Rin’s family.

For a long time, he thought being around the soul bonded pair would bring him envy or despair, since his own soul bond didn’t work. But that connection was theirs. He couldn’t imagine having that. It was too strong, too enormous. He had seen the good and the bad of it, and rather than coveting it, all he wanted was to support the two. He didn’t feel like he needed that kind of intense bond.

What he had was enough.

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

Congratulations on your graduation.

You’re coming to the farewell party, right? You better. It’s your turn to buy me and Aki lunch.]

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

I will!

It’s my turn? Isn’t it always yours?]}

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke
Oi.]

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

Kidding :) Let’s go to your favorite place. I like their karaage.]

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

Okay, see you on Saturday]

- - -

Soul Bond Types

I. Telepathy

- Two-way telepathy
- One-way telepathy
- No telepathy

II. Intensity

- Strong
- Moderate
- Weak

III. Sensory

- Visual (sight)
- Olfactory (smell)
- Auditory (hearing)
- Somatic (touch)
- Nociception (pain)
- Kinesthetic (movement)
- Eclectic

- - -

“So,” Haruka said after a few seconds of pause, “you told Yamazaki to live with you.”

They were doing their almost-daily phonecall, something that started as soon as they were both settled in their respective towns. Haruka was just a long train ride away, so it wasn’t like they were that far from each other, but transitioning from living in each other’s pockets to living on opposite sides of a large city was difficult.

Makoto closed his eyes and dropped on his bed, clutching the phone to his ear. “I just offered him the other room,” he replied. It was a huge mistake; he knew that the moment the words came out of his mouth. But he couldn’t take it back, not with the way Sousuke looked at him like he hung the moon. He was weak and Sousuke’s smile was too strong.

“So he’ll live with you.”
He sighed. “I guess.” If Sousuke’s parents would give their permission, then he could move in as soon as he wanted. Makoto didn’t want him suffering much longer either.

“Will you be okay?” Haruka sounded worried. It wasn’t often he’d show that kind of emotion so clearly. Makoto was sure he didn’t know about the soul bond yet. But the same way Makoto had his theories about Haruka and Rin back in elementary, Haruka must have a clue about what’s happening. What he saw when they were in high school must have been enough to warrant worry.

Makoto hoped he wasn’t that obvious.

“I will be,” he answered confidently. He believed it in his bones, that he’d survive this much. It wasn’t like having Sousuke around was a chore. If anything, it would help him adjust because of the familiarity of the situation. He couldn’t deny that talking to Sousuke earlier was a nice experience (as it always was). “It would be good to have a roommate. I’ve never lived alone before.”

“Hm,” Haruka hummed in agreement, seemingly thinking deeply. “It’ll only be a year. I’m sure he can find another apartment by next semester. Or maybe—”

“Haru…”

“I’ll ask mom if there’s any—”

“Haru,” Makoto firmly cut in, “I’ll be fine.”

Haruka sighed, the sound explosive in the phone. “Okay.”

Makoto could imagine Haruka’s expression perfectly; that kind of defeated tone meant that he was wearing that one slightly pouty expression with the furrowed eyebrows. It was a small change on his face though, for someone like Haruka, it was one of his most expressive. Makoto felt bad for making him worry, but he didn’t know what else to say to reassure him. This situation was weird, but Makoto had promised to be stronger. He didn’t need anyone to fight his battles for him.

“Enough about me. How about you?”

There was a long silence in response.

“Haru.”

“It’s good.”

“Just that?” Makoto forgot how hard it was to get answers from Haruka. While his best friend improved in his social skills and being able to ask for help, he was still fundamentally a stoic person. Getting personal answers from Haruka was like pulling teeth most of the time. It was so much easier when he could observe Haruka’s face closely. “How was the swim team?”

“The pool is huge.” There was a hint of awe there that made Makoto laugh. “The team is good, too,” he added belatedly.

Makoto decided to let that one go. Haruka sounded happy enough, and he knew to talk now whenever he had problems he couldn’t handle himself. “Have you talked to Rin?,” he asked instead.

Another sigh, this one exasperated. “He wants to skype call later.”
“Am I keeping you?” There wasn’t much difference in their timezones but it was already pretty late.

“Let him wait,” Haruka said. “How was that class?”

“That…? Oh.” He’d vaguely told Haruka about wanting to get the subject, and about how he got in. “Professor Mika asked us to read on the types and stuff already. I think she wants to do a proper lecture as soon as the next class.” He glanced at his bag haphazardly lying on the floor with a few papers spilling out. He had went to the library as soon as all his classes were over and he photocopied the chapters he needed. “Your bond is two-way telepathy, strong intensity and…” He paused. “What do you see when you look at each other again?”

There was a feeling like Haruka didn’t want to talk about that, perhaps because of embarrassment. Nagisa was always the one who talked about his Soul Bond, while Haruka was the one who kept it in the down low. Haruka only really talked about it when it was Rei who asked, out of some kind of agreement.

“Everything,” he answered after a while. “Rin said he can see the world from my eyes sometimes, or feel what I feel.”

Makoto smiled, overwhelmed all over again for his two best friends. How many people had that kind of experience? He wondered if there was anyone in Japan who had as strong a bond as theirs. “Eclectic,” he said, “that’s what they call it. But I guess they should make a different category for what you two have.” Eclectic was the broad category for more than one. There probably weren’t that many who would be under the all of the above category.

He couldn’t see it but he knew Haruka had rolled his eyes. “It’s getting late. You should rest.”

“Yeah. Say hi to Rin for me!”

Once they had hung up, Makoto reached down at his bag for a pencil and a notebook. Flipping to the back of one, he wrote down—

**Telepathy: none**

**Intensity: weak**

**Sensory: ??? (nociception?)**

He wondered how many people had a bond as weak as his.

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The next day, as soon as he woke up, he received a message from Sousuke.

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

Good morning :) When can I move in?]
Good morning! Any time tbh? I could give you a key so you can bring in your things?

He was expecting an affirmative reply, but instead, his phone rang and Sousuke’s name flashed on the screen. He took a deep breath and picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” Sousuke sounded too awake for this early. “Sorry, did I wake you?” He didn’t really sound apologetic though. Rather, there was a teasing tone in his voice.

“Just because you’re a morning person…” Makoto made a show of groaning in exasperation despite feeling his tensions seep out. “Shut up.”

Sousuke laughed, the sound pleasant even through the phone. “Aren’t you going to be late?”

“I don’t have a class this early,” Makoto said. He stood up and walked out of his room. He might as well start his day, if Sousuke would be judging him for his non-morning-people ways.

“It’s 6:30,” Sousuke said incredulously. “It’s not that early.”

“For you,” Makoto replied. “I don’t need to have a swimmer’s day plan now. I’m fully a college student.”

Sousuke didn’t answer, and for the first time, Makoto listened in properly. His breath was steady and there were distant sounds like dogs barking and birds chirping.

“Are you jogging?”

“Yeah.”

Makoto laughed. “Talking would tire you out, wouldn’t it?” He was pretty sure it messed with the breathing exercise while jogging. That was one valid excuse he and Haruka used for why they don’t talk much when jogging together, anyway.

There was a rustling sound, like the speaker rubbed at his shirt. He must have shrugged. “Jogging alone is boring?”

“Focus on jogging, Sousuke. It’s dangerous,” he reprimanded lightly. He opened his cabinet and took out his bread and jam. He probably should go grocery shopping soon. While experiencing life as a college student was good, he still didn’t want to eat bread everyday.

Sousuke sighed. “Fine,” he conceded, “but let’s meet for lunch again later? You could give me the key then.”

“Sure.” Aki didn’t have the same lunch period today, but well. The key was important, wasn’t it?

“See you later.”

- - -

After two morning classes, both of which were easy going class introductions and filled with people with the same course, Makoto was in a good mood. He knew most of his batchmates’ names by now after multiple orientations in his college, and most of them were nice. They even invited him to some start-of-the-school-year parties. It felt like he was really welcomed.

Riding that good mood, he sent Sousuke a message telling him his class was over.
“Here!” Kisumi was at one of the middle tables, standing up and waving his arm without shame. Sousuke was looking at Makoto with a contrite expression, perhaps sorry that he brought Kisumi with him. Makoto was unsure whether he felt relieved or disappointed. Maybe a bit of both?

“Hey,” he greeted, sitting down on the chair opposite Sousuke. “We should have exchanged schedules,” he said, taking out his own and smiling at Kisumi. “I didn’t know we had the same lunch break.”

Kisumi grinned widely. “Yes!” He offered his class schedule and took Makoto’s. “You should text me too. It’s unfair that Sousuke’s hogging you.”

Sousuke raised an eyebrow. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Yeah, I just needed to give him this,” Makoto said, rummaging through his bag for the spare key of his apartment. “I have another class in an hour so I can’t stay long.”

“Oh,” Sousuke frowned as he received the key. “That sucks.” He snatched Makoto’s schedule away from Kisumi and studied it more closely, ignoring Kisumi’s indignant ‘hey!’. “I have swim practice until six thirty every day so maybe I could move my stuff this weekend? It’ll be easier for both of us.”

Makoto nodded in agreement, but he had to ask, “Are you going to be alright?”

Sousuke stared at him in confusion for a beat before chuckling in amusement. “It’s not that bad,” he said dismissively. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Before Makoto could respond to that, something along the lines of ‘I always worry about you’ (which he was thankful he didn’t say), Kisumi grabbed the schedule back and narrowed his eyes at them. “What’s this moving stuff thing?”

“I’m moving to Makoto’s apartment,” Sousuke explained. “I needed a place to stay.”

Kisumi pouted, moving over to Makoto’s side and placing his arm around Makoto’s shoulder. “You ARE hogging him.” He pulled Makoto closer. “You can’t do that. Makoto belongs to everyone.”

Makoto laughed, letting Kisumi cling to him. He’s always been this way since they were kids. Though, he might have gotten worse. “I don’t belong to anyone,” he said. “And besides, you have a soulmate, don’t you? Won’t they be angry if you—”

“It’s Asahi, though.”

Makoto moved away to look at Kisumi, eyes wide. “Asahi?” He remembered them together in middle school, but Makoto’s only memories are of Kisumi teasing Asahi. “You were soulmates?” He didn’t know at all.

Kisumi let go and giggled, looking delighted. “I knew but Asahi didn’t for a while,” he explained. “He confessed to me after graduation.”

“Oh…” Makoto stared. “He— He didn’t know?” And he still fell in love with you?, he wanted to add.

The smile on Kisumi’s face might have been a smug one if he didn’t look so fond. “Asahi’s kinda slow when it comes to those things, right? He didn’t really get it.” He shrugged. “No telepathy or anything grand, so it wasn’t like much changed.”
Makoto knew that feeling so well. There wasn’t much that changed, even when he met Sousuke, but no matter how subtle it was, there still was something. He nodded, feeling numb. “I’m—”

“Let’s get lunch,” Sousuke interjected, standing up quickly and dragging Makoto by the wrist. “Kisumi, go to your next class. You’re going to be late.”

Kisumi looked down at his watch, frowning. “Ugh, yeah. I have to go.” He gathered his things, winking at the two of them before saying, “bye Makoto! Sousuke!” And then he left hurriedly, like a whirlwind that just passed through.

Once he was gone, Sousuke dropped Makoto’s arm and looked at him closely. “Are you alright?”

Makoto looked at his face, then away. “I didn’t know they were…” He frowned. “I was just surprised. I’m fine.” He walked forward, shaking off whatever cocktail of feelings that revelation brought in him. He could examine it later, when he wasn’t already trying so hard to feel less.

Sousuke followed closely, almost hovering beside him. Makoto could feel his worry. It really wasn’t helping.

When they arrived at the line, Sousuke sighed and poked him on the arm. “Want me to treat you again?”

“You don’t sound like you want to,” Makoto replied immediately, confused by the offer.

Sousuke made a face. “Maybe you and Aki trained me into offering every time,” he mused. “Though, I do owe you for giving me a place to stay.”

Makoto shook his head, laughing quietly. “You’re renting. It’s not as if it’s free.”

“It’s not free?!” Sousuke theatrically widened his eyes, faking shock. “I thought you’d just let me be a freeloader, Makoto. Way to get my hopes up, man.”

Laughing, Makoto turned back to the counter. “I’m not that nice.”

“Debatable,” Sousuke said. It was a usual point of teasing for him, saying Makoto was kind enough to be a saint. “I bet you’ve already paid for this month and didn’t even think to ask me for the fee.”

Makoto looked back at him, turning red. “Oh.”

Sousuke burst out laughing.

“You haven’t even moved in,” Makoto argued. “Of course I didn’t ask for it.”

“But you forgot, didn’t you?” Sousuke looked smug.

“Shut up,” Makoto grumbled, going back to choosing his lunch.

It was an hour later, when he was already in the middle of another class, that he realized how Sousuke easily changed his mood and made him forget about those complicated emotions.

That night, after finishing his readings, he decided to open his skype to check whether any of his
Makoto had not talked with Rei and Gou for a while now, and he only knew what happened in Iwatobi because of Nagisa’s semi-daily mails. He didn’t see Aki today, either, so it would be nice to talk to her if only to arrange their lunch plans tomorrow and check on her.

When he noticed Sousuke was offline, he was hit once again by that ‘disappointed but also relieved’ feeling. He probably should get used to that one. It was quickly becoming a trend with his interactions with the other guy. Maybe ‘conflicted’ was going to be his new normal.

He was still checking through his contacts when a notification came in, requesting for a video call. It was Rin.

Makoto smiled and hit accept immediately.

“Hey!” Rin was grinning, looking happy and comfortable. His hair was still wet so he must have just finished his after-practice shower. This wasn’t the first time they’ve done a video call, but it still felt weird to see Rin in his new room. The walls, beige and bare, were so different from his room in Iwatobi which was purple and filled with pictures that Gou and Nagisa had insisted he put up. “I’m glad I caught you!”

“Me too,” Makoto said with an answering smile. “How are you?”

“I’m great!” It was obvious how true that was. He was practically glowing. “The swim team here is really competitive. I wish you guys could see. It’s amazing to watch. But anyway—” He waved a hand as if to move those aside. “How about you? I heard from Sousuke. And Haru.” He laughed.

“I’m doing fine,” Makoto answered. “It’s all new but everyone here is really nice. Living alone is pretty…” He shrugged. “It is what it is. So I’m glad Sousuke-kun would take the other room.”

Rin’s expression softened. “I’m glad you won’t be alone, too,” he said. “And Sousuke really needed a new place, so thanks. That idiot downplays it but he really hates living with his uncle. He’s been complaining about it since he arrived there. How long has it been…? He got there earlier for the swim club training, I think. It’s been weeks.” He sighed. “Take care of Sousuke, yeah?”

Makoto nodded. “Of course.”

“And call me if he’s being annoying. I’ll shout at him for you,” he added with a smirk. “He better be a good roommate or he’ll have hell to pay.” He raised his fists as if ready to fight any time.

Makoto couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I don’t think you’d have to do that. Sousuke-kun is more organized than me.”

“Sure, but he can be annoying and you’re not.”

“I don’t think you should say that about your best friend,” Makoto chided.

Rin chuckled. “Fine, fine. Sousuke would probably be a good roommate. Probably. If he’s not being grumpy.” He perked up, then, wide grin coming back. “It’ll definitely be good for you to be there for him. Extended exposure to you might mellow him out. Look at what happened to Haru.”

“I didn’t do anything to Haru-chan.”

Rin rolled his eyes. “You did. You just never noticed.”

Makoto frowned, not knowing what to say. He didn’t think Haruka changed at all from when they were children. He had always been that way, and whatever softness people could see was already
“You really don’t notice, do you?” Rin shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you. Even Sousuke got affected by that before, you know? You just have that thing.” He wiggled his hand in front of him, like performing a magic trick. “You make people better.”

“That’s not—” Rin was like that. Nagisa was like that. Even Rei, he could count as one of those types of people. Just being around them made you want to change for the better. Wasn’t that what happened with the relay? “You’re like that. Not me.”

Rin froze and his cheeks immediately turned red. He was still weak with compliments. It was funny. “Whatever. You’re like that, too. You just never noticed.” He crossed his arms stubbornly. He glanced down, and must have seen the time. “Oh, Haru’s online. I have to go. Good night?”

Makoto nodded. “Good night, Rin.”

He closed the laptop and placed it aside before going to his bed. He didn’t really understand what Rin was saying, but it still felt good to hear that from someone like Rin. He lied down and let that feeling lull him to sleep.

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**Broken Bond** *ˈbrəʊk(ə)n bɔnd*

(noun)

*A Soul Bond that has been severed through mutual consent from the Soulmates*

**Partial Break**

(noun)

*A Soul Bond that has been severed prematurely from one side, which often results in physical pain and nightmares*

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For their second day of class, Professor Mika put them into groups for a free discussion. She wanted them to talk about the definitions and types of bonds in their readings. More importantly, she wanted them to talk about the things they have heard about or experienced in regards to the listed terms. They were given half an hour, after which they would choose a representative to share the group’s thoughts to the class.

Makoto was put into a group with Sakura, Touka, Sousuke, and a guy named Mori. It was… a pretty balanced group when it came to their beliefs. Makoto and Mori were firmly neutral. Sakura was a big believer of love from soul bonds, while Sousuke and Touka were the opposite.

It went well for the most part, possibly because they were strangers and they didn’t have the energy to fight with classmates just a day after meeting. They were all civil with their opinions, though Sakura and Touka did look like they could break into an argument any time.

“I have a friend who has a visual telepathy bond,” Makoto said when they reached the sensory types. “Her soulmate could see how she felt through colors and art.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Sakura sighed dreamily.
Touka rolled her eyes before sharing, “I have a friend who has no telepathy but could sense when their soulmate was in pain.”

Sakura stared at her. “And?”

“Her soulmate was accident prone and she always got hurt. Sounds awful, right?”

“It does…” Sakura frowned. She was obviously distressed at the idea of someone getting hurt that way. Makoto could relate. “I hope she’s okay.”

Touka blinked in surprise. “Yeah, she is.” She gestured to Sousuke. “How about you? What type have you seen?”

“Eclectic,” Sousuke said. “My best friend said he used to be overwhelmed by everything.”

They shared stories, from friends to relatives to things they saw on TV. It was fun to exchange anecdotes and laugh at the romance movies they’ve watched. The atmosphere started getting lighter.

Everything was going well.

Until the discussion of Broken Bonds, that is.

“Isn’t this reason enough to believe that Soul Bonds are inherently a blight in our freedom as human beings?” Touka had her lips pursed, narrowing her eyes down at their readings. “The fact that breaking it from one person hurts them is just—”

“You’re focusing on the negative!” Sakura looked indignant. “Just as it has its advantages, it has its disadvantages.”

“Like feeling pain,” Touka sneered.

“I think,” Makoto started, stunning the others into silence, “there are people who would fight through the pain if it meant fixing the bond. I don’t think it’s as simple as good or bad.”

Touka turned her narrowed eyes at him. “And what if one hates their soulmate but the soulmate doesn’t let go? Would they deserve that pain?”

Makoto’s eyes widened. “No! Of course not!”

“The world isn’t perfect, is what Makoto was saying,” Sousuke interjected calmly, voice level to calm the group down. “I know someone who broke their bond as a teen,” he shared, effectively taking everyone’s attention. “Partial Break. He had it for five years. It was painful.”

“See?” Touka gestured at Sousuke like that was the perfect proof. “The other person was selfish for—”

“He wasn’t.”

Makoto hastily covered his mouth. His tone was sharp and sudden, coming out instinctively without much thought. It was a sudden burst of anger he has not felt in a while. He stared wide-eyed at Touka who had the same shocked look.

Just like before, Sousuke calmly raised a hand and said, “They were children. None of that was their fault.”
Sakura and Mori nodded in agreement, and Touka sighed but backed down. “If—if anything, I think Professor was right. I think spreading the right knowledge is important.” Mori offered quietly.

“We could all agree on that,” Touka concluded. “Facts are facts.”

“It depends on you how you take it,” Sakura added.

They wrapped up their discussion with that, choosing the rational Sousuke to be their representative. While waiting for the other groups to finish, Sousuke nudged at his leg with a foot. “It’s nice,” he whispered.

“What is?” Makoto couldn’t see what was nice about that whole discussion. If anything, it felt like a disaster. He didn’t want his new classmate to hate him just because of an outburst!

Sousuke looked down at his notes to hide the smirk on his lips. Makoto could see it anyway. “Seeing you angry at someone else. It’s refreshing.” He huffed out a laugh, unable to keep it in. “That was scary. I wonder how I survived that?”

Makoto slapped his arm lightly, frowning. “It’s not funny. I need to say sorry for—”

“Oh come on,” Sousuke said, “you don’t have to. Hey, Touka.” He directed the last part at the table in front of them where Touka was typing on her laptop. “You’re not angry at Makoto, right?”

Touka shook her head. “Why would I be?” She seemed genuinely confused. She went back to typing after sending them one weirded out look.

“You have the second worst guilt threshold I know,” Sousuke snickered. “We really should fix that.”

Makoto looked away, directly at the board to evade Sousuke’s gaze. He hoped his ears weren’t turning red. He really should be used to how easily Sousuke doles out those kind of comments. He’d seen him with Nitori. It was normal for him to treat everyone like a teammate he would take care of. He and Rin were experts at that.

“Um, Tachibana-kun?” Sakura, who was on his other side, tapped him on the arm. “You knew who Yamazaki-kun was talking about, right? So you know each other from before?”

“Yeah, his best friend and my best friend were soulmates,” he answered. That was the easiest connection to explain.

Sousuke, having heard the question, nudged his leg again. “And we’re friends,” he said with emphasis. “That’s cold, Makoto.”

Makoto laughed. “And yes, we’re friends.”

“And roommates, actually.” Sousuke went back to fixing his notes for their presentation. “We’re going to be roommates.”

Sakura brightened up, smile growing wider. “That’s so nice! I still live with my parents so it’s boring. You must be excited for that!”

Makoto glanced at Sousuke, thinking back to the previous days, and for the first time since he offered, he felt good about his decision. It would be nice to be around Sousuke more often.
“Yeah, I am,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

y’know tfw you have a crush and you’re telling yourself ‘ohmygod i need to NOT be around this person’ but when you’re around them you feel all (● □)▽ ??? Makoto’s like “same” /unrequited crush high-five/

-So I crawled to my laptop to post this #dedication BUT I'm still sick??? I'm giving myself a week to post the third chapter. The chapters are in the 4k-6k range so I'll manage ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ Also that's the one with the moving in and my fave stuff, so I'm extra motivated to get better!!! Just you wait domestic soumako!!! we'll get you!!!

Comments for this poor sickly girl? m(_ _)m
Lesson 3: Soul Bond Theories

Chapter Notes

we were talking about this chapter and thought of subtitles for 404:
> Makoto is Dying: The Series
> Good Luck, Makoto: The Drama
> Sousuke Kills Us Mere Mortals: The Story

It’s obvious what our priorities are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Makoto woke up at 9 am on Saturday morning, not by his alarm but by the sound of his ringtone. Still groggy from sleep, he pawed at it and dropped it beside his face.

“Mmm... ‘lo?”

There was silence from the other line.

“‘m hangin’ up,” he said, then let out a huge yawn.

“It’s 9 am.” Sousuke finally spoke, voice full of disbelief. *Of course* it was Sousuke. Who else would call this early? “How are you still—”

Makoto moaned, pushing the phone away. He was not awake enough for this. This was unfair. It was his first Saturday as a college student. He deserved to oversleep! He does *not* deserve to be attacked so early in the morning!

“...Makoto?”

The sound was tinny but Makoto could hear the laughter from it, the amusement that definitely colored his tone. Sousuke was smiling. His face must have lit up in one of those rare moments when he allowed himself to look completely carefree and entertained. Makoto groaned and picked up the phone again, if only to distract himself from the image in his head.

“You didn’t forget I was coming over, did you?”

“It’s early,” he answered, pulling himself to a sitting position to wake up faster. “Aren’t you coming after lunch?”

Sousuke made a noise at his ‘it’s early’ comment, but simply said, “Yeah, but I was going to ask if you want anything? I could bring brunch for you.”

Makoto thought of his kitchen and how he has barely used it. (His mother had told him not to cook alone, and Haruka always reminded him not to try.) He wondered if Sousuke would. In his head, an image of Sousuke, wearing loose comfortable clothes while walking around barefoot in the kitchen, appeared. He would have a focused expression on his face as he chopped up ingredients, and maybe he’d even show off by flipping the pan. He would be at home there, in Makoto’s kitchen. It was a nice image. And... also a very dangerous one. He shouldn’t think about that.
“I’m fine with anything,” he answered, almost fully awake now. “Do you want to meet up somewhere?”

“Nah,” Sousuke said, “just text me the directions.”

Makoto narrowed his eyes at his bedsheets, thinking of the possibilities from that. There was more than a 50% chance that Sousuke would get lost with his luggages. It was a disaster waiting to happen. “Actually,” he started, “I’m craving something? I’ll meet you at the train station.”

A beat of silence. “...Are you worrying unnecessarily again?” Sousuke sounded suspicious.

Smiling, Makoto shook his head even though Sousuke couldn’t see him. “You’re treating me, right? I’m taking advantage of that.”


Makoto laughed. “That’s not something you should be proud of.”

“Oh, when it comes to you, it is. Believe me.”

He supposed that was true, in a way. Maybe he should take advantage of what was given to him more. Wasn’t that part of becoming stronger? Resourcefulness and survival skills? He should look around and consider what he could use for his own benefit. He told Haruka that, before, that it wasn’t bad to be selfish sometimes. He should follow his own advice.

“Well then, see you later, Makoto.”

“Yeah, see you Sousuke-kun.”

- - -

As promised, they met in the train station. Sousuke had a huge backpack and another bag slung on his shoulder. He was wearing a light blue polo shirt and black pants. Like always, his lips were downturned in a frown and his eyes were sharp as he looked around the station. To anyone else, he looked pissed off. It wasn’t really Sousuke’s fault his face rested like that.

Besides, the moment he saw Makoto, his whole face lit up with a smile. It was breathtaking, even now, to see that change. It was like Sousuke had shrugged off whatever bad vibes he had and was so glad to see Makoto. Truly, it was the most unfair thing about him, the way he made people feel like they were the most important person in the world in that moment.

Tamping down that feeling, Makoto walked over with a smile.

They ended up in a restaurant a block away from Makoto’s place. Komegashi had cheap but hearty rice bowls, which was what Makoto told Sousuke he was craving. They sat down on a table beside the window and ordered food. Even before Sousuke could say anything, Makoto said “Oyakodon for him”, and the waitress had already left before Makoto realized what he had done.

“It’s fine,” Sousuke waved off any upcoming apology. “You knew what I was going to order, anyway.”

It wasn’t like they ate out often in places like this, but they did once or twice in Iwatobi, back when
they were both captains and Aki used to drag them for joint meetings that were really just captain-exclusive lunch dates they all used to vent to each other. Makoto remembered his order because he always remembered things from those days. They were one of his favorite things about high school. The meetings were fun, and he loved spending time with the two.

“Are these all your things?” Makoto looked at his bags, which were large but still felt like not enough.

Sousuke shrugged. “I don’t have much things. My other stuff are at uni in my locker.”

“Do you go home every week?” They needed to plan all of these now if they were going to live together. Makoto knew they weren’t going to be the type of roommates who barely interacted. As it was, Sousuke was entrenched deep in his life. There was no point in denying that. What he needed to do now was plan ahead of time, to know exactly how much damage he was willing to take.

An awful way to think, but there was no working around it. It was the truth.

“I don’t,” Sousuke answered. “I have swim practice on Saturdays too so it’s pointless to go home. That’s why having a house this close would be really helpful. Thanks, really.”

“You’re helping me out with the rent, so it’s good for me too.”

“Oh, yeah, about that. The rent’s really cheap, huh?” Makoto had sent Sousuke the rent information and the apartment’s address yesterday as soon as Makoto talked with his landlord about the move. “My mom was overjoyed. I thought I’d have to work to get an apartment.”

“Haru’s mom owns the building. They told me it was the usual rate but I’m sure they’re giving it to me discounted.”

“Eh, perks of being Nanase’s friend, huh? That’s cool. Speaking of, how’s that guy?”

He’d spoken to Haruka almost every day since he moved in. It might be unusual for other people, but it was comforting and Makoto was happy for that. He’s already stepped forward by moving away from Haruka; he’s allowed this much, wasn’t he?

“He’s fine,” Makoto said. “He said the pool was huge.”

Sousuke laughed at that. “Of course that’s what he’d notice. I bet he never even talked about how good his teammates were. Never even noticed the competition.”

“Haru never has to, anyway. He’s always one of the top swimmers wherever he goes.” Makoto felt smug, just thinking about it. His best friend was exceptional at what he did.

“Oh?” Sousuke raised an eyebrow, looking amused. “Rin looks exactly like that when he talks about Nanase,” he said. “You all look like you won something.” He paused, smile turning wry. “Though I guess in Rin’s case, he kind of did. He hit jackpot.”

Just that one phrase, that one change in expression, brought back a wave of weight back in Makoto’s chest. He almost forgot because of how long he hasn’t talked like this to Sousuke, but the realization was as bright as it was that first day. There was a reason why Makoto thought Sousuke might still have residual resentment towards Haruka, why he thought Sousuke couldn’t fully accept the Soul Bond despite their friends already being happy because of it. This was that, clear as day.

“Rin’s really happy now,” Makoto found himself uttering, despite not wanting to say anything else.
“Yeah,” Sousuke sighed softly, “he is.”

And there it was again, with less intensity than two years ago, but still there.

Sousuke spoke of Rin’s happiness with genuine gratefulness. He would always be thankful for what Haruka did. Alongside it though, there was that touch of wistfulness, that pinch of sadness, that aftertaste of regret.

Makoto wondered if Sousuke still thought of the what-ifs in his life.

---

The Moment for Makoto, two years ago, went like this:

He had just finished talking to Rei when he looked at the side, noticing Sousuke for the first time. They haven’t met then, eye to eye, in various ways. They haven’t physically looked each other in the eye, or saw each other as equals.

Until then.

Makoto looked at him and—

And stopped. Froze there on the spot.

“Uh,” he stuttered, eyes widening as their eyes met. There was that feeling again, the one he got from that time they did a video chat, that feeling of wanting to reach forward and touch. “Good morning,” he said through the lump in his throat.

Sousuke smiled at him, easy and real this time compared to the forced expression he had the last time they met. “Good morning,” he greeted back, keeping eye contact.

Makoto nodded, unable to say anything else.

Sousuke moved to the side and offered a space on the bench for him. “Rin told me he’s coming here,” he shared, expression softening. There was a tinge of sadness there that Makoto wanted to ask about, but he kept quiet. They’ve only just met. He didn’t have any right to ask. “He said Nanase was kidnapping him.” There was humor in his voice that didn’t reach his eyes. “I guess it all comes down to the two of them, huh?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, forcing himself to focus at the words and not at the little quirks he kept on noticing. (Sousuke’s eyes were the color of the pool, but not quite as light, like the deep part you were asked to be careful of as a child. His stance was forced-relaxed, like he wanted to tell everyone he was fine, that this was exactly where he should be, but that wasn’t really what he thought himself.) Makoto sat down on the bench and looked down on the floor. “We did all we can do.”

Sousuke looked at the pool, silence stretching between them. Then, softly, he said, “Thank you for your help.”

Makoto smiled wryly. looking up at him despite not wanting to. “Even though this isn’t what you wanted?” The question tasted bad in his mouth; it was cruel and felt unnecessary. But it spilled out all the same.

“As long as Rin is happy, I am too,” he answered, shrugging. His expression was fond, or rather even more so. There was affection there that suddenly cleared a lot of things up. The
Makoto watched him for a moment, eyes wide. The melancholy and regret from his expression was overwhelming. It was painful to see. There were layers to Sousuke’s happiness, a stack of feelings carefully piled up on top of each other to hide the darker ones.

With a woeful sigh, Makoto replied, “Me, too.”

(He meant ‘all I want is for Haruka and Rin to be happy too’, but quietly, in his heart, he also meant ‘I hope you can be happy too’.)

- - -

They ate in relative silence, their conversations few and far between. Most of the topics were about the food they ate or the apartment, too. Makoto wondered if it was a conscious effort on both sides, to stay on that course and not stray towards their best friends.

Afterwards, they walked together to the apartment. He pointed out as many landmarks as he could, preemptively making sure Sousuke remembered the way. Sousuke nodded at each one, laughing and indulging him without much comment.

“Here it is,” Makoto said as he opened the door. It was a small area and had sparsely anything that made it homely. The couch was big enough to fit both of them but it was worn out and lumpy. The TV was an older type that didn’t get all the channels. The kitchen could be seen from the door and it was barely enough for one of them to walk around in.

Sousuke let out a whistle, looking around.

“It’s not that big but—”

“Makoto,” Sousuke cut him off with a grin, “this is awesome.” He walked over to the couch, dropping his backpack to one side before sitting down on it. “I feel at home already.” He made a show of settling in, as if claiming the left side as his own.

“We don’t really have to divide up the chores much. Let’s just clean up after ourselves,” Makoto explained, carefully looking away from the view.

“Fair,” Sousuke agreed. “I have practice most of the time anyway so I’ll be out often.”

That was the good part. They were going to share space a lot, but it wasn’t that bad. Sousuke would be tired from practice and might simply eat dinner and sleep every night. He woke up earlier too, and even had Saturday practices. He’d surely spend less time here than Makoto did.

It was manageable.

Makoto would survive this.

- - -

Makoto might not survive this.

On Sunday morning, he got woken up not by his alarm or his ringtone, but by the clanging of pans and the savory smell of breakfast. He jolted awake, drifting towards the familiar smell. For the first time since he arrived in Tokyo, he felt like he was at home. It was like any morning in his
house: the delicious smell of fried rice, the warmth of the early morning sun, the busy sounds of cooking.

Except—

It was Sousuke cooking, not his mom.

And he was barefoot, wearing a loose shirt and *boxers*.

Makoto has seen Haruka like this every morning of his high school life, but.

This was *Sousuke*.

Makoto didn’t grow up with Sousuke. He didn’t treat Sousuke like another brother from a different mother.

Sousuke was… well. Sousuke looked different. He looked soft and warm bathed in the light of the sun. He looked *comfortable* in Makoto’s kitchen. In *their* kitchen.

This was precisely like the image he conjured yesterday. And yet, it was a hundred times better because it was real and right there in front of him. But also *worse* because it was *right there* close enough to *touch*.

Makoto was not going to survive this.

“Oh!” Sousuke finally noticed him, that I’m-so-pleased-to-see-you smile lighting up his face once again. “Hey. I cooked breakfast.”

Urging every errant thought into a corner of his mind, Makoto smiled back and strode forward. He was going to be normal and not be a creep. Sousuke deserved that. “Thank you,” he said, “I haven’t really used this kitchen.”

To that, Sousuke smirked. He deftly cracked an egg with one hand, his other hand mixing the rice. “I’ve heard from Nanase,” he teased, “how *good* you were at cooking.”

“Wha—” Makoto didn’t even know when Haruka could bring that up! “I just haven’t practiced enough,” he objected, despite the fact that he spent many weekends training with Rei in Haruka’s house. Rei was able to cook complex dishes by the end of it. Makoto still somehow messed up making miso soup.

“Hm,” Sousuke hummed, obviously not believing him. “Well, you can practice later. I own the kitchen for now.”

Makoto raised both his hands. “I’m not trying to take over, I promise.”

“Good.” Sousuke went back to cooking. Now that Makoto looked closer, he saw that Sousuke was making omelette rice with the leftover from yesterday’s dinner (rice-in-a-box from the convenience store). It looked delicious. Makoto knew already from Samezuka’s cultural fest that Sousuke was good at cooking, but seeing it for himself was quite a treat.

Makoto pretended that this didn’t add more to the ‘Sousuke would make a really good husband’ list in his head. That list did not exist. That would be inappropriate.

Shaking his head, Makoto turned his back to Sousuke and walked back to his room to get his laptop. If he was going to be awake, he might as well use his brain for school.
“I’m done,” Sousuke called out. When Makoto looked back, he already had two plates of omelette rice ready. There was even a box of orange juice at the side.

Makoto stood up to take one plate and get the juice. They only had one glass, two plates and about 3 sets of spoon and fork. He didn’t realize how little he had until there was another person living with him. “I am completely a college student now, aren’t I?”

Sousuke sat down beside him on the couch, since they had no other place to eat at. He looked around, tilting his head thoughtfully. “This place is too clean,” he said. “I’ll give you a six out of ten. Put less effort. Needs more clothes on the floor.”

“A six?” Makoto faked indignance. “I only have one glass.” He pointed to it on the table. “And I don’t have a coaster.”

Sousuke laughed. “No one has coasters, Makoto. Even working adults don’t use them. Parents do.”

“I’m not gonna clean up,” he said, purely to make a point.

“Really? I cooked though.”

Makoto groaned, slumping his shoulders down dejectedly. His mom would somehow know it if he ever refused to clean up after someone else cooked for him. And the guilt would kill him if he did it. “Ah. Yeah, I’ll wash the dishes.”

Sousuke laughed some more. “You goody-goody.”

Refusing to rise to bait, Makoto took the remote and opened the television instead.

Later, after Makoto was finished washing the dishes and Sousuke was finished teasing him about it, Makoto decided to get out of the house as soon as possible, maybe make an excuse like going to the library or something. The safest place was away from here. Sousuke was a health hazard.

But of course, Sousuke had other plans.

“Hey,” he said, as soon as Makoto was on his way back to his room to get his books, “do you have anything to do today?”

He looked hopeful, like he wanted to spend the day with Makoto. It was his only day-off in the week. And he had spent most of his weekdays in that house with his asshole relatives who belittled him. This probably was the first time in a while he could completely relax. Makoto couldn’t possibly ruin his day-off, right?

“No, I don’t have plans,” Makoto answered truthfully, mentally kicking himself.

Sousuke grinned. “We barely have groceries left, so I was hoping to get that out of the way today.”

Hearing that, Makoto almost sighed in relief. If he had pretended to have something to do, Sousuke would wander around trying to find the supermarket and he might get lost forever. That would be awful. “There’s a supermarket a few blocks from here,” he said. “I’ll change in a minute?”

“Yeah, me too,” Sousuke said, looking down at his comfortable house clothes.
At least Makoto got used to the boxers. Sort of.

---

Here are a few things Makoto learned about Sousuke on the way to the supermarket:

1) He was the type to make shopping lists;

2) His shopping lists were planned based on nutrition and their measly student budget;

3) He could cook a variety of things because of Summer Camps he has attended throughout his life;

4) He liked daydreaming about what dinner he could cook if he had a kitchen of his own;

5) And despite all that, he was willing to change his list if Makoto had other preferences, because Sousuke was methodical but he was an accommodating person above all.

---

“Are you sure you don’t have any preference?”

Sousuke raised an eyebrow at him, both hands holding a different brand of bread. Every time he wanted to put something in the cart, he would ask Makoto for his opinion, and Makoto would say he didn’t have one in particular.

“Honestly, I would have survived on takeout and instant ramen if you didn’t live with me,” Makoto said with a shrug. It was true. He didn’t know how to cook and preparing anything more than instant ramen was a hassle anyway. It wasn’t like he had a reason to live a strictly healthy life.

“You’re really serious about living like a real college student, aren’t you?” Sousuke looked amused at the thought. “Should we stock up on coffee and energy drinks?”

Makoto tilted his head, thinking about that properly. “Actually, we should, right?” He’s heard some scary stories from upperclassmen about needing to stay awake for projects and tests.

Sousuke immediately shuddered. “I’m buying us tea.” He placed the whole wheat bread on the cart and levelled a look at Makoto. “And Gatorade and Pocari.”

“You’re sabotaging my plans,” Makoto complained lightly.

“What I’m doing,” Sousuke replied, wheeling the cart forward, “is taking care of you.” He walked forward to the next aisle, fortunately never looking back to see the way Makoto’s whole face turned red.

---

It was on their last stop, the meat section, when Makoto realized a problem.

“Wait—” Makoto stopped walking, holding on firmly to the cart as Sousuke perused the lean meats. “How are we paying this?”

Sousuke frowned at him. “I’m paying.”

“But!”

“You just said you’d be okay with instant food and all those cheap stuff without me, Makoto,”
Sousuke noted. “All of these things are for me.”

“But I’ll eat too,” Makoto objected. “These are enough for both of us for a whole week.”

“My allowance is bigger because of my nutrition plan,” Sousuke said, “and you’re going to pay more rent than me for this month, right?”

“That’s because it’s only fair. I lived there more than a week before you did.”

“Quit arguing and help me choose one of these,” Sousuke said, clearly done with this conversation.

“Sousuke!” Makoto was not budging. For his sanity, he needed Sousuke to stop being so damn perfect already. There has to be a flaw somewhere, right?

“Okay,” Sousuke sighed, turning towards Makoto, “we’ll divide the expenses properly next time. Deal?”

He didn’t really want to concede, but he knew they’d be here longer if he put up another fight. “Alright,” he agreed. “Next time.”

Sousuke shook his head at him before going back to inspecting the meat counter. “You know, with the way people talked about you, I really thought you’d be… I don’t know, meeker?” He grimaced, pointing one out at the butcher. “I mean, they talk about you like you don’t argue about anything with anyone.” He chuckled. “Of course, and then I met you and I was proven very wrong.”

“I argue,” Makoto said. “I argued with Haru before coming here.” It was one time, but Sousuke didn’t need to know that. It was still the biggest argument of Makoto’s life.

“Oh? That doesn’t sound like either of you.”

“It doesn’t,” Makoto agreed. “I was… I wanted to study in Tokyo and he didn’t get it. You know how it was, before graduation.”

Sousuke’s expression softened as he nodded. “Nanase got pretty messed up, didn’t he?” He looked sad, thinking about it. “I’m glad they fixed that.”

The thing was, Makoto knew how important that time was to Sousuke. Haruka and Rin were going to be away from each other and what Sousuke needed the most was reassurance that they would be fine despite the distance. They all were invested in it, but Sousuke was overly so, like the idea of Rin suffering was a personal slight against him.

Until now, Makoto didn’t really get the complicated feelings that went through Sousuke during that time. He wondered if he’ll ever get to ask.

“Hey,” Sousuke called out, eyebrows furrowed, “you alright?”

Makoto nodded immediately. “I was just… remembering.”

“Was it bad? Your fight with Nanase?”

It was the worst fight they’ve ever had, and they didn’t talk for two days. “Bad enough,” he answered, looking down. “I didn’t— I knew he was having a hard time deciding where to go after college, so I had to tell him. I wanted to tell him that I worked hard too.” This was the first time he phrased it like that. He didn’t like telling people about the fight, and even more so, he didn’t like telling people about the insecurities that made that fight happen.
Makoto froze in shock when he felt a hand on top of his head. No one really did that with him, since he was so much taller than most people. Well, except for Sousuke.

“You did,” he said softly. “You really worked hard.” The butcher called out so he turned towards the meat counter and took off his hand without waiting for a reply.

---

As expected, Sousuke was busy enough with school and varsity that they didn’t spend that much time together. When they were both at home, Makoto would be on his phone with Haruka or on his laptop doing homework. Sousuke would be too tired to do anything but heat up whatever he made early in the morning.

Despite joking about it, Sousuke was also very polite with moving in the morning. He never woke Makoto up and always left something for breakfast. He was honestly sickeningly perfect. Makoto could not believe it.

---

On their next Socio 204 class, Makoto came in as early as always. He sat down beside Sakura, greeting her and making small talk. He found out she was a psychology major and they actually had a similar circle of friends, since education majors had to take basic psychology classes. He knew a few of her batchmates and they were invited to the same parties. He was glad to hear that, because he didn’t really want to go if he didn’t have a friend there. Attending parties was an important step in his ‘experience more in life’ plan.

They were deep in conversation when someone stopped beside their aisle.

“Hey,” Sousuke called.

Makoto looked up. “Hey?”

“I can’t go to lunch with you guys today,” Sousuke said with a displeased grimace. “Group work.”

“Oh.” Makoto frowned. “Aki’ll miss you.”

Sousuke let out a surprised huff of laughter. “She won’t. She likes you better.”

“I guess,” he agreed, smiling a bit. “She likes messing with you, though.”

“She’ll live,” Sousuke shrugged. “I’ll text you later, okay?”

Makoto nodded and waved as Sousuke went back to his seat at the back.

“Sousuke-kun is pretty cool, isn’t he?” Sakura smiled widely, watching Sousuke for a moment before straightening in her seat. “I’m sure the people in class who don’t believe in soulmates are glad he doesn’t, either.”

“Hm? Why?”

“Well,” she said, laughing. “that means they can ask him out, right?”

Makoto felt a heavy weight in his stomach at the thought of that, of seeing Sousuke asked out by an unknown classmate, of watching from afar as they fall in love. It was… It was a very disturbing thought. He looked down and pretended to rummage around his bag.
He didn’t have any right to feel this. Sousuke wasn’t his.

“Now that we have a better understanding of what Soul Bonds are, we’ll delve into why they exist.”

Professor Mika was in a good mood today, her usual don’t-mess-with-me aura lessened to a barely there feeling. She smiled when she came in and greeted them with enthusiasm. She must like this topic a lot.

“There are three primary theories as to why Soul Bonds came into existence.” She pointed to the back. “Kisumi-kun, do you know what they are?”

Kisumi smiled widely and nodded before reciting, “Biological/Chemical, Evolutionary and Spiritual.”

“And what do you believe in, personally?”

“Can they all be right?” He scrunched up his nose in confusion. “Because they all sound right.”

She laughed, clapping her hands. “They do, don’t they?” She sat on top of her table, nodding to herself. “Okay, let’s do a show of hands. Who here believes it’s biological/chemical?”

Sousuke and a few others raised their hands.

“Why do you think so, Sousuke-kun?”

“Because it acts exactly like a sickness or an imbalance when the connection is not complete,” he answered. “The main reason in itself that Soul Bonds were accepted as a legitimate thing was the fact that there are biological and chemical responses that could not be explained any other way. It’s in the way our bodies are made.”

Professor Mika nodded, pleased with his response. “For those who didn’t read this chapter,” she said, narrowing her eyes at the class, “it said Bonds were formed to balance a need in our bodies. It’s embedded in our DNA. With the problem of hormonal imbalance being pervasive in most countries, there are studies about how Soul Bonds help people and how finding your soulmate stabilizes you.”

“Is it true soulmates with realized bonds have longer and healthier lives?” Someone behind Makoto asked loudly.

“We’ll get to that in later discussions for sure, but there are studies that back that theory up. Soul Bonds as a topic is largely open to discussion, so there’s no definite answer yet, of course.”

“And experimenting on humans is unethical,” Touka added, “so it’s not that easy to add definitive proof to any theory.”

“There are experiments that could be made, the same way psychological or sociological experiments are done,” Professor Mika explained, “but Soul Bonds are sensitive topics to most people, so it’s a slow process.” She clapped her hands once then said, “Next, who here believes in the evolutionary theory?”

Touka raised her hand. Only a few other handful did.
“Okay, so why do you believe it?”

“If the biological theory says that it’s a part of our DNA, then it’s more accurate to say Soul Bonds were formed as a response to evolution. We’re being forced to find our ‘other half’—” she used finger quotes around the word, disdain clear in her tone, “to make sure we as a species gets stronger.”

“Evolution is all about the survival of the strongest, right?” Sousuke spoke up. “There are as many same-sex soulmates as there are heterosexual soulmates.”

“That’s definitely one point that’s always contended,” Professor Mika agreed. “If it’s evolution that provided this to us, then why would there be same-sex soulmates who couldn’t pass on their genes?”

“There are theories, like the kin selection theory, that explains how homosexuality still affects selection by helping out with nesting and promoting the reproductive fitness of their kin,” Touka immediately offered.

They continued discussing the said theory, throwing out opinions after opinions. A few other classmates offered their stance. Makoto zoned out almost immediately, feeling his eyes grow heavy. It was definitely an interesting topic, and maybe Makoto could even read more about it, but he was just so tired and honestly, the stress was probably getting to him. Or he was merely getting bored with the big words his classmates were using. He wasn’t sure.

He felt fingers pinch him on the side, and he straightened up immediately, eyes wide. He looked to the side to see Sakura motioning to the front with her head.

“Thanks,” he muttered, forcing himself to focus at whatever was happening.

Professor Mika glanced at him and smirked. “Last one. Who believes in the Spiritual Theory?”

Both Makoto and Sakura raised their hands alongside half the class.

“Sounds just about right,” she said. “Every year I do this, and every year half my class believes in this theory the most.” She gestured to Makoto with a hand. “Makoto-kun, would you like to explain your view?”

“Um,” Makoto cringed, sitting straighter, “I think the Spiritual Theory makes sense because it talks about the Bond more like it’s a dynamic thing, not like it’s something that appeared in our bodies for our own benefit. It accounts for the different types and how the effects are shared between two bodies. It’s not—” He cleared his throat, nervous of all the attention. He was quite sure someone was glaring at him, though he was scared to look who it was. “It’s not something you could discuss individually. It affects two people, and whether those effects are the same or not, it’s still related to both of them.”

Professor Mika’s whole face was lit up with glee. It was pretty scary.

“Good answer,” she said, giving him actual applause. “The reason why most students gravitate towards the third option is often because of the vagueness of it. There’s a fantasy element to it that is closely related to the way most children are told about Soul Bonds from a young age.” A few of the students nodded in agreement. “But Makoto-kun’s idea is a reason that’s not often cited. The Spiritual Theory is the only one that relates the Soul Bond to the relationship between soulmates. Both Evolutionary and Biological/Chemical observe it using its effects. It’s the easiest scientific way to look at it. Effects are quantifiable. The Spiritual Theory talks about the give-and-take more.
It’s the only one which considers why telepathy differs, and such.”

“It also talks about how we find each other from our past lives,” a derisive voice says from behind.

Professor Mika didn’t even bat an eye at the tone. She just smiled and shrugged. “Most students like it too because of the romance it brings. It sounds good, doesn’t it? That someone is so important that even when all memories of your past lives are stripped off of you, your connection to your soulmate still persists.”

“It’s a children’s tale,” Touka scoffed.

“Perhaps,” she agreed, “but we don’t know that for sure.”

Personally, Makoto really liked the idea of finding your soulmate in every single lifetime. No matter how many times you were reborn, you would always find each other. It was a sweet thought, and also a hopeful one.

Maybe the next time he was reborn, Sousuke would believe in Soul Bonds. Maybe then, they’d have a chance.

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Aki took one glance at him before she stood up, gently pushed him to a seat and patted him on the back. She left him at the table, and when she came back, she had a tray of food for him.

“You didn’t have to!” Makoto hastily took out his wallet, eyes wide. “Why did you—”

“Psssh,” Aki shrugged him off, “Sei-kun treated me to lunch earlier so it’s fine.”

“But—”

Aki levelled him with a look, the same one she used for her team back when she was captain. “Let me,” she said. “I owe you.”

He blinked, accepting the tray with furrowed brows. “You owe me?”

She sat back down and looked down at her lap, strangely timid. “Well, uh,” she said, playing with her hands, “I think I did something unnecessary? I know you did it yourself, so really, it’s kinda your fault, but I should have done something about it, you know?”

He raised a hand to stop her. “What is this about?”

She looked at him straight in the eye. “About letting Sousuke-kun rent that room.”

It felt like being dumped with cold water out of the blue. He gulped. “What?”

Aki’s expression turned from worried to warm and kind. It was an expression he’d seen often when talking to her. He used to vaguely wonder about it, not knowing why she looked so understanding, but now he had a hunch as to why.

“It’s stressful, I know,” she said, reaching over to squeeze his arm comfortingly. “I should have known to interfere.”

“You’ve…” He paused, thinking back to the times the three of them ate out together before. “How long have you known?” He could see it now, the way Aki was always so careful around them, the way she deliberately let Makoto interact with Sousuke but only to the degree he was comfortable
with. It made sense now, why those captain lunch dates were so easy. She was helping him out all this time.

Aki shrugged. “I had a hunch, from the start. But during our third year, it was…” She grimaced, searching for the word. “You were trying so hard to not be around him, but you couldn’t say no to the lunch dates, either. It was relatable.” She was the same way with Sei-senpai. “I thought maybe you had a crush and didn’t want to be weird about it, but then Sousuke talked about Rin and Haruka.”

Makoto looked down, even now remembering the feeling of sadness Sousuke’s words gave him.

“That made it all click?” Aki bit her lip. “Am I right?”

He nodded, refusing to look up.

“That’s why I’m sorry,” she said. “I knew you’d get stressed. I should have interfered.”

She had helped countless times already without him knowing, and yet she still felt guilty right now. “I did that, though,” he said. “I asked him to live with me.” He looked at her, willing her to understand. “And I’m fine with it.” I’m fine with it now.

She gave him a dubious look.

“No, I promise.” He tried to sound as sincere as possible. “It’s stressful, but it’s worth it.”

Her expression slackened into surprise. “It’s worth it?” There was a sudden giddiness in her tone.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding, “it’s not that bad.” It was bad for his health, and he was hyper aware of Sousuke sometimes, but most of the time, it was pleasant and Sousuke made him laugh so many times. Having Sousuke around definitely beat living alone.

She sighed in relief, a huge exhale of breath like she was keeping it in all this time. “I’m glad,” she said with a radiant smile. “I’m so glad.” She pointed down at his tray. “Now eat that before it gets cold. You need the energy!”

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After his Psych 101 class, which was the only other class he had during Tuesday’s, he and a few of his classmates went to the library to find a book their professor had asked of them. And then, when they found it, he decided to stay in the library to read his photocopied chapter there instead of at home. Maybe he could focus better if he was in a place specifically made for studying.

He sat down on a corner booth, pushed all thoughts from earlier away, and settled in.

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His awareness came back in waves.

First, he felt the vibration in his hand. Then, he heard the sound of a chair scraping the floor. Bit by bit, it came back. Until he opened his eyes and realized he was in the library.

He had fallen asleep on his readings.

The vibration was a call. It was lucky he remembered to put it on silent. The librarian here scared him, and he didn’t want to get in her bad side.
“Hello?” He still felt sleepy and listless. “Who’s this?”

“Were you sleeping? Sorry,” Sousuke said. “I was wondering why you didn’t reply.”

“I’m in the library. Must have dozed off.”

“Oh!” Sousuke very clearly perked up at that. “You should go to the gym. I’m just finishing up. We could walk home together.”

Makoto debated the pros and cons of that.

And then threw all those logical thinking by saying, “Sure” immediately. He was almost used to his own weakness by now. “I’ll go there.”

“Alright, see you.”

Just the thought of Sousuke smiling happily at his phone was enough to drown out any other thoughts, anyway.

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Makoto grew up around swimmers. He joined a swim club as early as seven years old and he never really stopped admiring swimmers since then. Haruka was a large reason for that. Being so exceptional from a young age, Makoto saw firsthand how fast he was underwater, and how beautiful he looked when he dived. Everyone looked when Haruka swam. He was graceful and made winning look effortless. He looked like he belonged there in the pool, all the time.

Sousuke was a different kind of beautiful.

He was almost as quick as Haruka, but the way they swam were polar opposites. Where Haruka was graceful, Sousuke was powerful. Where Haruka looked like he belonged, Sousuke looked like he made the water bow to his will. Haruka glided through the pool; Sousuke fought across the water.

Makoto admired both styles, but Sousuke’s style made him want.

He waited at the benches outside the gym, peeking once to see Sousuke getting out of the pool. Waiting was good for him, right now. He should probably take up yoga, or meditation, to make this easier. It felt like every free time he had, he spent clearing his mind.

When he was adequately calm, he walked over to the vending machine and bought two bottles of Pocari.

“Makoto!” Sousuke grinned as he jogged closer. His hair was still wet from the shower and he was wearing his new dark blue varsity jacket. The colors fit him. The red and black was never his color. “Sorry. Did you wait long?”

“No,” he said, and then offered the bottle at him, “I was just buying these.”

“Thanks.” Sousuke took it gratefully, drinking almost half the bottle immediately. “Let’s go?”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the quiet of the afternoon. It was going to get
dark soon so there weren’t that many students walking around campus. The usual bustle had turned into a strange calm.

“How was swim practice?”

“It was alright,” Sousuke answered, shrugging. “Captain asked me if I wanted to join the relay competition next month. He was asking about my course load.”

“Wow, already? That’s great! Did you say yes?”

Sousuke grinned. “Of course, I did. I’ve been itching to join a competition since I arrived here.”

“Sousuke-kun’s amazing,” Makoto sighed. “You’re really going straight for your dreams.” He was a bit envious of that. He’d always been, especially surrounded by people like them who had a clear goal in mind since childhood.

“I’m no Rin or Nanase, but I try,” he said. “There’s no other way I can reach them but to push forward.”

Makoto glanced at him, confused. “Reach them?”

Sousuke looked up at the sky as they continued walking. His eyes looked distant, like he was remembering something from long ago or imagining a future ahead. “I had only one goal growing up,” he explained. “Rin wanted to win in the world stage, in the World Championships or the Olympics. I wanted to be right there beside him. That was… That is my goal. If I could stand in a podium with Rin, I think that would make me happiest.”

Of course, it would. For a very long time, Rin was Sousuke’s world. That was the exact reason why he and Makoto clashed, wasn’t it? Because Rin was Sousuke’s world and Haruka was Makoto’s sanctuary. But Haruka was Makoto’s best friend, and Rin was… well.

Makoto sighed and looked ahead. For a few days now, he had been thinking of how perfect Sousuke was, how he was a good and kind person. There were hardly any flaws.

To be fair though, being in love with someone else was a pretty big flaw for a soulmate.

Makoto supposed, like everything else, it was just something he had to learn to live with.

Chapter End Notes

--DISCLAIMERS: Soul Bonds aren’t actually real so anything they discuss isn’t real either. (There are sprinkles of real psych things here because I'm a nerd but let's just assume everything is Not Applicable in the Real World)


-- heeey i did the thing in less than a week! be proud of me. I'm gonna try and do that again.

Questions? Wanna fight me? Wanna save Makoto from the evil overlord that is me? Leave a comment!
“So… sexuality.” Professor Mika sat on her chair behind the desk, her face completely serious. “Who here has met or seen same-sex soulmates?” About a half of the class raised their hands. She nodded and leaned her arms on the desk. “Out of those who’ve seen them, how many of you have heard people ask ‘who’s the submissive one?’ or shit like that?” She said the phrase like it left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Makoto personally has never heard anyone speak like that about Haruka and Rin, or Nagisa and Rei. Maybe it was because he lived in a small community where they all grew up together. He has always been surrounded only by people he cared about. He thinks he had seen it though, on TV. Did that count?

Sousuke and Kisumi both raised their hands, as well as a few others.

“Kisumi-kun, in what scenario did you hear it?”

Frowning in an uncharacteristic manner, Kisumi crossed his arms and answered, “An old relative asked that to me and my soulmate during a family gathering. I think it’s because my soulmate is taller than me and much more manly?” He pouted. “I’m very manly though.”

She smiled at that. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“It is!” Kisumi sounded indignant. “We’re both guys. Just because we’re soulmates with each other, doesn’t mean one of us would suddenly turn into a girl.”

She rolled her eyes, nodding in agreement. “It is a backwards way to think, but there still are a lot of people who think that. We mentioned the Spiritual Theory before, right? Quite a number of people uses that— and wrongly, may I remind you— to say that a female soul and a male soul would always find each other, no matter the body they were born into.”

“They found a way to use the theory to their advantage,” Touka said. “Pathetic.”

“Yeah,” she said, “they make it sound like the theory says that, even when it doesn’t. Numerous studies have already disproved any correlation between gender and sexuality, and Soul Bonds. And yet…” She let that linger in the air. “Amazing, isn’t it? How stubborn humanity can be.” She sighed heavily. “And by that, I mean, completely annoying.”

“But don’t soulmates complete each other?” A guy from the back said. It was a familiar voice, probably one of the few students who constantly spoke up during discussions.

Professor Mika narrowed her eyes. “Soulmates complement each other, is what I and a few of my colleagues believe in. And that isn’t related at all to the discussion at hand.”

“Women and men were made to complement each other,” he argued.

“Oh my god, are you kidding me?”

Makoto looked to see Touka groaning into her hands. Sousuke, who was sitting a row behind her, had his head on the table, like he had given up on this discussion completely. Kisumi was gaping
at the boy who spoke with something akin to disgust.

“People complement other people,” Touka said. “It isn’t related at all to a person’s gender.”

“Women—”

“If that sentence ends with have their own place or anything of that sort, please stop. And leave this room.” Professor Mika actually stood up, voice firm and eyes sharp. “This class would not tolerate those kinds of ideology.”

“I have a right to—”

Professor Mika raised a hand to stop him. “This is my classroom, and I’m asking you to leave.” She pointedly gestured towards the door.

The boy, who was smaller than Makoto but had an air of superiority, stood up and left, face full of anger. He slammed the door close loudly behind him.

Makoto sighed in relief as the tension in the room waned. He was upset at what the guy had said, but he didn’t think Professor Mika would kick him out of the class.

“As you saw, those people still existed.” She sighed, long-suffering, before sitting back down. “Back to our discussion. In your readings, there are case studies…”

They went back to the lecture, discussing the anecdotes in the book one by one. They were all mostly about lab researches into bonded soulmates, about how they solved puzzles together and how they reacted to the same set of problems while separated. There were no significant differences between the couples, no matter the makeup of the pair.

It was interesting, mostly because Makoto could imagine Rei pulling Nagisa to do the same experiments. It was the kind of thing he always wanted to try out, to study the reach of their bond.

He thought about how Haruka and Rin were similar at the core, and would probably solve problems the same way, but how they were always better when together. Or about how Nagisa and Rei were polar opposites in the way they approached things, but found a compromise when together. He thought about how Aki and Sei were both captains, but had different ways of handling their team.

He thought about how Sousuke fits in his life perfectly, about how he woke up early every morning to make breakfast and how Makoto was so much better at dealing with laundry than Sousuke was. He thought about how they both held on to their beliefs stubbornly, and how he hoped that they, too, would find a compromise someday.

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“I just—” Kisumi groaned, stomping his foot like a child. “I’m so annoyed at that guy. I hope he never comes back.”

“Don’t you have a next class?” Sousuke raised an eyebrow at him, evidently unimpressed.

“We don’t have a class today,” Kisumi answered, sticking out his tongue. “I can have lunch with Makoto.” He pushed Sousuke to the side and wrapped his arm around Makoto’s shoulder. “Hey, we should hang out more, right?”

Makoto laughed and agreed. They barely saw each other because their schedules were almost
always conflicting. It would be nice to spend time with Kisumi.

“What am I, then? An extra?”

“I like you, too, Sousuke, but Makoto is way nicer to me.” Kisumi patted Sousuke’s back with his other hand and then leaned his head on Makoto’s arm. “I need comfort. That guy was bad.”

“He was,” Makoto agreed. “You should forget about him.”

“Yeah, that guy doesn’t matter,” Sousuke added. “His shitty opinions don’t, either.”

“If only it was just one person, you know?” Kisumi slumped more, letting most of his weight lean on Makoto. “I’m really tired of people assuming things about me because of what Asahi looks like.”

Makoto grimaced, offended on his friend’s behalf. It sounded like this upset him a lot. He didn’t know what to say, though. It was something he couldn’t understand and thus didn’t have a right to talk about.

“People are stupid,” Sousuke said, shrugging. “It’s hard to accept, but there’s no helping it.”

“I guess.”

“Besides, you can totally kick their ass if they tried to talk like that. I’ll even help you.”

Kisumi laughed in surprise, straightening up and grinning at Sousuke. “I might take you up on that.”

Makoto smiled as he watched Kisumi’s earlier unhappiness disappear. Maybe Makoto was nicer, but Sousuke had moments like this, when he knew exactly what to say to lighten up someone’s mood. Makoto was glad to have that right now.

“Me too,” Makoto offered. “I’ll help.”

Kisumi turned to him, smile bright. “You will?! That’s so awesome!”

“What’s with that difference in reaction?!” Sousuke was chuckling though, obviously amused.

“Can you imagine what that guy’s reaction would be if you two cornered him?” Kisumi ignored Sousuke’s comment, instead looking up at the ceiling with a devious expression. “He’d be shaking in fear.”

“Sousuke-kun would be enough to send him running,” Makoto said. Sousuke would tower over that guy and he wouldn’t even need to talk. He could simply glare, and the guy would run away screaming.

“Are you saying I look scary?” Sousuke frowned, feigning affront. “That’s hurtful.”

Makoto laughed and shook his head. “You’re a little scary.”

“Ouch,” he replied, placing a hand on his chest, “I thought I looked dashing all the time.”

Well, he does, but Makoto refused to comment on that. Kisumi, on the other hand, said, “Sousuke, you’re objectively good-looking, but in that intimidating way that scares off people.”

That was… actually a good description. Sousuke was tall and handsome and intimidating, like he
was out of everyone’s leagues.

“I’m sorry, not everyone can be like Makoto,” Sousuke deadpanned.

“Wait, what?” Makoto blinked at him, confused. Why did his name even come up?

Sousuke motioned towards his face, grumbling, “You know, the whole refreshing thing with that face and your niceness.”

“With… that face…”

“Accept the compliment, Makoto.”

“That was a compliment?” Makoto wasn’t following this conversation well.

“Yes, it was,” Sousuke sighed, like Makoto was being particularly stubborn. “Anyway, Kisumi, we’re going to eat with Aki. Have you seen her at all after graduation?”

The conversation shifted with that, and they talked about Aki for a while until they reached the cafeteria where she was sitting in their usual corner table.

“Oh, a new face!”

Kisumi flashed a peace sign, sitting beside her. “Yo, Aki-chan. Long time no see.”

“It’s been years,” Aki agreed. “You’re in their class too?”

“Yes,” Kisumi said with an enthusiastic nod. “It’s a fun class. You should have taken it with us!”

“She said she tried,” Sousuke explained for her. “Sucks that you didn’t get in.”

A memory of that conversation passed through Makoto’s head, and he could understand now why she lied about that. She never wanted to get into the class, perhaps because she wasn’t interested in learning more about the bond like they were. That time, she was simply diverting attention away from her worry about him. How many times had she done that before, he wondered.

“Yeah, sucks,” she said dismissively. “You should get your lunch now before the line gets longer.” She turned to Makoto. “Let Sousuke buy your lunch. I need to talk to you about something.”

Makoto frowned, taking his wallet and giving it to Sousuke who took it without question. Sousuke dragged a protesting Kisumi away, sending one speculative look at Aki before disappearing into the line.

“Oh,” Aki started, taking a deep breath and letting it out in one exhale, “so, you haven’t gotten yourself glasses yet.”

_Huh._ That wasn’t where Makoto thought this conversation was going. “I haven’t.”

“We should buy your glasses after class today,” she said, “but I have the swim practice, so you have to wait for me.” She folded her hands in front of her, eyeing him carefully. “Okay?”

She was using her ‘I-know-what’s-best-for-you-so-just-say-yes’ voice. He’d never heard her use that on him before, only on her team or on Momo.

He didn’t know what else to do but nod in assent. “I could wait in the library,” he offered. “Thanks.”
She smiled, much more happy about this than what he thought was warranted. “Good! It’s bad for your eyes, you know? You need to take care of yourself.”

He nodded dazedly, still wondering why she was so pleased with herself.

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Makoto understood why the moment swim practice ended and Aki sent a [I’m so sorry! I need to do something! Go with Sousuke instead! He’ll wait for you at the pool]. He knew something was up. He should have known Aki would try something. Maybe she did misunderstood their conversation last time. Maybe his “this is worth it” meant something else to her than what it meant to him.

Did she think Makoto let Sousuke live with him to… what? Seduce him? He’d never do that!

“Argh,” he groaned, standing up and taking his bag. Now he was thinking about what it would take to seduce Sousuke. It wasn’t a good thought, and he shouldn’t think about that ever again. Damn it, Aki.

He had just left the library when his phone buzzed with a call. It was Sousuke.

“Hello?”

“Hey, practice just ended. I’ll wait for you outside the gym?” It was clear they were finishing up from the sounds in the background. There were a few whistles and a shout of ‘get out of the pool’.

“Um, are you sure it’s alright? You must be tired.” He didn’t want to impose. He knew how busy Sousuke was. Rest was an important part of his schedule.

“Yeah, of course. You should have told me you needed glasses.”

“It isn’t that bad,” Makoto argued. “I could buy them this weekend alone.”

“You’re going home to Iwatobi, right? It’ll take away from your time with your family. You miss them.” There wasn’t a question there. Sousuke knew exactly how much Makoto missed his siblings and parents. “Besides, you sat in front of the class because of how bad it is, right? I never figured that out until Aki told me about your eyes.”

“I could go buy them tomorrow,” Makoto said as a last ditch effort.

“You’re going to the freshman party though, right? For your college.”

Ugh. Of course Sousuke remembered that too.

“Don’t you want to go with me?” Sousuke paused, voice full of unease. “It’s okay if you want to go alone. I won’t force you to spend—”

“That’s not it,” Makoto immediately said. “I do want company.” He hasn’t even gone anywhere else but his apartment, the university, and the supermarket. He didn’t know what he’d do when he got to the mall on his own. Sousuke will be no help with directions, but it would be easier to have someone to talk to. It would tamp down any nervousness he might feel in that situation. “I just don’t want to be a bother. I know you’re tired.”

“Makoto,” Sousuke sighed, “I’m fine, and going to the mall with you sounds fun, okay? Let me have fun.”
“If you say so,” he conceded.

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Going to the mall with Sousuke was the right decision. The inane chatter they kept up from the university to the bus to the mall was fun and light. They walked around the mall until they found a map and the directions to the glasses store.

The process was pretty simple. The shop assistant lead him to a room where their optometrist checked his eyes with various equipments. They explained what they were doing step by step, pointing at each foreign item and explaining what they measured, but Makoto was content with simply answering their questions, letting them maneuver him from one eye test to the next.

By the time it was over, Makoto went out to see Sousuke staring down at a display of glasses. He looked excited, humming to himself and face open. It made Makoto smile.

“Hey,” he called out, after another few moments of looking and reveling in the image.

“Hm?” Sousuke looked up. “Oh! Is it over? Can we choose now?” He looked delighted, like choosing Makoto’s glasses was a special treat for him.

“Yeah,” Makoto said, looking around. “There are so many choices, though.” He didn’t know how to choose. He could go with his favorite color, green, but he wasn’t sure it would fit him. This was a thing he’d use in class all the time. He wanted to at least look presentable.

Sousuke grabbed his wrist and pulled him over to the other side of the store, while saying, “This one. It would look good on you, I swear.” He pointed at one of the glasses, one that had red, thick square frames. “Red looks good on you,” he explained.

Makoto stared down at it, feeling his cheeks warm. It would be nice to get glasses that Sousuke specifically chose for him. “It looks nice,” he said, gesturing to call the shop assistant over. When she was close enough, he pointed at it with a polite smile. “I’d like this frame, please.”

“Wait, you won’t look around?”

“I’m fine with this,” Makoto said. He really thought it looked nice, and besides, Sousuke looked excited with his suggestion. That on its own was enough for him to choose this over everything else. “I trust your judgement.”

Sousuke sighed in disbelief, a smile on his lips.

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They had time to kill, since the saleslady said it would take about an hour until the glasses were ready. Makoto left his cellphone number with the store and went outside where Sousuke was waiting.

“Do you have somewhere you want to go?”

Sousuke looked at the side towards the different stores. “I don’t have anything to buy. How about dinner? We could eat out for a change.”

Makoto nodded. “It’s been a while.”

“Because my dishes are so good, right?”
“They are,” Makoto agreed easily.

“Wah—” Sousuke looked away, clearly embarrassed. “You’re not supposed to just agree,” he muttered under his breath.

“What? It’s true,” Makoto smiled, elbowing him lightly. “Your omelette rice is my favorite. You should teach me how to cook that.”

“It’s normal. There’s nothing special about it.”

“Well, it’s the best omelette rice I’ve ever eaten.”

“Lies. I’ve heard about your mom’s cooking,” Sousuke said, shaking his head. “You’ll make your mom cry.”

“Everything my mom makes is delicious,” Makoto agreed. “But I like your omelette rice better… Only that one, though.”

“You raise me up and then bring me down,” Sousuke said. “That’s not nice.”

Makoto immediately shot back with “But I told you, I’m not that nice.”


“Oh, shut up,” Makoto said, laughing. “Let’s go get something to eat already.”

They ended up in a fastfood, because Sousuke decided he was going to have a cheat day but, more importantly, because they were both too poor by this time of the month to go anywhere else. They ordered food and sat down, chatting about anything under the sun. They finished eating after about fifteen minutes.

“Do you want to wait here or walk around the mall?” Sousuke sipped the last of his orange juice and looked questioningly at Makoto. “I’m fine with anything.”

“We don’t have anything to buy,” Makoto answered with a shrug.

“Yeah, but we don’t go here often,” Sousuke said.

Makoto studied Sousuke’s expression, wondering if he wanted to walk around but was leaving the choice to Makoto instead. “You’re not tired?”

Sousuke rolled his eyes. “You keep asking that. I’m the one living the healthy life, you know? Aren’t you tired?”

“I’m not.”

“But you want to sit here and wait?”

Makoto thought about it carefully, mentally listing down the things he needed in his other classes. “Oh,” he said, realization hitting him, “I have to buy a new pen and some art paper, I think.” He planned to buy it tomorrow, but then he wasn’t sure if he’d have time before the freshmen party to do that. And as Sousuke said, he didn’t want to lessen his allotted time with his family.
Sousuke nodded, shouldering his bag and standing up. “Bookstore, then?” They passed through a huge bookstore earlier that had a whole school supplies section.

“Yeah.”

“What’s the art paper for?”

Sometimes Makoto forgot how different their paths were, now. Sousuke was in the Sports Sciences, focusing on nutrition and health. Most of his classes were in the main gymnasium or in the science building. Makoto, on the other hand, was at the opposite side of the university, in the Education building. It was kind of a miracle that they even got one class together, or that they still found time to eat lunch once or twice a week. (Was that fate? Or was that the two of them compromising to spend time with each other?)

“EDLR,” he said, “It’s an introduction to reading and writing.”


Makoto took a few seconds before he realized what Sousuke must be thinking. He laughed. “It’s not teaching us how to read and write, Sousuke-kun,” he said, hiding his laughter in his hand. “It’s teaching us how kids learn to read and write.”

Sousuke scowled and lightly hit him on the arm. “Shut up,” he said. “How would I even know that?”

Makoto continued laughing. “You thought… You thought I had a subject like that…”

“Hey! Stop laughing!” Sousuke reached out to facewash him, though he was chuckling himself. “You’re laughing too much!”

“It’s just— I can’t believe you—”

Sousuke, clearly infected by his laughter, pulled him in with an arm around his shoulders and pinched his cheek. “Stop that.”

Makoto shook his head then hid his face in both hands, trying to contain his giggles.

“You’ll die of laughing and I’d have to explain to Haruka why,” Sousuke complained under his breath, continuing their walk by bodily dragging Makoto towards the bookstore. “And then he’d kill me and it would be a mess. Stop laughing!”

It took another minute, right when they were in front of the store, before Makoto fully calmed down. When he looked up at Sousuke, there was an exasperated but fond look on his face. It looked so warm.

“Are you done?” Sousuke’s expression turned into its usual nonchalance, except the tips of his lips were still twitching up like he was trying hard not to smile.

“Yes,” Makoto said, nodding faux-seriously.

“Good. I’ll go there.” He pointed to the magazines section. “Get me when you’re done?”

“Okay.”

Makoto took his time looking around, checking the different kinds of art papers and then scanning the scrapbook section for anything he might need. One thing he’d learned from his education
subjects was that being a teacher meant making a lot of props. Little children loved colorful and shiny things, and the teachers needed to get their attention. Makoto wasn’t as artistic as Haruka, but he’d grown up taking care of his little siblings, so he at least had some useful techniques.

After getting everything he needed, he walked over to the magazines section where Sousuke was reading a current events magazine seriously.

“What’s up?” Makoto siddled close, peeking at the magazine.

“Rin’s in this,” Sousuke said with a befuddled expression.

“What?!”

Sousuke pointed over to a small photo at the corner of the page. It was a small feature on up and coming teen athletes. Rin’s picture was definitely taken when he won in the 100m Freestyle last year. There was a small blurb beside it that mentioned that Rin was now studying abroad and training with world-class talent. “That asshole.”

“That’s amazing…”

“He never even mentioned this to us,” Sousuke said, scowling at the magazine.

“Well, maybe he was embarrassed,” Makoto suggested, taking the magazine away and placing it back down carefully. “You know how he gets with compliments.”

Sousuke nodded but he didn’t look mollified. Makoto knew he was thinking about the picture, about how Rin was smiling but it wasn’t his real smile. It was taken a few hours after Rin and Haruka had their first major fight post-reforging their bond. Rin won the competition but his mind was filled with worry about Haruka.

Makoto watched Sousuke’s face for a few more seconds before sighing. “You know, we still have time. They haven’t called.” He grabbed Sousuke’s wrist and pulled him towards the romance pocketbooks. “Let’s do research while we’re here.”

That was enough to distract Sousuke, the tension from his expression easing. “Research?” He looked around incredulously at the pink paperbacks lining the shelves. “Really?”

“Soulmates in Society,” Makoto recited, “and how Soul Bonds are treated by the general public.”

“I don’t think romance books would help,” Sousuke said, wrinkling his nose in distaste at one particular cover. It had a bikini-clad woman running on a beach followed by a shirtless man. “I’ve done enough research my whole life, thank you very much.”

Makoto didn’t get how he could know so much and still not recognize his own bond. But well. He tried not to think about that anymore. It probably was because of Sousuke’s stubbornness. It would be characteristic of him to be like that.

“Hey, we have Soulmates in Media in our syllabus.” He chose a book at random, inspecting the cover. It was tamer, with a man and a woman in casual clothes sitting in front of each other and eating dinner with one of their hands intertwined by their side. “Look, it’s not that bad.”

Sousuke glanced at it and scoffed. “That’s just unproductive.”

“…true,” he agreed, “it looks unnecessary. But it’s sweet? It’s like they can’t take their hands off each other.”
“So you’re the handholding type?”

Makoto glanced down at Sousuke’s hand, thinking if it’s yours, I’d love to hold hands, but before he could blurt out anything stupid, his cellphone rang. “Oh! It’s probably done,” he said. “We should go back.”

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The glasses were perfect.

Or, well, Sousuke put it on him, hands warm and gentle, and smugly said, “Told you it would look good.”

Which was as perfect as anything Makoto could imagine.

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The next day, as he’d promised his batchmates, he got out of his last class of the day and went directly to the biggest hall in their building. The preparations were mostly done by the time he arrived, the decorations put up and snacks overflowing on the tables lining the wall. He looked around and saw a familiar guy, a kind-faced upperclassman who hosted the first orientation he attended in this building.

“Keiichi-senpai!”

“Oh! Tachibana-kun!” Keiichi grinned, hauling a banner right into his arms immediately. “You’re tall. Put this up.”

The person beside him, an unfamiliar girl with long brown hair tied in a ponytail, snickered, kicking him on the shins. “Bullying the babies already? Unbelievable.”

Keiichi moved his hand adjacent to Makoto's head and then put his palm on top of his own head, comparing their heights. Makoto was about a head taller. “He’s huge! Look at him!”

“Stop being rude,” the girl said primly. She smiled at Makoto, slapping at Keiichi’s side without looking. “Hi. I’m Nagisa Kikuchi. You can call me Nagi-senpai. Feel free to never listen to Keiichi. He’s horrible and not a good rolemodel. Don’t let him lead you astray.”

Makoto tentatively smiled back. “Nice to meet you, Nagi-senpai.” He didn’t know how to react to most of what she said, so instead, he just asked, “Um, where do I put this up?” He vaguely wondered if every Nagisa had this whirlwind type of personality or if it was just those he’ve met.

“Oooh~” Nagi nodded, sharing a look with Keiichi. “This kid’s good. I like.” She patted Makoto on the arm. She was even smaller than Makoto’s Nagisa. “Here, let me show you where that goes.” She walked towards the stage, pointing to the ladder at the center of it. “Not afraid of heights or anything, are you?”

“I’m not,” he assured her, before climbing the ladder. She stayed at the foot of it, holding it steady for him. He went slowly, an image of him falling down and squishing her to death passing through his mind. He fastened one side, went down, then helped move the ladder so he could do the same on the other sides.

By the time they were finished, Keiichi was waiting for them with two cups of juice. “Good job, team.”
Nagi narrowed her eyes at him and snatched the cup. “You’re so useless.” She turned towards Makoto. “You’re so useful. Are you a member of any org or club? We’d love people like you to replace guys like him.” She pointed to Keiichi with her thumb.

“Oh,” he said, surprised, “I’m not… I never really considered it.” His one-step-at-a-time plan meant he didn’t step out too far from where he was, taking tiny steps forward like attending parties and joining study groups. He’d heard stories about university orgs and their initiations. They were all horrifying tales of embarrassment.

She smirked as if she could read his mind. Offering a hand formally, she said, “Nagisa Kikuchi, president of the Society of Teachers and Instructors for Children. STIC, for short.”

“Um.” He shook her hand, not sure how to react.

“We’re not, like, forcing you or anything,” Keiichi said. “But we’re pretty chill and it’s fun to be in an org, I promise. Plus, our application process is easy. We don’t make people wear costumes.”

“Unless it’s for the kids,” Nagi corrected. “But yeah, we’re chill. I protect the precious freshies from bullies like this guy.”

Makoto opened his mouth, then closed it, speechless. He’d never joined anything other than the swim club. The first time, it was with Haruka to help him. The second time, Nagisa recruited him and left him with no choice. This time, he was alone. And it wasn’t a swim club.

Nagi’s smile turned soft and understanding, like one a big sister would wear. It wasn’t quite like Aki’s. It had more… maturity? Or rather, it was like she was looking at a small child. Aki always looked at Makoto like an equal, no matter what the situation. Nagi looked like she wanted to pat him on the head and give him blankets. It was an expression he’d seen before, though.

Oh. It was how Rin looked at Nagisa and Rei. Nagisa called it the Senpai Look™.

“I’m gonna give you my number,” Nagi said, taking out her phone, “so you can text me if you want to join. Our room is in the second floor of the old main building.”

Makoto nodded dazedly, inputing her number. “I’ll think about it.”

- - -

He thought about it during the party, which he spent surrounded by various classmates from his required classes. They were all nice, and a good number of them were in the organization. They told him about how they spent most of their time arranging events for orphanages and visiting the children’s hospital. They helped out in some of the public preschools whenever they needed helpers. It was a good group, they said.

He thought about it the whole weekend, too, in between playing with Ran and Ren and helping out his parents.

(He mentioned it to Haruka, who said “why not do it?” with an air of someone who knew exactly what Makoto would decide in the end, and to Nagisa, who said “that would be so cool!” with a huge supportive grin.)

When he got back in Tokyo on Monday morning, he’d made up his mind.

- - -
His first task, when he texted Nagi-senpai about joining, was to fill up the membership form and pass it to her. That was easy. He went to the old building after class on Monday and found her lounging on STIC’s room. She had a stack of membership forms there, so he simply filled it out right there and then.

The moment he signed at the bottom of the page, he looked up to see her grinning.

“Uh.” He passed the paper back and waited for further instructions. Her smile was unnerving. She said they weren’t going to make him do anything embarrassing, right?

“Your next task,” she said, standing up and walking over to the shelf by the wall, “is to master this.” She picked up a shoebox decorated with sequins and colorful magazine cutouts. She walked back and placed it down in front of him.

He gulped nervously and slowly opened it.

It was filled with various shiny beads and different colored nylon strings. He recognized the materials from that time the twins made a project for school. “Master what?” He had to ask, just to be sure.

Her smile was all teeth. “Friendship bracelets. You’re going to make one for every member who joins this year with you.” She picked up her bag, which was littered with about ten or so bracelets on the handle. “It’s a tradition.”

That seemed easy enough. “Okay.”

“Anyone who breaks a bracelet given to them would be punished,” she added, which suddenly made things clearer. That smile definitely had a sadistic tinge to it. “Friendship bracelets have magic, you know? When you make one for someone, you’re tying yourself to them. So make each one with the person you’re giving it to in mind.” She looked at the white board at the side of the room. “The applicants are gonna meet this Friday, so you can meet them then.”

“Every bracelet needs to be personalized,” he concluded, “and strong enough to last… um, a long time?”

“As long as possible,” she answered. “Everyone’s going to take care of their bracelets, so you just have to make it as sturdy as you can.” She leaned forward, like she was imparting great wisdom. “It’s magic, so you have to believe it for it to work.”

That night, he was so immersed in learning to knot the nylon strings that he didn’t even notice Sousuke arrive.

“What’s that?” Sousuke dropped down beside him with a tired sigh.

“Friendship bracelet,” he answered distractedly, narrowing his eyes at his fingers. His hands were never that nimble, so the task proved to be difficult. The twins were better at this than he was. “Oh, yeah,” he said, thinking about how the twins did it, “hold this.” He sat sideways on the couch, his knees pressing on the side of Sousuke’s thigh. He offered the end to Sousuke, who gamely took it and held it firmly.

“Why are you making friendship bracelets?”

“I’m joining a club,” he explained, returning to tying the strings. It was easier this way since it was
steadier and he had use of both hands. “I’m required to make every member one.”

“Huh.”

“It’s supposed to be individually customized,” he said, “so I’m making Haru one for practice.”

Sousuke hummed in understanding. “So, once you’re done with this, you’re making me one, right?”

Makoto blinked, looking up. “What?”

“Friendship bracelet. For me.” Sousuke did his best persuasive expression. “Because we’re friends.”

“Oh, of course,” he said, looking back down. He supposed that was true. They were closer now, more than ever. He could even say Sousuke was currently closest to him, aside from Haruka. It would be fun to design a bracelet just for him. “Senpai said this was magic,” he said, finishing up a row of dark blue-colored knots. It felt important to expound on it. “That’s why we have to customize each one. It, um, ties you to the person you’re giving it to.”

“Friends forever,” Sousuke said, chuckling. “I’ve heard of that.”

“Yeah. The internet said you’ll be friends as long as the bracelet is in one piece.”

“Cool.” Sousuke reached over with his other hand to the box of materials Makoto had on the table. He rummaged through it with clear intent.

Makoto let him be, focused on the task at hand. He wanted it to be perfect. It has been such a long time since he made a gift for Haruka. This would be a great thank you present for all the help Haruka gave him during his university search and even now.

He was almost done with the bracelet when Sousuke spoke again. “You should teach me how to make one,” he said.

Makoto blinked up at him, pausing on the last few loops. “Teach you?”

“It’s unfair if it’s not both of us,” Sousuke said, scrunching up his nose in distaste. “Friendship goes both ways.”

*Oh, the irony.* Makoto repressed the urge to laugh. “I’ll teach you tomorrow,” he said. “You should eat dinner.”

Sousuke nodded, patting his stomach. “Oh, yeah. I’m hungry.” He looked down at the strings. “After you finish.”

“A almost done.” Makoto tied the last row, quicker now that he was used to the motions. “There.” He held it up, smiling contentedly. It looked like the sea, with different hues of blue strings and shiny white beads like waves. It felt like Haruka’s.

Standing up and stretching, Sousuke placed the box back on the table, taking out a roll of red nylon strings. “Save this one for me,” he said.

“What’s this for?” Makoto called out to Sousuke’s back as he started heating up his dinner.

“Your bracelet,” Sousuke answered. “It’s the color of your glasses.”
“Oh,” he muttered, warmth spreading through him. “Okay.”

Later, before he slept, he looked at his bedside table where the two sets of strings were placed: one for the bracelet Sousuke would make for him, and one for the bracelet he’d make for Sousuke.

Red, like his glasses, Sousuke had picked.

The other one, Makoto’s choice, was blue green, like Sousuke’s eyes.

Vaguely, in his sleep-adding mind, he remembered his elementary art teacher talking about primary colors, and mixing them together, and how that made complementary colors. “Violet is the complement of yellow, orange is the complement of blue,” she’d said, “and green is the complement of red.”

That really fit them, he thought, as he finally fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

-- We’re kinda halfway through the story, can you believe it? Wtf right

-- drinking game: take a shot every time Sousuke makes Makoto laugh. *ambulance sirens*

-- please know that half the time I was writing this was spent hitting my head on a wall because of frustration over soumako being… who they are… /gestures at everything they do/ why

I'm going to go away for the weekend, so I'm posting this now. I finished in less than a week :3 Let's hope it continues that way. Comments really help motivate me tho
Lesson 5: Theories of Love

Chapter Notes

I forgot to place this anywhere so if you want to read supplementary materials read [this one](#). It's the nagimako dynamics. That's it. I just needed to share it.

Also damn I update fast. Tnx for the comments. It heals me. Keep em coming.

P.S. Luv u Naya, thanks for suffering with me.

It was almost a week after he got his glasses that he saw Aki again. She was at the grassy area outside the Fine Arts building, sitting beside Sei-senpai with her sketchpad on her lap. It looked like she was sketching him. Makoto debated whether to greet them or walk the other way.

In the end, politeness won over and he approached the two. He had not seen Sei since they first checked this university out and Sei drove them around Tokyo. Makoto should probably have searched for him and thanked him before this. (He was busy, though. He had a perfectly reasonable excuse.)

“Good afternoon, Aki-chan, Mikoshiba-senpai.”

They both looked up in unison, Aki’s focused gaze melting into her usual smile while Sei readily stood up to give him a hug. “Tachibana!” Sei released him and looked him up and down. “You’re all grown up.”

Makoto chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s only been a month or so.”

“Too long,” Sei said. “We’re finally in the same city so we should hang out.”

“He’s busy,” Aki dismissed that suggestion with a wave of a hand, turning back to her sketchpad. She erased a few lines, eyes narrowing in concentration.

There was silence for a few moments until— “Why is it pink?” Sei raised an eyebrow, tilting his head to stare Aki in the eyes. “He’s pink?”

Makoto watched as Aki laughed and patted Sei on the arm. Those two didn’t have the same telepathy as Nagisa (who heard Rei’s thoughts) or Haruka (who felt and saw everything Rin did). Instead, Sei could see the colors of Aki’s thoughts. It took a long time before he decoded what they meant, but now he had gotten used to it.

“Makoto is pink,” Aki agreed with a nod, never looking up from sketching.

“Sei blinked, frown deepening. He turned to Makoto and examined him more closely. “Pink, huh…” He nodded to himself before leaning towards Aki and kissing her on the forehead. “I’ll leave you to that, then,” he said with quiet laughter. “Call me later?”

Aki shrugged then tore the page from her sketchpad. “I’ll come over,” she said. “This one sucks.”

A pleased grin appeared on Sei’s face. It looked almost exactly like Momo’s whenever Nitori gave
him attention. “Okay. Want me to fetch you?”

“I’ll manage,” she said. “See you later, Sei.” She folded the sketch and placed it on the front pocket of his bag.

Sei nodded before quickly saying goodbye to Makoto and jogging away towards the parking lot. Before he disappeared completely, he shouted, “Good luck, Tachibana!”

(Makoto felt confused about the whole interaction, as was normal when he saw the two. He remembered when they first saw each other during joint practice, how Sei’s eyes got wide and then he squinted them shut and winced. “It’s too bright,” he had groaned, and Aki immediately walked over to offer him a drink. Later, Aki would explain to Makoto that realizing that Sei was her soulmate was so much of a shock that her mind basically whited out. After that, Sei spent as much time as he could around Aki, observing the changes in her mind’s colors and making an inventory for himself. “He’s competitive,” she had explained then. “He wants to be the best here too.”)

“Pink?” Makoto sat down beside her, eyeing her inquisitively. “What does pink mean?”

She looked at the sky, pensive. “Makoto-kun is safe,” she said, raising one finger. “And Makoto-kun is exciting.” She raised another finger. “And I’m really, really interested in… well, you.” She raised a third finger.

Makoto frowned. That didn’t really make any sense. “Why did Sei-senpai leave?”

“Sei’s a bright orange,” Aki explained. “I’m in the mood for pink today.”

“That sounds... complicated.”

She shook her head. “Not really. I think he knows I wanted to ask you things he’s not allowed to hear about.”

“About…?”

She simply raised an eyebrow at him, purposely poking at the bridge of his glasses.

“Oh,” he said. So Aki knew but Sei didn’t, huh? He thought for sure Sei would have figured it out too, since he could see through Aki’s mind. Maybe Makoto did not understand Bonds well, even now.

“Oh?” She turned fully towards him, narrowing her eyes. “How was your date?”

“It wasn’t a date,” he reflexively corrected. “And that wasn’t very nice of you.” He frowned disapprovingly at her. “I don’t want to go on a date with Sousuke-kun.” Not this way, at least.

She didn’t care for his disapproval. There was an unapologetic tone to her voice when she said, “I didn’t do anything bad.” She paused, looking to the side as if searching for words. “And I think it’s stupid to say you don’t want to go on a date with him. You do.”

“I don’t want to go on a date if he doesn’t know it’s a date,” he amended. “I don’t want to force him to do that. It’s taking advantage of his kindness.” Until now, he felt guilty of the thoughts in his head whenever he looked at Sousuke too long. It was unfair.

“He likes spending time with you, though.”

He sighed. “I know that.” Sousuke was always quick to tell him that he appreciated his company,
and liked hanging out with him any time. It was a privilege that Makoto did not take lightly.

“So what’s your issue?” She crossed her arms challengingly.

“It’s unfair to spend that kind of time with him while feeling this,” he said, looking down. It sucked, but the guilt would eat him alive if he didn’t properly assess their situation. Boundaries were important.

Aki stared at him for a moment, expression unreadable. “What do you feel when around him?”

Makoto felt warmth, most of the time. Like having Sousuke around was comfort and protection rolled into one. But more and more, the warmth, soft and simple before, was turning into a larger fire, volatile and needy. He used to be okay with simply being around Sousuke, but now he wanted to reach out. He wanted to make Sousuke laugh. He wanted to have Sousuke’s arms around him, or his fingers interlaced with his.

Makoto wants so much. So badly.

He felt like he added oil into an already raging fire.

“I don’t know,” he answered, because that was it. That was the only answer he could come up with. There were too many feelings, all of them conflicting, and he was still too close to see the bigger picture. “I think I’m fine.” I think I can continue being fine, if it meant I could experience the good parts. I think it’s still worth it. “Promise me not to do anything like that again, Aki. Please.”

“So status quo?” Aki looked sad. “You don’t want anything to change?”

“What I have is enough,” he answered. “It always has been.”

She shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. You went to Tokyo for a change. You wanted change, didn’t you?”

That was true.

That was the whole point of going here. But.

“I wanted to step forward.” He went here to a new environment, met new friends, joined a club that wasn’t a swim club, and took the initiative to get a class he wanted. Wasn’t he doing well? Wasn’t that enough? “But that doesn’t change the fact that my bond is this. I never wanted to change that.” The bond wasn’t just his. It wasn’t okay to act like it was something that affected him alone. He could survive the bad parts of it, if he could control the situation properly.

“Didn’t you learn anything at all from Haruka and Rin?” Aki looked annoyed now.

Makoto smiled at that, because he had thought of that so many times. Their situation was dramatic and had the simple solution of having the two accept their feelings. It wasn’t like his. Theirs was a strong magnetic attraction. Makoto had never felt anything like that.

“Haruka and Rin are in love with each other,” he said plainly. “They were in love since they were twelve.”

Aki bit her lip, eyebrows furrowing. “And you and Sousuke are… what?”

“And that would be fine with you?”

*I’d have to be. “Sure, yeah.”*

Aki sighed. “Whatever. I’m sorry, I won’t interfere again.” Her annoyance seemed to have toned down into quiet frustration. She flipped her sketchpad to another page and placed her pencil on the surface again. “Go do whatever you’re supposed to do,” she said. “I need some alone time.”

Makoto had the urge to say sorry, but he knew she’d get angrier if he did, so instead, he stood up, uttered a soft goodbye and left.

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*Socio 204 has always been a good choice. It was a class Makoto always loved attending, and he appreciated the discussions a lot. He learned about himself and other people every single session. It was good for him.*

But despite that, this particular topic felt like a personal jab at him. It felt like an attack, like Professor Mika peeked into his head and decided to hit him where it hurt.

“The Soul Bond does not make people fall in love,” she said, writing a huge $\text{BOND} =/= \text{LOVE}$ on the board. “It’s a huge help, yes, but it is generally not a huge enough push to force two people into a relationship, or more likely, it’s never enough to keep a relationship.” She clicked the overhead projector on and an image of a diagram appeared on the screen. It was a triangle with various words on each point and on each side. “Today, we’ll discuss the Triangular Theory of Love.”

Someone raised a hand on the front row. Makoto remembered him as one of the people who were firmly against the Soul Bond. “How about the love-at-first-sight incidents?”

“Happens to non-soulmates though, doesn’t it?” She hummed, tapping the table. “Okay, here’s what I want you to do: write down that question and ask that after we discuss the Love Theories. Then we’ll answer it as a class. Deal?”

He nodded and immediately wrote down on his notebook.

“Now, we have a few different Theories of Love, but we’ll start with my favorite.” She pointed to the diagram. It had three huge words at each point of the triangle: Intimacy, Commitment, and Passion. “The triangular theory of love discusses the different types of love, and how these three components create them.

“The first component is intimacy…”

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*Makoto had all his focus once again on making a friendship bracelet when Sousuke arrived at home. This time, instead of disturbing him, Sousuke went ahead and heated up his dinner. He ate quickly and efficiently without making much sound. And then, when he was finished, he walked over to the couch and sat on the left side, offering a hand. Makoto placed the end of the bracelet on it without a word.*

The silence continued as Makoto poured all his thoughts and feelings into weaving the bracelet, willing the magic to work. He used the light green and blue-green strings alongside black diamond-shaped beads. It was a steady design, with a numerical pattern for the knots and the beads; a logical sequence unlike the freestyle that was Haruka’s.
Sousuke was soothing like the colors of the strings. He was a stable presence like the familiarity of the pattern. But he was also dark sharp beads that were beautiful but could be painful. Every part of it was well thought out. Every move of Makoto’s hand was deliberate. He needed to pull each knot tightly, to make sure the bracelet would be sturdy enough to last. He wanted it to last as long as he could have him.

It took him a while to finish, but seeing the completed product gave him a sense of satisfaction. He pulled it back and placed it on his lap, gazing at it reverently. It was perfect.

“Do you—” Makoto cleared his throat, looking at Sousuke. “Do you want it now?”

Sousuke was staring down at the bracelet consideringly. “No,” he answered. “Teach me how to make yours first. I want it to…” He shrugged, like he was unable to find the word he was looking for.

“You want it to be fair,” Makoto offered. “You want it to be an equivalent exchange.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s it.”

Makoto nodded and took the shoebox, placing it on Sousuke’s lap. “I left the red one for you, and you can use anything in there.” As Sousuke chose his materials, Makoto opened up the websites he used to learn the knots for the bracelet. They were pretty simple and it had lots of informative step-by-step pictures.

“I’m done.” Sousuke had chosen a dark brown string and small white pearl-like beads alongside his original red string.

“So first, we need to make the first knot.”

Makoto got strings of his own to demonstrate how it was done. He even pointed to the screen to show the easy-to-understand diagrams.

But apparently, Sousuke wasn’t only bad with *place directions.* He was also pretty bad with following instructions. It was a new side to him Makoto has never seen before. He was as overly focused into it as with anything he does, but Sousuke clearly got frustrated the fourth time he couldn’t tie the strings and it ended up slipping off his fingers.

“You made it look so easy,” Sousuke grumbled.

“I could make the first knot for you?”

Sousuke scowled and snatched the strings away from Makoto’s offered hand. “Don’t baby me. I can do this.”

“Of course you can,” Makoto said. “But the first knot is the hardest, so you can let me help.”

Sousuke narrowed his eyes for a second before sighing and giving him the strings. “Fine,” he said, “but that’s all you’re allowed to do.”

Makoto laughed. “I won’t offer to make myself a bracelet for you, Sousuke-kun.”

“Well, yeah. I’m the one who has to do it. It’s supposed to be infused with my magic or something, right?” His voice was teasing.

“Intentions,” Makoto corrected, since he figured that out while making Sousuke’s. It wasn’t *magic.*
It was your memories, your feelings, everything in you that sang when you thought of the other person. “You make it with their image in mind, but also what you feel for them.”

“Oh,” Sousuke exhaled, soft and quiet.

Makoto looked up to see the change in his expression from the casual smile to something more… tender. His heart ached at the image, even though he didn’t understand what it meant. He wondered what he would hear, if he could hear Sousuke’s thoughts.

That loaded silence continued as Makoto tied the first knot and gave the strings back to Sousuke. Then, they went back to looking at the diagrams and designs, making Sousuke try each.

He was really bad. He could do it, but his hands were awkward and he was obviously not used to handling something like this. Though he wasn’t an expert, Makoto at least had some practice with helping out his siblings and braiding Ran’s hair. Sousuke was an only child who never liked arts and crafts.

“How,” Makoto couldn’t help but interject, reaching out to rearrange Sousuke’s fingers properly. He was holding the string all wrong, in the first place. “Stay like this.” Their hands were the same size, but Sousuke runs hotter and Makoto felt conscious of his cold hands. He resolutely ignored the observation and quickly finished teaching Sousuke about the proper hold.

When he let go, his hands felt colder.

It took quite some time but Sousuke learned the basic braiding skills he needed to continue the work on his own. Being the competitive person he was, Sousuke asked Makoto to let him finish the bracelet privately. He wanted it to be a surprise, he said.

“Okay,” Makoto agreed. “Good night, then?” He stood up and yawned.

Sousuke stood up as well. “Yeah,” he said, reaching out to squeeze his wrist, “this was fun. Thanks for teaching me.”

Makoto smiled and nodded. “It’s no problem.”

As he watched Sousuke walk back to his room, he touched his wrist and wondered if the bond was responsible for the lingering heat there.

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“Intimacy is the aspect that encompasses the feelings of closeness, understanding and caring between two people,” Professor Mika explained, “and feeling it on its own is considered ‘liking’ someone. It’s the foundation of a loving relationship, whether it be friendship or more.”

---

The week passed by fast, with him being busy with homework and readings and with Sousuke being busy with building a rapport with his new relay teammates. Before Makoto knew, it was already Friday. It was already time to meet the other applicants or, as Nagi-senpai called them, his “future best friends”.

He went to the clubroom after his last class, arriving there about 15 minutes earlier than the
assigned time.

Nagi and Keiichi were there by then, bickering over something in the laptop in front of them. “She’s not my type,” Nagi said, scrunching up her nose. “She’s your type. Don’t clump me with your god awful tastes.”

“That’s so unnecessary, man. Don’t attack me like this.”

They both looked up when Makoto stepped in, creepy identical smiles on their faces.

“Oh, hey!” Keiichi stood up to give him a bear hug. “Welcome to the family, bro. I hope you survive.”

Makoto laughed nervously, not quite sure what he meant by that.

“Protip: do not listen to Keiichi ever,” Nagi-senpai said, pulling up a chair for him. She gestured down at it as an offer before going back to her own seat. “We’re really kind-hearted senpais, and you’ll all definitely survive.”

Keiichi pouted and went back beside her. “That takes away the tension in the process. Where’s the fun in that, right? I’m just trying to be the fun senpai.”

“You’re scaring the poor kid, asshole.”

Makoto decided to ignore their fight. It felt like this was their usual. He walked over to sit on the offered seat and looked around instead, studying the things around. The shelf was pretty empty now that most of the shoeboxes have been distributed to the applicants. In their place, there were piles of papers plus a few scattered building blocks and boxes of chalk. At the very top of the shelf was a neatly organized collection of children’s books. He recognized a few of them as the books he read to the twins when they were young.

“Good aftern—”

He looked back to the door from checking the wall to see Sakura, his seatmate from Socio 204.

“Oh!” She pointed at him, eyes wide. “Makoto-kun!”

“Sakura-chan! I didn’t know you were applying here too.”

She smiled and stepped inside, closing the door. “I met Nagi-senpai in a class,” she explained, then looked over to the upperclassmen to greet them. She walked over to sit beside Makoto. “How about you?”

“They were at the freshmen party for our college,” Makoto said.

“Hey! How do you two know each other?” Nagi asked, watching them with curious eyes and leaning her cheek on her palm. “Psych and Educ, right? You share a class? That’s fast.”


Nagi and Keiichi’s eyes widened at the same time, delighted expressions appearing on their faces. “Soulmates in Society!” Nagi stood up and leaned forward, hands slamming on the table. “That’s amazing! Me and Keiichi took that class, too!”

Keiichi laughed and shook his head. “No, we didn’t. We sat in and bothered Professor Mika.”
Sakura blinked at the two. “She doesn’t allow sit-ins though.”

“After us, she doesn’t anymore,” Nagi said, laughing amusedly. “But she loved us, seriously. You should mention us to her. She was our fairy godmother.”

“Fairy godmother?” Makoto could see Professor Mika having that kind of effect on people, but it was hard to imagine the two and the professor in a class together. Besides, if they sat-in for Socio 204, that meant they were interested, right? Only those deeply invested would give that kind of time for a class that wouldn’t even be in your records.

“We’re soulmates.” Keiichi pointed to Nagi and himself. “Bonded, one-way telepathy, all that shebang.”

Nagi nodded. “So we asked her lots of questions.”

“Because she’s, like,” Keiichi started, gesturing towards Nagi expansively, “very gay and all.”


Makoto stared. “What.”

Sakura, on his side, couldn’t even speak. She merely stared at the two of them with her jaw gaping.

“God, we broke them,” Keiichi said, with a smile that was more ‘this is fun’ than worried. “The poor children.”

Nagi waved both her hands in front of them, snickering. “Guys, it’s no big deal. You’ll learn this shit soon enough.” She clapped her hand once, loudly, to break them out of it. “Earth to freshies!”

“You’re not…?” Makoto could not believe this was his life. What were the chances he’d meet a pair of soulmates that weren’t in a relationship? “You’re not together? And you’re bonded.”

“Well, we’re not dating.” Nagi said the word like she bit something sour. “That’s like dating your twin brother, ew.”

“But you’re bonded!” Sakura looked like the world was ending. She looked so distraught at the idea.

“Why not?” Keiichi shrugged. “We’ll be together forever anyway. Not together together, but you know? She’s my best friend. It’s not like I’m in love with her or anything. I just want her in my life forever.”

“Okay, first, that’s adorable, Keiichirou-kun,” Nagi cooed, reaching over to pinch Keiichi’s cheeks, “but also ew. Why the cheese?”

“Shut up, Nagisa. I’m trying to be a good senpai here.”

Makoto’s mind was whirring with this new information. Together forever, huh? It sounded so good. Being by each other’s side without any complications. Supporting one another without being in a relationship. Maybe… Maybe he could pull that off. Wasn’t that where they were going, anyway? Sousuke didn’t care about the bond, or could not feel it, but he liked Makoto enough to be willing to live with him and spend time with him. They could do it.

That might be the solution he’s been waiting for.

“Hey, Makoto!”
He sat up straighter, looking around. There were three more people in the room now. How long was he daydreaming?

“Sorry,” he said, smiling apologetically at Nagi.

“That shocked, huh?” Nagi gestured to Sakura. “This kid’s worse.”

Sakura was scowling at the floor, looking gloomy for the first time since he met her.

“I guess it’ll take time,” he said. “It’s not a common thing, after all.”

“Sorry for ruining your childhood dreams,” Nagi offered to the two of them, though she didn’t sound that repentant.

He shrugged, accepting that apology for what it’s worth. His childhood dreams were already pretty broken, anyway. The point of being here was building new ones.

Nagi watched them for another second before addressing the whole room. “Okay, guys! Let’s start this orientation!”

There were five of them in this batch of applicants. Makoto and Sakura introduced themselves first. The third applicant was a transferee from the College of Science, a boy named Mizoguchi who wore black glasses and had short dark blue hair. He was awkward and fidgeted in his seat but his voice was firm when he spoke. He reminded Makoto of Rei. The fourth applicant was a tall girl with blonde hair who introduced herself as Risa. She was a member of the basketball team. The fifth one was another girl with brown hair and a dimpled smile. She said her name was “Hikaru” but she’d love to be called “Pika”.

Focusing on getting to know them and imagining what kind of bracelet would fit them distracted Makoto enough that he was able to go through the orientation without another thought about the earlier conversation.

- - -

He wasn’t so lucky with his walk home. In the quiet bustling of the road, he wondered and wondered and wondered.

What he had was enough, right?

- - -

When he got home, Sousuke was already there.

“Oh,” he said, “you’re here.”

Sousuke raised an eyebrow at him, standing up to get closer. “Are you alright?”

“Hm? Yeah. I’m just tired.” He sidestepped Sousuke and dropped on the couch with a sigh. “I met the other applicants today,” he said, to throw Sousuke off his trail. “They were nice.”

Moving back to his side of the couch, Sousuke examined his face for a moment. “Okay,” he conceded, relaxing. “How was it? Any new craft we need to learn?”

We.
Makoto forced a smile. “Nothing new,” he answered. “We’re all going to focus on making the bracelets. Then when we finish that, we can help with their next event at the orphanage.”

“That sounds like fun,” Sousuke said earnestly. “You’ve thought of a plan?”

“Yeah, we’re going to read them books and give them new clothes.”

“You’ll be great at that,” he said, elbowing him lightly. “I heard from Kisumi. His little brother can’t stop talking about you. Kisumi’s worried you’re his new favorite and he’ll be demoted to second best brother.”

Makoto laughed, shaking his head. “That’s not true. Hayato-kun loves Kisumi-kun a lot. He was determined to learn so he could impress his brother.”

“I bet you’re just saying that to be humble.”

“I’m not!” Makoto pushed at his side lightly. “It’s true!”

“Still,” Sousuke said, “the kids would love you.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m sure of it,” Sousuke said, smiling confidently at him. It was that infectious confidence that made you feel stronger by mere exposure to it. Makoto felt himself calm down completely. “Those kids will love you and they’ll talk about you all the time after, too.”

Makoto nodded, not able to say anything else to that.

“Oh!” Sousuke stood up and walked over to the kitchen without warning, disappearing off Makoto’s view. “You haven’t eaten dinner, right?”

“Um, I haven’t!”

“I’ll make us a sandwich,” he called out. “Go relax!”

They ate dinner on the couch, watching some mindless reality TV show about idols learning new skills. There was silence as they concentrated on eating and on watching.

Soon enough, an hour after finishing their sandwiches, Makoto figured it was time to sleep.

“Um—”

“Hey—”

They both stopped, staring at each other as they realized they turned and spoke at the same time.

“Me first,” Sousuke said, standing up. “I have something for you.” He ran back to his room briskly, and then came back with his clenched hand outstretched towards Makoto. He sat down and opened it, palms up.

The friendship bracelet. **His** friendship bracelet.

It was pretty simple; it wasn’t clear whether it was because of Sousuke’s level of skill or his image of Makoto. The red string was the base, with the brown string zigzagging through it. The small
white pearl-like beads were scattered in equidistant points around the whole thing. Knowing Sousuke…

“A halo?” was all Makoto could ask, feeling the warmth in his bones again. It was still a nice feeling.

Sousuke laughed, loud and delighted. “Yeah, of course,” he said, “for my saint roommate.”

“That joke is old now.”

“Nah, it won’t get old until you stop being Saint Makoto.”

Makoto rolled his eyes, knowing for sure that Sousuke would forever use that. “Come on,” he said, extending a hand to take it. “I’ll—”

He closed his hand into a fist, hiding it again. “Where’s mine, first?”

Huffing, Makoto reached down his bag and picked it from the outer pocket. “Exchange?”

“Nope,” Sousuke said, grabbing his free hand and pulling it towards him.

“What—” Makoto stopped, eyes wide as Sousuke slid the bracelet on his left hand, gingerly turning his wrist left and right to check his design against Makoto’s skin.

Sousuke grinned down at it, looking pleased with himself. “Makoto Tachibana,” he started, “I promise to be your friend forever, and to always be here for you.” He paused. “Unless you break this, of course.”

Makoto hoped the hitch in his breath wasn’t that noticeable. He hoped the redness in his cheeks could be read as simple embarrassment. He hoped he wasn’t so obvious. He hoped his heart could calm down because he’d die at this rate.

He cleared his throat, retracting his hand and testing the weight of it. The bracelet was light and didn’t feel like much, but the weight in Makoto’s chest was way heavier now.

“Sousuke Yamazaki,” he said, following after. He caught Sousuke’s wrist, slipping the bracelet on and holding on for a second more than necessary. “I promise to be your friend forever, and to always be here for you.” He stared Sousuke in the eyes and smiled. “As long as this bracelet is intact.”

Sousuke laughed, cheeks red by now as well. At least Makoto wasn’t the only one who was embarrassed. “Take care of it, then.”

“You, too.”

“Yeah,” Sousuke played with it, long fingers turning it round and round. “I should probably put it somewhere safe. I can’t really wear it.”

“Swimmer problems, huh,” Makoto said absently, staring down at his and thinking he’d probably wear it as long as he could. “Uh, it’s late. We should really sleep.”

Sousuke nodded, offering a hand after standing. He pulled Makoto up, squeezed his wrist, and said, “Good night.”

“Good night, Sousuke-kun.”
“Commitment is the component that encompasses the decision to be with each other, and the plans you make to stay together. Alone, it is considered an empty love, like the arranged marriages that start out as an agreement. But if it is with intimacy, or if intimacy is born from such arrangement, it is called companionate love.” Professor Mika pointed towards the diagram. “Companionate love is the type of love you feel for your family, or for your closest friends. It’s stronger than friendship because of the element of long-term commitment.”

“Also, marriages that has lost their fire,” someone at the back said out loud.

“Yeah!” She nodded enthusiastically. “Marriage that has lost passion but still has intimacy is considered companionate love as well.”

“It’s still love?” Another person raised a hand to ask. “Even if they’ve lost passion?”

“There are many kinds of love. Platonic but strong friendship that lasts is another example of companionate love.”

That weekend, Ran and Ren gushed about his bracelet, begging him to make them one too.

When Ran asked, very seriously, if she could have his, he instinctively pulled his hand away, eyes widening at his own action. “Um,” he started, turning red, “this is very important to me.” But he’d always given them anything they wanted, even things he loved. When he was young, he’d give them his favorite food just to make sure they were both happy.

Ran nodded like it was nothing. “Okay! Make me one now!”

Makoto looked down at his hand, touching the bracelet gently. It felt, at that moment, like something shifted inside him, like the exchange yesterday finally clicked into place in his head.

“I promise to be with you forever,” he murmured, then sighed. Your friend, he reminded himself. It was a friendship vow. Nothing else.

He turned to his siblings, and pretended the pain in his chest wasn’t getting stronger.

The week after, Sousuke and Makoto walked towards the cafeteria after their Socio 204 class, talking about the assignment Professor Mika left them earlier. They were so deep in conversation that it took them a few seconds before they realized they had passed their usual table.

“Wow,” Aki said, eyeing the two of them. “Great awareness, guys.”

Makoto placed his bag down on the seat beside her, feeling overly conscious of the bracelet he was wearing. She didn’t know where it was from, and Makoto did not have any plans of telling her. He knew it would sound… bad. Because, well, it kind of was. The bracelet was a reminder to him, of Sousuke’s friendship and of his own hopelessness.

She didn’t need to know that.

Luckily, Sousuke didn’t wear his, and she wouldn’t—
“Oh?” Aki looked at Sousuke’s wallet, where the bracelet was hanging alongside his keychains. *Uh-oh.* Then she looked at Makoto’s hand, narrowing her eyes deliberately. “Huh.”

Makoto didn’t know how to react, or what to do. She was looking right at him, waiting for an explanation. He snatched Sousuke’s wallet, smiling awkwardly before saying, “How about I buy the lunch this time?”

“What—”

“I’m sure Aki-chan wants to catch up with you,” Makoto said, backing off slowly. *Ask him,* he told Aki with his eyes. “You haven’t seen each other in more than a week!”

“Uh, sure?” Sousuke looked at him weirdly, but Makoto did not have time. He’d rather let Sousuke (who didn’t know anything anyway) handle that.

He ran off.

“Hey, Makoto-kun~” Aki smiled sweetly as soon as he arrived back. Behind the smile, there was something keen in her eyes. “I heard from Sousuke-kun! A friendship bracelet! How quaint.”

Makoto could hear the underlying question in her voice. Sousuke, on the other hand, looked weirded out.

“What’s wrong with you?,” Sousuke muttered. He turned to Makoto and took his lunch and his wallet, obviously checking on the bracelet before putting it carefully back in his bag. “Thanks,” he said.

“It’s really sweet that you’re that close,” Aki continued, still studying Makoto’s expression like a hawk.

“Well, yeah. We live together,” Sousuke said, matter of fact. “And we’re closer friends now.”

Aki turned her glare towards Sousuke. She looked like she would scold him any time soon.

“What?”

“I’m just—” Aki sighed, slumping down her seat. “Wow. I’m so tired, I think I need to go back to the dorm and rest.” She stood up, shoulders still slumped like she was giving up on everyone. She must be really annoyed with Makoto right now.

“Aki…,” Makoto frowned. *I’m fine,* he wanted to say, though he really wasn’t sure himself. “Come on.” He knew he was close to whining, but he didn’t know what else to do.

“Okay, I’m fine,” she said, “but maybe I need coffee.” She stood up and tugged at Makoto’s arm. “Come with me.”

Makoto smiled reassuringly at Sousuke before letting himself be dragged away. Aki pulled him the whole way to the vending machine at the other side of the cafeteria, even though there was one closer to their table. When she let go, her face was full of frustration.

“Are you a masochist?”

“What?” Makoto shook his head. “I’m not!”
“Friendship bracelets, matching ones, that you made together,” she said, with emphasis, like it was the definitive proof she needed. And maybe it was. “Makoto,” she sighed tiredly, “are you alright?”

Makoto blinked, nodding instantly. “I am, I swear.” He looked down at his own bracelet. “You know, I met a pair of soulmates who stayed friends. I think— I think that’s a great idea.”

“That’s really okay with you?” There was something pitying in her expression, and it hurt to see that. To know he probably deserved that.

“It’s all I can have,” he answered, because it wasn’t really okay. It wasn’t. He was starting to get that. But there wasn’t any other choice, was there?

“You’re settling.”

Makoto couldn’t read her tone. “I’m being content,” he clarified.

“Are you?” Aki stared him in the eyes, unblinking. “Is that what you really feel?” When Makoto couldn’t answer straight away, she added, “Have you properly thought of what you feel towards Sousuke-kun? Because if this isn’t just about being soulmates— if you’re in love, then—”

“I’m n—”

“Think about it.” She raised a hand, stopping him from speaking any more. “Think about everything you feel. Tell me when you’re sure.”

When they came back to their table, Sousuke took one look at the two of them and frowned, but didn’t ask anything. Small mercies.

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Makoto didn’t know how to think about it.

He didn’t know what he felt, and what the bond was making him feel, or what the fantasies he had since he was a child had warped his ideas into.

He knew, vaguely, that what he felt for Sousuke has changed. Before, he has always tried to get away from him, to use someone else as a buffer between them, to keep their relationship as distant as possible. He used to be able to say no to Sousuke’s offers of hanging out. He used to be able to think of Sousuke and think “that’s a shame”, and not “I want more”.

Living with Sousuke changed things.

Being able to spend more one-on-one time changed a lot of things.

Was it possible he nurtured the bond into becoming stronger?

If so, was Sousuke really immune to this feeling?

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[To: Makoto

From: (Unknown Number)
“Asahi-kun!” Makoto jogged down the main stairway of his college, stopping in front of the red-haired boy. He looked like an abandoned puppy, sitting dejectedly on the last step. It was a weird look, because he was almost as tall as Makoto and had such sharp lines on his face. Makoto understood suddenly what Kisumi said a while ago, about Asahi’s appearance being so manly that they assumed things prematurely. “Long time no see!”

Asahi stood up and smiled, relieved. “Makoto-kun!” He pulled him into a half hug. “I was so scared. Kisumi was being an asshole.”

“What?”

“We have a date,” he explained, pouting. “But he’s busy so I have to wait. He gave me your number a few days ago but I didn’t have any reason to text until now.” He pressed both hands together, raising them to his face. “Sorry!”

“Oh…” Makoto didn’t really know what to say to that.

“Anyway,” Asahi continued, patting Makoto on the back, “I texted Aki-san for help too, and she told me you needed my advice.” He grinned. “What is it?”

“…Advice…” Makoto stared down at the floor. Oh, Aki. It’s been days since then, so she was probably getting impatient with him. He has been avoiding her since then, and avoiding Sousuke most of the time, too. (They didn’t eat lunch together, with Makoto using his new club as an excuse, and they didn’t meet at home much either, with Makoto locking himself up in his room. Sousuke didn’t seem to notice.) Aki decided to take matters into her own hands, huh? As expected of Captain Aki. “Um, it’s about our class. You know, the one I have with Kisumi.”


“Yeah… About that.” Makoto motioned to a bench near them, walking over to sit down on it. He waited until Asahi had sat down before saying, “I heard about you and Kisumi-kun. You, um,
“I didn’t!” Asahi nodded two times. “It was a shock! I was getting ready to be let down easily, you know? ‘Coz it’s obvious, right? He’s so popular with girls and he flirts with everyone, so I thought I didn’t have a chance at all. I was ready to mope.”

Makoto nodded, urging him to keep going.

“But when I confessed to him after graduation, he, well…” Asahi’s whole face turned red. “He kissed me.”

Oh. That pattern. “It strengthened the bond,” he said, eyes wide. He forgot about that.

“It wasn’t anything big,” Asahi said, shrugging. “But still, it felt like a weight lifted off my shoulders? I don’t really get it.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I only knew because he told me after. It makes sense, I guess. Sometimes, it feels like I can hear his voice cheering for me, when I’m swimming in competitions. He felt the same way when he was playing basketball.”

“But it wasn’t telepathy?” If they weren’t seeing eye to eye, then it wasn’t. But what was it?

“Your professor said something about emotions spilling over,” Asahi answered, looking like he didn’t get it either. “Kisumi took the class to ask.”

Makoto wondered if they could have that, too. He sighed. He didn’t really want to hope.

Asahi stared at him, frowning. “I don’t think I helped at all. Are you okay?”

“I don’t really know if there’s an answer to the question I want to ask,” he answered vaguely.

“If you don’t ask the question, then you won’t know the answer,” Asahi said simply. “What is it?”

“How did you know you fell in love with Kisumi?” It was a personal question, a question Makoto was scared to know the answer of, but he needed to ask.

Asahi leaned back on the bench, looking up at the sky. “Hmmm,” he hummed thoughtfully. “I just knew? It isn’t that difficult. Even someone like me got it, you know? I’m sure you’re way better than me at that.” He tapped his chin with a finger before glancing back at Makoto. “I think if you’re wondering about it that hard, then you might already be in love. If you’ve reached that point, isn’t that the point of no, uh— what was it?”

“The point of no return?”

“Yeah, that!” Asahi nodded. “I didn’t know when I fell in love with Kisumi exactly. But one day, I was wondering what it would be like to hold his hand, and it hit me. I wanted to hold his hand!” He blushed again. “And you know, other stuff.”

Makoto remembered the feeling he got every time Sousuke touched his wrist, that warmth in his gut and that burning need to reach out to touch him back. It wasn’t always there, he knew. It was something that grew, that got stronger and stronger until he couldn’t ignore it anymore.

“Got it?” Asahi pecked at his face, smiling encouragingly.

“Yeah, thanks.”
He stayed with Asahi until Kisumi was done with his group work. Asahi hummed to himself the whole time, letting Makoto stew in his thoughts. When they said goodbye, he hugged Makoto more firmly and whispered, “good luck”.

After that, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He went directly home and into his room, locking the door.

He took out his phone and clicked the #1 speed dial.

He… he needed this right now.

“Hello?”

“Haru-chan,” he said, voice shaky. “I’m in love with Sousuke. What should I do?”

---

“Lastly, passion. It is the component that encompasses desire. That burning need, both emotionally and sexually. When you have passion and intimacy, you get romantic love.” Professor Mika clicked on her laptop, and the diagram zoomed in on the middle of the triangle. “And when you have passion, intimacy, and commitment, you get consummate love. It’s the complete form of love. It’s the ideal every person strive for in a romantic relationship.”

She smiled wryly. “But of course, not everyone gets that.”
ok so I was writing Chapter 6 and it reached 7k words (I'm even not finished yet!!!), so... I'm cutting it in half. I'm posting this now for you guys and then I'll post the other half maybe tomorrow or the day after that. idk. Let's see how it goes. This is short but I hope you like it ☆ ~ (ゝ。 ∩ ｏ) 

Also, as always, thanks Naya for being my biggest cheerleader/enabler♥

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

What time are you coming home?] .

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

I’ll be late. Eating out with the team. Why?] .

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

Haru’s coming over. Sorry.] .

―  ●  ○

“Hello?”

“Haru-chan,” he said, voice shaky. “I’m in love with Sousuke. What should I do?”

Silence. Makoto counted the seconds, shoulders tensed and the anxiety overwhelming his senses. He just blurted it out, without even thinking about what Haruka would think, but he needed this. He needed to hear Haruka’s thoughts. It was the only thing that would calm him.

“It’s alright,” Haruka said quietly, as expected. His breathing was steady, as if this was a normal conversation and not the groundbreaking realization Makoto thought it was. “Calm down. Meet me at the train station in an hour.”

Makoto stopped, tension disappearing as shock bypassed his emotions. “Wait, what?”

“I’m coming over,” he said calmly. “Practice just ended. We can go home together tomorrow
morning."

“But you weren’t planning to come home.”

“I am now.” Haruka sighed. “I’ll hang up. See you.”

- - -

Makoto leaned on the platform wall, eyeing the people getting out of the train. He didn’t know why Haruka decided to go here immediately upon hearing Makoto’s words, but he was thankful for it. The surreal idea of Haruka packing his bag in a hurry and running after a train to catch up was enough to erase any other worry. It probably did not happen that way, but the image was still enough to make Makoto smile. Haruka had his back. It was going to be alright.

It was a few minutes later that Haruka arrived, a small backpack slung on his shoulder. He looked serious and vaguely annoyed.

“Haru!” Makoto waved a hand, unable to keep the smile off his face.

Haruka scowled at him and walked over with intent. “Let’s go to your apartment.”

“You sound just like Rin,” Makoto noted, following after him, “going here out of the blue.”

Narrowing his eyes, Haruka’s frown deepened. “I’m not.”

“Rin’s rubbed off on you,” Makoto continued, revelling in the familiar shades of annoyance on Haruka’s face. He’s missed this. “It’s nice.”

“You sound fine,” Haruka said, ignoring everything he said. “Calmed down?”

Makoto nodded. “Yeah, thanks. You didn’t have to come.”

Haruka glared. It was obvious he thought this was necessary. “Is Yamazaki at your apartment right now?”

“Not yet, he’s hanging out with his teammates.”

Haruka nodded and then went silent. Makoto watched him as they walked.

As soon as they were at the apartment, Haruka walked to Makoto’s room and dropped his bag before moving towards the kitchen. There, he opened cupboards after cupboards and took numerous things out. Makoto could only stare in confusion as he opened the stove and started cooking.

“Haru?”

“You haven’t eaten dinner yet,” he said, voice showing displeasure. “Sit down here.”

Makoto huffed out a laugh, doing as told. It was really nice of Haruka to do this. “What are you making?”

“Miso soup and grilled mackerel,” he answered. He was focused completely on preparing the pot.

“Of course,” Makoto said. And then, “I didn’t know we had mackerel.”
Haruka glanced back at him questioningly. “Is this Yamazaki’s?”

“No, we share. Sousuke-kun bought the groceries this weekend, since I go home and he doesn’t. I leave my share of the cost with him,” he explained. “It’s a good system.”

Haruka looked down at the pot and mixed it lightly. “He takes care of you?”

“Yeah.” There was no other answer to that. Sousuke was the best roommate he could ask for. He was attentive and responsible. He liked taking care of Makoto.

“But he made you sad,” Haruka continued, eyes narrowed down at the soup.

Makoto examined his expression. Haruka was tense as well; he could see that now. He must have been really worried. “It wasn’t his fault.”

Haruka nodded and accepted that. The silence came back, only interrupted by the sounds of Haruka’s cooking.

Makoto set the plates on the table and watched as Haruka dished out the rice and mackerel on them. He frowned at the lack of bowls, and then picked up two plastic cups for the soup. They sat down in front of each other.

“So,” Haruka said, eyeing him. “Sousuke.”

“Yeah.”

“Since when?”

Makoto shrugged. “It… it didn’t really register until now?”

Haruka’s expression softened as he sighed. “You told me as soon as you realized,” he concluded.

“I didn’t know what else to do.” The panic had subsided by now but he could still feel the residual adrenaline of admitting his feelings out loud for the first time. “I knew you could calm me down.”

Haruka took that in and started eating. He looked like he was thinking of what to say. Makoto followed suit, picking up the cup and sipping the soup. It was his mom’s recipe. The taste of it immediately sent a flare of happiness in him, reminding him of home. So this was why Haruka cooked, huh? Makoto beamed down at the food. Calling Haruka was definitely the right move.

“Are you going to tell him?”

Makoto looked up and then back down again. “I’m scared,” he replied, not answering the question.

“I think you should,” Haruka said. His eyes were clear. He was sure of this. “You told me to tell people how I feel.”

“It’s not really the same, though.”

“Why?”

“You and Rin were in love with each other. You just needed a push.” There was no other way, back then. Haruka needed to confess or else their bond would be lost forever, even though they loved each other so much. No one was hurt when they confessed to each other. Well, other than
Sousuke, of course. “Sousuke is...”

“Sousuke is...?”

“He’s in love with someone else. I think he always has been.” Makoto smiled sadly. It was pretty weird to explain this to the soulmate of the person Sousuke was in love with. “There isn’t any chance he’d fall for me.”

Haruka raised an eyebrow. “Is he with that person?”

“Well, no.”

“Then,” Haruka said, slowly, “why won’t he fall in love with you?” He looked so confused, like the idea of someone not falling in love with Makoto was difficult to imagine.

Makoto appreciated the support, but he was being realistic here. “He’s still in love with him. I’m not... he doesn’t see me that way.”

Haruka frowned some more. “Is the person he loves going to be with him?”

Awkward. “I’m pretty sure not. He’s, um, he’s with someone else. His soulmate.”

“You both deserve to be with someone who’ll love you back,” Haruka said, turning back to his food. “If I were in that position, that’s what you’d tell me.”

Makoto couldn’t help but laugh a bit at that. He could see it. If in an alternate reality, Rin was in love with someone else but that person didn’t love him back, Makoto would urge Haruka to push forward and try to prove to Rin that they could be happy together. It sounds so easy to do, if it were other people. But faced with the same advice, Makoto couldn’t imagine doing it. It felt like a higher level skill, like an ability he hadn’t learned yet.

“I don’t want to take advantage of him,” he said. *I’ve already been taking advantage of his kindness. It’s bad enough as it is.*

Haruka looked him in the eye, expression stern. “You don’t take advantage of people. You’re not that type of person.”

“But I’ve already—”

“It was his decision to move in with you,” Haruka reminded him.

“I’ve been keeping things from him,” Makoto mumbled, cowed by Haruka’s tone but unable to just keep quiet. “I haven’t been very honest.”

Haruka just stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

“I’m— uh, that is...” Makoto bowed his head further, hiding his face. “He’s my— Sousuke’s my soulmate.”

Silence.

A very long silence.

Makoto looked up after another second, curiosity taking over his fear. Haruka looked confused again, and completely shocked. Makoto thought he’d have an inkling at least, but maybe he didn’t consider the idea of soulmates immediately. The only type of Soul Bond Haruka knew profoundly
was the two-way telepathy bond he had. He probably never thought about the bonds that were as weak as this.

“When did you know?” Haruka whispered, as if he felt like this moment would shatter if he raised his voice.

“That, uh,” Makoto stuttered, briefly wondering how he could explain the situation without giving a clue as to who Sousuke was in love with, “that time in second year? When we had the practice relay match. We saw each other for the first time, then.”

“But you’ve been talking before that.”

“Um, yeah. I think… I think the video chat made it less obvious? I felt it, even then, but it isn’t that strong in the first place, so…”

“Sousuke didn’t realize?”

Makoto nodded, heart heavy with the memories. “He was preoccupied with something else.”

The offended look on Haruka’s face was almost enough to cheer Makoto up. “Preoccupied?” He spat out the word like it was an insult.

“He just had his heart broken, I think,” he explained gently, willing Haruka to not get angry. It wasn’t Sousuke’s fault. It was the wrong timing. It was bad luck.

“And he’s still in love with that person who broke his heart?”

*Rin was his world,* Makoto wanted to say, *and his dream.* But he just nodded. “He told me he’s happy, as long as that person is happy.”

Haruka narrowed his eyes at the table for a long while, until— “You could make him happier.”

Makoto blinked. “What?”

“You could make him happier,” Haruka repeated. “You could.”

“Haru…”

“Don’t give up,” Haruka insisted. “You told me not to.”

“I told you that was different.”

“It’s not.”

“You were both—”

“You’re in love with him, Makoto. That’s what matters.”

Makoto knew Haruka would always be on his side, and he appreciated that more than anything in this world. He knew that if he ever got his heart broken, Haruka would come running and cook him miso soup just like now. It felt like a safety net. He could work hard. He always had someone to go back home to.

But, on the other hand, his feelings weren’t the only one that mattered. Not at all.

“Sousuke’s feelings matter, Haru,” he said softly. “His happiness matters to me, too. I want him to
be happy. Confessing right now… it might just destroy what we have.” He placed a hand on his wrist, where the bracelet Sousuke made lie. He touched it gently, feeling the ridges and thinking about the effort Sousuke went through to finish it on his own. “I want to stay by his side. I think that’s what I really want, more than anything.”

“That’s what you want?”

Makoto looked up at him, staring him in the eyes resolutely. “Right now, yes.” Let me have this, for as long as I can have it.

“For now,” Haruka corrected knowingly. He always heard the things Makoto didn't say out loud. “But if ever you change your mind…”

Makoto nodded, because he wasn’t sure himself what he’d feel tomorrow or the day after. These past few weeks has been a roller coaster of emotions. He felt a bit more settled though, knowing for sure what he was feeling. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Good.”

---

By some stroke of luck, they were sound asleep by the time Sousuke arrived home, so no confrontation happened. Unfortunately, Haruka was still there in the morning, and something was definitely going to happen.

Makoto woke up from a fitful sleep to see Haruka and Sousuke glaring at each other in the kitchen. It felt like a bad omen.

“Um.” He stopped at the side, staring wide-eyed at the two. “Good morning?”

“Good morning,” they chorused, then narrowed their eyes at each other.

“What’s wrong?” Makoto stepped forward, hands raised in an attempt to pacify whatever fight was happening. They didn't often fight anymore, especially since they all became friends after doing relay practice against each other. When they do, it was usually more subtle and more about sarcastic jibes than actual glares.

“He wants to cook breakfast,” Sousuke grumbled. “It’s not his kitchen.”

“It’s Makoto’s,” Haruka said.

“Yeah, his. Not yours.”

“It’s kind of his, though,” Makoto offered, cringing at the glare Sousuke sent him.

“Because what’s yours is his?” Sousuke’s voice was challenging, which didn’t make much sense. What was this about?

“No,” Makoto said calmly, striding forward and grabbing Sousuke by the arm to drag him to the living room. “It’s his mom’s. She owns the apartment.”

Sousuke looked like he wanted to pout, but glowered at the floor instead. “Fine,” he sighed, sitting down at his side of the couch. “I don’t get why he wants to cook. He’s a guest, isn’t he?” He reached for Makoto’s arm, pulling him to sit on the other side. “What’s up with your best friend?”

“He likes cooking,” Makoto said with a shrug. He knew it was probably for a variety of reasons,
including: wanting to feel at home in a new place, taking control of the situation by mastering Makoto’s kitchen, and most importantly, messing with Sousuke. Makoto had a sneaking suspicion that Haruka put up a fight largely because he was still offended about their talk yesterday. It was funny.

To clear the air and distract Sousuke, he said, “We’re going home after breakfast.”

Sousuke nodded. He was frowning. “Yeah,” he said, “it’s lonely here when you’re not around.”

“You have training,” Makoto said, tamping down on the feelings that erupted because of that simple sentence. Sousuke was really good at making him feel those kinds of things. He was so, so bad for Makoto’s health.

“Yeah,” Sousuke sighed, looking away. “I’m just—” For some reason, he didn’t look at Makoto when he stood up and said, “I forgot something in my room.”

For the next minutes, until Haruka was finished cooking, Sousuke didn’t come out.

- - -

Breakfast was stilted, because Haruka kept on eyeing Sousuke and Sousuke looked like he wanted to say something but didn’t say anything. Makoto was surprisingly the most normal one in the table.

“Well,” Makoto said, when they finished, “I guess we’re going.”

Sousuke nodded, but then said, “Can I talk to Nanase? Privately?”

That… sounded ominous. Makoto looked at Haruka.

“Sure,” Haruka said. Don’t worry, he said with his eyes. Makoto hoped he was imagining the challenge there, though. He really didn’t want Haruka to defend his honor, when there was no fight on the first place.

“I’ll get our bags, then.”

- - -

When Haruka got out of the apartment, he had a thoughtful look on his face. It was an improvement from the glaring, so Makoto was relieved. Whatever they talked about must have been good.

“What was that about?” Makoto handed over Haruka’s bag and watched him carefully.

Haruka glanced at him, then away. “It was nothing,” he said. “A question about the food.”

Makoto didn’t expect that. They looked so intense earlier. Maybe it was Sousuke’s way of making up with Haruka? They’ve always been weird about each other, so it would make sense.

- - -

The whole weekend was spent playing at Makoto’s house, with Haruka sleeping over the night. Ren and Ran were ecstatic, having the two of them to play with. It was good. Being at home, having his whole family surrounding him, it felt like the comfort he needed.

It reminded him, though, of the fact that his small apartment was home now, too. That sitting on
the couch with Sousuke, eating dinner while watching TV shows, was another kind of comfort he was starting to get used to.

The thought strengthened his resolve.

Sousuke was his soulmate. He was in love with him.

And he would do everything in his power to stay by his side.

It was probably selfish. It was probably wrong. But, for the first time in a long time, he was sure of what he wanted. He wanted to personally make Sousuke laugh, no matter what his roles was in Sousuke’s life.

---

Monday morning, he went home in his Tokyo Apartment with determination blazing inside him.

And he was promptly disappointed to see an empty living room and no signs of Sousuke around.

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

Hey, i’m home.]

He didn’t receive a reply until about an hour later, when he had already given up on his phone and was reading through his notes.

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

Welcome home.

I’m at a classmate’s house. I might sleepover. See you tom?]

It felt off, somehow, the message. Sousuke was always the first to text when he was going home late. Texting right now with that kind of weak response was not like him at all. Not to mention, it was the first time he was sleeping elsewhere since they started living together.

Maybe the newness of it was just weirding Makoto out.

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

Ok :) Stay safe! See you!]

---

Their class the next day was short, since Professor Mika had a meeting to get to.

“I have a list here,” she said, taping a piece of paper to the board, “of groups for the next presentation. You have an assigned topic already, so discuss among your groupmates how you want it to happen. My e-mail is written here so feel free to contact me about questions.”
And then she left.

Makoto was one of the first ones to reach the board, since he was on the front row. His eyes immediately zoomed in on [Group #3: Sousuke, Sakura, Touka; Movies]. He scanned down the list and found his name at [Group #9: Makoto, Kisumi, Mori; Children’s Books].

They were supposed to introduce their assigned medium and explain what it said about soulmates, and how that message is spread amongst the masses. Makoto was excited, since his topic was perfect for him. He might even be able to borrow books from his EDLR class or Nagi-senpai.

Kisumi clapped him on the back as soon as he saw the list. “Yo! Finally!” He grinned. “We’re going to be awesome.”

“Yeah,” Makoto agreed. “I’m excited.”

Nodding, Kisumi looked back at the list and saw Sousuke at the other side of the crowd. “Sousuke! Me and Makoto are groupmates!”

“Good for you,” Sousuke said dismissively as he walked closer to them.

“No need to be jealous~” Kisumi teased, shaking a finger at him.

Sousuke rolled his eyes. “Didn’t Makoto belong to everyone?”

Kisumi stuck out his tongue. “Well, I’m taking him,” he said, tightening his hold on Makoto’s shoulders.

“Careful. Aki might murder you in your sleep,” Sousuke said nonchalantly.

“Aki?” Makoto blinked. Where did that come from?

Sousuke grimaced and shrugged, not answering.

They met up with their groupmates, Kisumi dragging Makoto towards Mori and Sousuke walking over to where Sakura was nervously talking with Touka.

Steeling himself, Makoto took the lead with their conversation, talking about the books he’d seen tackling the topic of soulmates. There was a wide array, from the classic fairytales like Cinderella to the newer ones like A Pair of Shoes. Mori looked relieved to have a concrete plan, and Kisumi was just excited to read the stories Makoto told them about.

They were finished faster than most, so he waved goodbye at Mori and Kisumi (who both had classes after) and waited for Sousuke’s group to finish.

Unlike their lighthearted talk, Sousuke’s group was in a heated argument. Sousuke was frowning and glaring at Touka, while Touka hissed something at Sakura. It looked scary. He hoped Sakura would be fine after this. He knew she was still sensitive after finding out about Nagi and Keiichi.

Makoto watched as Sousuke sighed and stood up, saying one last thing sharply, before walking over to them. “Are you alright?” He couldn’t help but reach forward and pat Sousuke on the arm comforting. “That looked bad.”

Sousuke sighed and leaned towards him, pressing towards his hand. “They have different ideas,” he explained. “And I can’t watch the movie with them. Sakura’s got a curfew and Touka’s some
kind of rich girl and I have practice.”

“You can watch it on your own, right? And then you can just talk about it when you have time.” Makoto’s hand moved towards his back, rubbing small circles. He was rewarded with a deeper sigh that seemed to have seeped the tension out of Sousuke. “Don’t worry. They can cooperate. You’ve seen it.”

Sousuke laughed. “Cooperate might not be the word, but yeah. I guess.”

“Let’s get lunch, then?”

Sousuke’s expression darkened for a second, but he nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

The whole way to lunch, Makoto was wondering why Sousuke’s expression changed like that, or why he even mentioned Aki earlier. He didn’t have to wonder long, though.

The moment they sat down on Aki’s table, Sousuke sighed heavily and looked at Aki. “We need to talk,” he said. “Privately.”

This… felt like déjà vu. Wasn’t that what he said to Haruka last week?

Aki raised an eyebrow and nodded, standing up immediately. She gave Makoto a smile before following after Sousuke.

It didn’t take long. About five minutes later, a few seconds after Makoto placed his and Sousuke’s lunches down on the table, the two came back. Sousuke was blushing. Aki was giggling, hiding her face in her hands.

“What happened?” Makoto looked at Sousuke, who didn’t say anything, then to Aki, who just giggled some more. “Why are you laughing?”

“Don’t you dare,” Sousuke said, narrowing his eyes at her. “I’m sorry, okay? I misunderstood.”

“But Sousuke-kun,” Aki said, sickly sweet, “I think he should know.”

“What is it?” Makoto turned his gaze to Sousuke. “Come on, this is unfair.”

Sousuke sat down stiffly before muttering, “I asked her if she broke up with Sei-senpai.”

Makoto frowned. That… wasn’t a very nice question. Or even something to laugh about. “Why would you ask that?”

“Nothing,” Sousuke said immediately, sending a look towards Aki. “I misunderstood.” He pulled his lunch towards him. “Thanks for buying this. How much was it?”

“It’s my treat,” Makoto said. “You’ve treated me enough times.”

Sousuke looked like he was going to protest so Makoto sent him his sternest expression. He sighed in defeat and nodded. “Fine,” he said. But the way he said it seemed like he was adding next one’s on me, though.

When Makoto looked at the side, Aki was typing on her phone, still looking gleeful.
From: Aki

You're not off the hook yet! 

From: Makoto

???

From: Aki

I asked you a Q

From: Makoto

Oh. Yes.

From: Aki

Is that the answer?

From: Makoto

Yes

From: Aki

k :)

From: Makoto
we’ll talk more later >:D]

- - -

Acknowledging the fact that he was in love with Sousuke didn’t really change much of their interactions. It was still natural to reach out to comfort him, or talk to him when he went home. It still felt natural to walk side by side after their only shared class, or to text each other randomly.

The only difference was that thought in his head whenever Sousuke did something really nice or laughed out loud; that thought that said *I love him* and *I’m so happy he’s here.*
Lesson 6: Soulmates in Media

Chapter Notes

I'm kind of late! It's because of my self-confidence issues, im sorry. They show up unexpectedly and kicks my ass. Don't worry, I've handled it ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

The next chapter is halfway written already but we'll see how it goes. Less than a week is my promise, as always. Also we're more than halfway through. Like 3/4 in. Just a heads up.

THANKS TO NAYA, WHO IS MY ANGEL AND MY SHINING (LIGHT).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ma’am!” As soon as Professor Mika entered the class, a boy in front raised his hand, looking determined.

Professor Mika smiled as she placed her bag on the desk, nodding at him. “Yes?”

“You said we’ll answer the question as a class,” he reminded. The students simultaneously made noises of agreement and understanding. They all remembered the question, too. “About love at first sight.”

She sat down on top of her desk, scanning the class. “Yeah, we will. On that note, shouldn’t we ask the valuable opinion of your resident soul bonded classmate?”

Makoto looked at the back where Kisumi was blinking in surprise. “Me? About love at first sight?”

“Yes. Did you fall in love with your soulmate at first sight?” Professor Mika smiled encouragingly.

Kisumi hummed, closing his eyes and crossing his arms. “Not really? I don’t think so. I was just curious about him. I wanted to know what my soulmate was like.”

“And your soulmate?”

Kisumi laughed and shook his head repeatedly. “No, no, definitely not. He didn’t even realize we were soulmates! Love at first sight didn’t happen at all~” He pouted. “I had to seduce him and make him fall in love with me. It was hard work!”

Everyone laughed.

“So there’s your anecdotal evidence,” Professor Mika said, looking back to the original asker. “Not all soulmates fall in love at first sight. Some of them do. Just like non-bonded people.” She turned towards her laptop, clicking some buttons until the projector connected. “But for a more detailed explanation, here’s a study comparing…”

As soon as the class was finished, Kisumi ran towards Makoto and clung on to him, grinning
widely. “Hey, groupmate,” he greeted. “I don’t have a class today.”

“Oh, we could go to the library to check out books. Aki-chan is busy with a project so we can’t eat lunch together.” He looked towards the back row to see Sousuke walking out of the room alongside Touka and Sakura. “Sousuke has group work, too.”

Kisumi raised one fist up in a victory pose. “I have Makoto all to myself!”

Makoto took off his glasses, placing it back on the case before shouldering his bag. They waited for the crowd at the door to disperse before walking out. “So,” he started as soon as they were out of the room, “how was your date with Asahi?”

“About that!” Kisumi perked up, bumping his hips with Makoto. “I should thank you. I thought Asahi would be pissed because I forgot about my group work and left him lost, but you distracted him. Well, he can be easily distracted, since he’s an idiot.” He sighed fondly.

“No, no! He helped me out, actually.”


“He really did help me,” Makoto said sincerely. “I didn’t know what to do and he, um, explained things better for me.”

“That doesn’t sound like Asahi at all.” Kisumi narrowed his eyes. “But his thinking can be pretty special, I guess. What was your problem about?” His eyes widened. “Maybe I can help too!”

Makoto was about to shake his head and say the problem has been solved already, but then…

“Hey, Kisumi, how did it feel to know Asahi was your soulmate when he didn’t know?”

Kisumi raised an eyebrow. “Is that your problem?”

Makoto shrugged. “It’s related. And I wanted to ask for a while now, about that.”

“Well~” Kisumi went back to walking, eyes fixated up as he pondered. “It was funny, I guess. We were sooo young so I didn’t really get the whole soulmate thing.” He shrugged. “I was just thankful it made me look harder at Asahi, you know? I’m not sure I would have done that if I didn’t feel that bond. It would have been such a shame. Asahi’s a great guy. Even though he’s stupid.” He giggled, looking down with a soft expression on his face. “I’m happy I knew. I’m happy I tried.”

“Why— uh, why didn’t you just tell Asahi?” Makoto looked away, heart thudding nervously inside his chest. He didn’t know what he wanted to hear. Another view? Or validation?

“I didn’t think it would matter,” Kisumi said. “I don’t think either of us cared.”

Ah. And that was the difference, wasn’t it? Makoto cared. Sousuke cared a lot.

Makoto nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

---

Friday night was a Nagi-sanctioned Friendship Night. The applicants didn’t have much choice but to follow as Nagi dragged Keiichi to the nearest karaoke place (and made him pay). She rented a room for them and pushed them inside with a “go and have fun, kids!” before going back to the desk to order their food.
“So I guess we’re supposed to get to know each other?” Risa asked, laughing nervously.

“Would you like to play a game of two truths and a lie?” Mizoguchi raised a hand stiffly and looked around. He was red from his cheeks to the back of his neck. He might even be shaking slightly. “It is fun, I assure you.”

Seeing his awkwardness, the others couldn’t help but laugh. Pika stood up, snatching the microphone from the stand in the mini podium. “Okay! How about this? If we can figure out which is the lie, the person will sing any song we chose.” She grinned. “Deal?”

“Yes!” Sakura, Risa and Mizoguchi raised their hands and answered. Makoto just watched them, laughing to himself.

The game started with Pika, who successfully won her round and broke the ice completely with her “I know how to tie my shoelaces” as her one lie. Mizoguchi was next, and he lost very easily because of how awkward he was and how easy it was to see through his lies. They chose the Doraemon theme song, since they kinda felt bad for him. Risa lost too, though that one was by sheer luck. Pika chose an old famous love song and offered to do a duet so Risa won’t get that embarrassed.

“I was scared of being underwater, I swim freestyle, and I was captain of my swim club,” Makoto said, when it was his turn.

Mizoguchi narrowed his eyes, rubbing at his chin thoughtfully. “Why would you be in a swim club if you were scared of being underwater? But then…”

“It could be a trap.” Pika said, imitating Mizoguchi and rubbing her chin as well. “You’re devious! I didn’t expect that! I’m adding black to your bracelet.”

“Same,” Risa said, leaning forward as if getting close would show her the answer. “You looked super nice. A-ha! Maybe he wasn’t even a captain.”

Sakura giggled at his side. “Your image is completely tarnished now, Tachibana-kun.” She tilted her head to the right then, thinking. “I wonder what the lie is?”

The four huddled together to convene, before deciding, “You aren’t scared of being underwater!”

Makoto smiled charmingly at them and made an X with his arms. “Sorry, that’s the truth.”

“Oh!” Mizoguchi said, eyes widening. “He smiled at us!”


Makoto simply laughed at their antics before motioning towards Sakura for her turn.

The game went on for two more rounds before Nagi and Keiichi came back with their food. It was obvious they were loitering outside to make sure the applicants had time on their own. They placed the food down on the table and scanned their expressions.

“Oh,” Nagi said, pleasantly surprised, “looks like that worked, huh? Good job.”

“We have good kids this batch,” Keiichi agreed, nodding and pretending to wipe tears from his eyes.
Playing along, Nagi put her arms around Keiichi, saying, “We did good, didn’t we? We hatched the good ones. I’m so proud of us.” She turned towards them, dramatically spreading her arms as if she wanted a hug from all of them. “My children!”

There was stunned silence, before they all burst out laughing.

The whole night went on like that, with the applicants getting to know each other and their two senpais making random jokes and forcing them to sing. It was fun being in that atmosphere. This felt like another family he could have, a new step in the bright future he yearned for.

Tokyo, that night, didn’t feel so foreign anymore. Perhaps, he really was getting stronger.

Since Sakura had a curfew, Makoto offered to walk her home and see her off safely. Nagi-senpai looked relieved at the offer since Sakura was the youngest and the only one still living with her parents. The others had dorms or lived close to the university.

At first, they walked in silence, Sakura a few steps ahead as she skipped on the road. Makoto watched her back, smiling contentedly.

He was startled when he felt his cellphone buzz from his pocket. “Hey,” he called out, stopping, “I’ll just check this.” Sakura nodded and paused on her skipping. It was a message from Sousuke. He was asking where Makoto was and if he wanted dinner when he got back. He replied with [I already ate! I’m just walking Sakura-chan home. I’ll be back soon :)]

“Oh~” Sakura was suddenly right there in front of him, peeking at his face. “Are you texting your girlfriend?”

Makoto blushed, shaking his head. “I don’t have one!” He also didn’t want one, but that was besides the point.

“Then, your crush?”

“...um,” he said, hastily hiding his phone before she could see, “yes?”

“I knew it!” She smiled widely, clapping happily. “You looked so smitten! That’s so sweet. I want to be in love, too~”

Makoto’s blush didn’t feel like it was going away any time soon. He might overheat if Sakura continued teasing him. To prevent any more of that, he said, “I’m sure you’ll find someone too, Sakura-chan.”

She scrunch up her nose and turned her back on him, skipping ahead once again. “With everything that happened, I’m not sure who I want to find anymore,” she shared. “My soulmate? A person who would love me? A really cool person that would make my heartbeat skip? I’m not sure.” She sighed. She cupped her hands on her mouth, and mock-shouted, “Why is growing up so difficult?!”

He didn’t know the answer to that, either. Growing up, finding his new dreams, all of it has been difficult processes, and they weren’t even finished yet. He was still just in his first year of college. He had just admitted to falling in love with his soulmate. There was a long road ahead.
“You know who has the adult aura in lock?” Sakura turned towards him, walking backwards. “Touka-san and Yamazaki-kun.”

They did. Touka had the feel of a rich young lady and had the strength of voice of someone who knew exactly what she wanted. They might not have the same opinions, but when she spoke, it felt like you had to listen. She had such an easy confidence with her. Sousuke, on the other hand, had kept his Captain air and was known around their class as a rational and fair person. He was trusted to solve skirmishes and everyone listened to him. Not to mention, they were both beautiful people who looked like they could make anyone kneel before them.

“They would be such a power couple,” Sakura sighed sadly. “It would be scary but they would be so beautiful.”

He paused, staring at her dumbfounded. “Power… couple?”

“They look good together, right?” Sakura slumped her shoulders and turned back towards the road. “They’d look perfect together,” she said wistfully.

Yeah, he thought, but I don’t think he’s available. (The thought shouldn’t be such a comfort, but it still somehow was.)

- - -

“Hey.”

Makoto sat up on his bed, rubbing his eyes sleepily. There was someone knocking on his door. He glanced at the phone on his side. It was 7 am. On a Saturday.

“No,” he said loudly, then lied back down again.

“Sorry,” Sousuke said in his familiar not-sorry-at-all tone. “But you’re awake now. You should jog with me. You’re not going home, right?”

He was meeting with Kisumi and Mori after lunch so he decided to stay here this weekend. That did not mean that he wanted to wake up at an unholy hour. He got home late from walking Sakura and he was ready to sleep in until 10, at the very least.

“Come on,” Sousuke wheedled, “you know it’s boring to jog alone. And it’s a waste since you’re here for a change.”

Makoto sighed. He knew he’d agree sooner or later. Sousuke wouldn’t accept any other answer. (And anyway, he was flattered that Sousuke wanted to spend more time with him. It was nice.) “Fine,” he said, “but give me a few minutes. I need to find my jogging shoes.”

“Oh it’s here,” Sousuke replied. The door opened a tiny bit as he peeked inside. He poked the shoes in. “It was in the shoe rack.”

Makoto laughed. “You were sure I’d agree?”

Sousuke just grinned. “I’ll wait for you outside!”

Despite Sousuke’s insistence that it won’t be as boring with Makoto around, they were quiet for most of the route. Makoto couldn’t help but notice little things, like how they were still in step
while jogging, how their breathing was in synch, and how Sousuke was so at peace. He noticed the way Sousuke would look at him with a small smile every now and then. He felt like his heart was filling with so much warmth that he wanted to do something about it. Like hold Sousuke’s hand. Or kiss him.

Makoto shook his head and looked away.

It was halfway through that Makoto realized something he probably should have noticed earlier.

“Don’t you jog earlier than this?” He was usually already awake by 5:30 and jogged by 6. He would finish the route in less than an hour and would be back to make breakfast before Makoto was even awake.

Sousuke glanced at him, eyes wide, guilty, before looking away. “Yeah,” he said, “I woke up late.”

“You…? You woke up late?”

“No need to sound so shocked,” Sousuke drawled. “I am human, too.”

“Super human,” Makoto said, “that’s what you are.”

“Shut up, Saint Makoto.”

Makoto shook his head, laughing. “But seriously, you woke up late? Why?”

“I was, uh.” Sousuke paused. He was still looking away, so Makoto couldn’t see what his expression was. He looked stiff though, like he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. “I stayed up late.”

“Were you awake when I came home?”

Sousuke nodded, speeding up a bit. He was escaping. Why? “I was on skype with Rin.”

Oh. Okay, then. Makoto didn’t know what to say to that. And even if he could think of something to say, the lump on his throat would prevent him from speaking.

The silence lingered a while after that.

When their apartment was in view and they were winding down, Sousuke finally looked back at Makoto. His expression turned from the calm one he was wearing most of their run to a worried one. He pursed his lips and stared at Makoto. “Sorry, did I push too hard?”

Makoto blinked and shook his head. “No,” he said, smiling to reassure him. “This much is nothing. I’m not that rusty, Sousuke-kun.”

Sousuke examined his face for a few more moments before nodding. He was silent for another second before he asked, “So, you walked Sakura home yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you—” He paused, cleared his throat, and turned back towards the road. “You’ve gotten closer, huh?”
Makoto shrugged. “Yeah, I mean, we’re supposed to be getting to know each other.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, for STIC. The friendship bracelets, remember?”

Sousuke stopped and whirred back to look at him. He looked shocked. “Oh,” he sighed, “I didn’t know she was an applicant too.” He exhaled, shoulders slumping down. Makoto didn’t even realize he was that tense.

“I must have forgotten to tell you,” Makoto said. “Why did you think I was walking her home?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke said, turning again. They’ve slowed to a walk now. “I thought you were being nice, I guess. You would do that out of the kindness of your heart.”

“Your image of me is ridiculous, you know?” On one hand, it was nice being complimented all the time. On the other hand, he doesn’t think he could live up to that kind of expectations. “You’re going to get disappointed.”

“I already live with you, Makoto,” Sousuke said, dismissively. “I’ve seen you in the morning and I’ve seen you when you’re sleepy. I know you’re not perfect. You’re just… You’re way better than most people.”

Who says that?! Makoto placed a hand on his chest, breathing in slowly and releasing it in one exhale. He knew he was turning red to the tips of his ears. Sousuke walked on, oblivious to the effects of his words.

It took a few more seconds to recompose himself before he tried to catch up.

- - -

Makoto spent the extra hours he got after eating breakfast with Sousuke by making notes for his group’s presentation, so by the time he met with the others, the meeting went smoothly and they were able to partition the work between them. Makoto was assigned to read the book they chose to the class; Kisumi would explain the symbolisms in it; and Mori would compare it to the other children’s books like classic fairytales.

Knowing Professor Mika, though, they knew they had to do some reflection. It was guaranteed by now that saying your own opinion would give you a higher grade.

“My parents are soulbonded with a two-way telepathy,” Makoto shared, “so when I read these books, I thought it was universal. It was weird growing up to realize not everyone meets their soulmate.” Even now, he was surrounded by people who did meet their soulmate, so really, his life might just be weird.

“Yeah, same,” Mori said. “And I thought the telepathy was always two-way! I read Read My Mind and Lost Pair of Socks A LOT as a kid. Real life’s disappointing, I guess.” He sighed sadly.

Kisumi patted him on the back, shaking his head. “Where’s the fun in always knowing what your partner thinks, anyway? It sounds boring. Right, Makoto-kun?”

“Well…”

“Oh!” Kisumi turned to him with bright curious eyes. “You want to have telepathy when you meet your soulmate?”
“It seems nice,” Makoto offered vaguely. “Knowing what he thinks would make everything easier.” Sometimes, he was overcome with the need to know exactly what Sousuke had in mind when he did the things he did. Hearing his thoughts would solve so many of Makoto’s problems.

Then again, that might just give him a mountain pile of more pain. He could imagine Sousuke’s thoughts after talking to Rin, the happiness and sadness all muddled together. He didn’t think he could survive hearing the exact thoughts there.

Kisumi leaned towards him, breaking Makoto out of his stupor. He eyed him carefully before asking, “He?”

Makoto’s eyes widened as he paled. “Um.”

As soon as Mori realized what was happening, he turned towards Makoto as well, caging him in. “You’ve met, haven’t you?”

“...yeah,” he sighed, knowing there was no escape. He would just need to be as vague as possible, so Kisumi won’t know who it was. “I’ve met him.”

“And you don’t have telepathy, huh? Sucks,” Mori said with a sympathetic frown.

Kisumi was still staring at him. “Oh,” he said, eyes widening in realization, “he didn’t notice either! That’s why you asked!”

“Sshhh!” Makoto put a finger on his lips, glancing towards the librarian who was glaring at them. “It’s not a big deal. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Mori backed off immediately, sitting back on his chair and picking up a book. They weren’t that close yet, so it was obvious he was respecting Makoto’s privacy despite his curiosity. Kisumi, on the other hand, has never been a fan of personal space.

“You should seduce him,” Kisumi whispered, smiling mischievously. “I’ll help.”

“No, thank you.”

“But Makoto, you deserve to be with your soulmate!” Kisumi tugged at his sleeves.

“He deserves to choose who he’ll fall in love with,” Makoto said.

Kisumi nodded. “Yeah, and that’s why you’ll seduce him. To put yourself out there as a choice.”

“I don’t want to make anything awkward,” Makoto insisted. “Stop.”

Kisumi pouted, but upon seeing Makoto’s expression, he sighed and nodded. “Fine. But you can talk to me and ask me how to seduce him, okay? I’ll be happy to help.”

Makoto did not think he would ever do that.

- - -

Sunday morning happened almost the same way, except that Makoto was more ready now and had set an alarm. Sousuke looked pleased when he immediately opened his door and agreed. Despite how early it was, seeing that smile as soon as he woke up was still the best way to start the day.
“So are you doing anything today?” Sousuke looked at him with a smile, not even looking winded as they jogged side by side. Maybe Makoto was a bit rusty. “Or are you staying in?”

“Staying in, I think,” he answered. “I’m finished with my homework. I might just read for my exam on Tuesday.”

“You have time to watch a movie, then?”

“A movie?” Makoto’s mind immediately went to an image of him and Sousuke going out to the mall to watch a romantic movie, sharing popcorn and holding hands and…

“Yeah, at home. I’m watching the movie we chose for Socio. Wanna join me?”

Of course. “Sure,” he said, mentally erasing the scenario he conjured. He had promised himself to think things through and not be weird, so he won’t be. He’ll be Sousuke’s friend, and he won’t make things awkward by fantasizing too much. Everything will be just fine.

“Thanks,” Sousuke said, glancing at him. “It’s a soulmate movie, so I’m not sure I’ll survive on my own.”

Makoto faked a smile, thinking *I’m not sure I could survive this either.*

- - -

That afternoon, the two of them pushed the couch back, sat on the floor, and placed Sousuke’s laptop on the table. Makoto watched as Sousuke clicked on the file, and then went back to sitting crosslegged at his side. His knees were almost on top of Makoto’s thighs, but Makoto tried his best to ignore it.

The movie their group chose was entitled *The Wedding*, and it was an iconic romance drama. It was also, quite possibly, the worst choice they could make.

It started with the main character, a 22 years old woman named Kira, sitting in front of a mirror and being fussed over by numerous people. She was wearing a wedding gown and holding on to a beautiful bouquet of roses. It was her wedding day, and she was conflicted. She wasn’t sure if it was the right choice to get married.

The next few minutes were then spent on a flashback on how she and her husband-to-be met, and a montage of how they fell in love. It was nice and sweet.

But Kira didn’t feel like she was truly in love. She felt like there was something else out there for her. The uncertainty of it was enough to make her say yes to his proposal though. She thought she could be happy with this. She could be content with whatever she had.

Back to the present, Kira asked her mom about who made the flower arrangements. The florist was part of the wedding planner’s team, a man with long hair tied in a ponytail and glasses perched on his nose. When he was called into the room for Kira to compliment him personally, the world went into slow motion, the lights surrounding the man like a cloak.

“And there it is,” Sousuke scoffed, narrowing his eyes at the screen. “That’s over the top.”

Makoto would actually agree. It wasn’t like this for him, and as far as he’s heard from Haruka and Rin, it wasn’t like this for them either. (The lights and the slow motion came after, he was sure. It was when you’ve accepted the bond and your soulmate. Makoto remembered how Rin looked at Haruka during their first relay, how he looked at Haruka like he was shining.)
On screen, an image of their future together flashed through Kira’s mind. They would grow old together and have two children. They would have a house of their own, with a beautiful garden he would tend to. He would give her flowers every morning, and their love would never die. If she chose this man, she would be whole. This was what was missing.

“I don’t think that happens, either,” Makoto said, eyes on the laptop. “Soul bonds doesn’t give you the ability to see the future.”

Sousuke shrugged. “This was released just a few years after soul bonds were accepted as a real phenomenon. I think they thought it was supernatural. Some movies still portray them like this.”

“I guess it’s more interesting this way,” Makoto added. It’s a movie, after all. It was an artistic choice, or something.

“Still wrong.”

They grew quiet again as they both focused on the movie. The two were conversing in their heads. Of course, they had two-way telepathy. Grand love stories all do. Cinderella and her Prince, Romeo and Juliet, Jack and Rose in Titanic: all of them had two-way telepathies. For a very long time, Makoto thought the type of telepathy you had was related to the quality of the soulmates’ relationship. His parents were perfect and had two-way telepathy.

Luckily, Rei and Nagisa set the record straight. Despite having a one-way telepathy, they understood each other and loved each other as much as any couple Makoto knew. They had a simpler relationship than Haruka and Rin, even.

Makoto shook his head and went back to watching the movie, briefly glancing towards Sousuke to see how he was coping. He was frowning, clearly displeased.

Kira’s future husband had entered the scene, looking hurt and heartbroken. He sat back down on the chair at the corner, sighing into his hands. “Are you-” He stopped, took a deep breath, and then asked, “Is this it? The wedding’s off?”

“This is so stupid,” Sousuke muttered as Kira ran out of the room while crying. She didn’t want to hurt anyone, but her heart had seen what it wanted, and she didn’t want to be miserable either. She needed time to think.

For the second part of the movie, as Kira walked around and talked with a few of her family and friends, and as her soulmate followed after her and got to know her, Makoto and Sousuke watched in silence.

Finally, in the last scene, Kira’s husband-to-be met her at the chapel and kneeled in front of her. He took her hands in his and kissed the back of it, smiling up at her. “I’ll always love you,” he said, “but that means your happiness is more important to me than anything. If being with him is what you want, I’ll let you go.” He looked down, bowing his head as if offering his everything. “I’m always here. Be happy please?”

It was too much. The scene was… too much. (Too similar to what Makoto thought Sousuke would be like, if he ever confessed his love to Rin. Too similar to the heartbreaking thought of Sousuke forever letting someone else be happy at the expense of his own happiness.)

Makoto felt the sadness in his heart, and he wasn’t sure whether it was his own or Sousuke’s. He gathered his legs with his arms, and leaned his forehead on it, hiding his face. He wasn’t crying, not really, but his face would surely show the emotions he was feeling at the moment. Vaguely, he
could hear Kira and her soulmate talking, and he knew they were meant-to-be and compatible. Their interactions were interesting and they had unbelievable chemistry. Everyone who watched this accepted the ending as ‘happy’, because it was. Kira was able to find happiness.

“Hey,” Sousuke said, “you okay?” He placed a hand on Makoto’s head, lightly ruffling his hair.

“Are you?” Makoto took a deep breath and looked up. Sousuke looked normal. He wasn’t frowning or anything. He didn’t look angry, either. It looked like he had pushed the whole movie out of his mind.

Sousuke raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “I expected that much.”

“You aren’t angry?”

“Oh, I am,” Sousuke said, but he was chuckling. He squeezed Makoto’s arm and stood up. “I still think soulmates are overrated. But they chose what they wanted. I think they’re wrong, but well. It was still their choice.” He stretched his arms up, his shirt riding up. Makoto looked away. “I’ll start cooking dinner. Any request?”

“Nothing,” Makoto said, moving to stand. Sousuke offered a hand so he took it and pulled himself up. The tingling under his skin was as strong as always. Worse now, probably, with the way Sousuke’s hand lingered on his. “I’ll, uh, go back to my room? I need to read for my exam.”

Sousuke nodded. “Yeah, okay, sure.” He looked away before walking off to the kitchen. “I’ll call you when the dinner’s ready.”

- - -

It was about an hour and a half later when Sousuke called Makoto. When he walked to the kitchen, Sousuke had already plated their dinner: Karaage and miso soup, two of Makoto’s favorite food. Sousuke handed over his plate and a plastic cup for the soup, and then nudged him towards the couch. Makoto wordlessly walked, staring down at the food.

Once they were both seated, Makoto placed his plate down on the table and sipped on the cup curiously. Every miso soup recipe is different. It was a family thing. Most people called it the taste of home.

This one was…

This one was his. His mother’s. The one Haruka had made when he came over. He didn’t know what that meant.

Sousuke was obviously watching him for a reaction.

He blinked, sipped some more, and then smiled. The smile was instinctive, really, because this taste was enough to lift his spirit up any time. “This is really good,” he said. Was it okay to ask if this was the same recipe? Maybe their families just had similar-tasting miso soups. That would make sense.

“Yeah?” Sousuke looked pleased with himself, smiling down at his own cup. “I asked Haruka for the recipe.”

Okay.

Okay. That was… that was confusing. “You liked the taste?” Makoto barely whispered, and he
knew his voice sounded weak.

Sousuke continued staring down at his own food. “Yeah, I mean. Sure.” He put down his plate awkwardly before looking back up at him. “I liked it, but.” He grimaced, seemingly thinking over his words. After a few moments, he explained, “You looked happy, when Haruka made this.”

I wanted to make you happy too, was what he was saying. Makoto could see it in his eyes.

“Uh.” How do you respond to that? How do you pretend like that didn’t just break your heart and pieced it whole over and over again? “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Sousuke mumbled, pulling the remote from the table and opening the TV. “This is just— This is thank you for watching with me. I didn’t think the movie would affect you like that.”

Oh. Sousuke wanted to cheer him up because he was down over that movie? Makoto wanted more than anything to comfort Sousuke earlier. It wasn’t about *him. He* wasn’t affected. He thought Sousuke would be. This is ridiculous.

“It didn’t affect me that much,” Makoto objected.

Sousuke glanced at him with a dubious expression.

“I felt sorry for Kira’s husband, that’s all.”

Something shifted in Sousuke’s expression, something like hurt and understanding and something else Makoto couldn’t completely parse. “Of course you were,” he said with a sigh. “You’re too kind. The story wasn’t about him.”

“I know,” he said, “but he deserves happiness, too.”

“Yeah, he does.”

They ate in silence, after that.

- - -

That night, Makoto lied in bed thinking about the past few days, but most especially, this whole particular day, from jogging to watching the movie to eating dinner. There were things there that didn’t make sense to him, but was slowly coming together like puzzle pieces. He thought about Sousuke’s face when they jogged together, about his knees on Makoto’s thighs, about the miso soup. It made him think *maybe* and *what if*.

Against everything in him, he wondered of another possibility.

.

[To: Kisumi

**From:** Makoto

How did you do it?]
From: Kisumi

OH! Are you going to seduce him?!

I’ll teach you everything, Makoto ˚ (≧∇≦)˚

*Seduce* wasn’t exactly the term he would use, but it wasn’t *entirely* wrong either.

(One step at a time, he’d told himself back when he moved to Tokyo. This was another step forward. Maybe Haruka was right. Maybe fighting for his own happiness wasn’t that bad, after all.)

Chapter End Notes

find me @ moeblobmegane
talk to me about 404 (i need it)
Lesson 7: Soulmates in the Family

Chapter Notes

cut in half again because a) I'm really bad at this word count thing? b) this feels like a complete thing already c) me and Naya died while editing this. The second update would probably be much shorter!

As always, thanks to Naya for hanging on to dear life after reading this chapter. Let's survive through this fic together ❥ /layouts/emojis/trash.png ✿

Kisumi-sensei’s Subtle Seduction Tip #1: The best compliments come from the heart. Flirting has different forms, but the most natural one is saying what’s in your mind at that moment. Go with the flow (ノ^_^ノ)^*:・゜　

- - -

For their next big Socio presentation, they were allowed to choose their partner and choose their own subject. The topic was ‘Soulmates in the Family’. The aim of the activity was to show how soulmates function in families and how they affected the dynamics in a household. Makoto immediately looked towards the back, where Sousuke and Kisumi were sitting. Kisumi was waving, pointing towards him and then at himself. Beside him, Sousuke was talking to Touka.

Ever since the last group assignment, Sousuke and Touka has been getting closer and closer. A few times now, Sousuke had asked Makoto to go on to the cafeteria because he had to talk to her. They didn’t exactly look like friends, but there was something there. It looked a lot like understanding.

Makoto shoved whatever he felt about that to the deepest recesses of his mind, refusing to acknowledge it. Sousuke could make friends with anyone. He was cool with that. (Sakura’s ‘power couple’ comment echoed in his head, but that was nothing. He shouldn’t care about that.)

He stood up and walked over to their row, smiling at Kisumi. “Hey—”

Before he could say anything else, Sousuke put an arm around Kisumi’s shoulders and said, “you were already in a group together last time.”

Kisumi pouted, squirming away. He couldn’t escape though. Sousuke just tightened his hold. “But Sousuke! I called him first!”

“I have privileges as his housemate,” Sousuke said seriously. “Working together with me would be easier for Makoto.”

“Weren’t you talking with…” Makoto looked at the side to see Sakura sitting on the row in front of Touka, obviously convincing her to work together. He wasn’t sure why Sakura would want that, since she was always nervous in front of the other girl. “You want to pair up with me?” It sounded way too hopeful for his liking, but. Well, he was.

“Oh course,” Sousuke said, grinning handsomely. His face was doing that thing it does when he was oozing with confidence, something Makoto could never do. “I won’t pass up the chance to
meet your mom.”

Oh god. Why was Sousuke always like this? Especially lately. He’s gotten worse the longer they lived together. One day, Sousuke would say something and Makoto would inevitably explode from the heat climbing towards his head.

“You said her cooking is better than all of mine, right?”

“Except your omelette rice,” Makoto said, mostly reflexively.

“So I’m going to personally taste her food and learn from the master.” Sousuke nodded, like this was a grand plan and not a silly idea he thought of right now.

“Makoto! Choose me!” Kisumi raised one hand, as if reciting in class. “You want to see Hayato again, right?!”

Sousuke narrowed his eyes and pulled Kisumi closer, messing his hair. “Don’t use your little brother. That’s cheating.”

Kisumi puffed up his cheeks and stared at Sousuke for a few seconds, before blowing out a huge exhale. “Fine~” He pushed Sousuke until the other guy released him. “Mori-kun!” He waved at the aforementioned boy and walked off, leaving the two of them alone.

“That’s that, then. We’re working together.”

Makoto couldn’t help but laugh, both at the whole situation and at Sousuke’s satisfied expression. “Did you really have to scare Kisumi away?”

“I didn’t scare him away.”

Shaking his head, Makoto patted him on the arm. “Sure,” he said, “but you didn’t have to. I would have chosen you, anyway.”

The smile Sousuke gave him was sudden and bright, like Makoto had given him the best Christmas present early. “Of course you would,” he said.

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Kisumi-sensei’s Subtle Seduction Tip #2: You want to take care of him, don’t you? Then DO IT. No one will blame you for taking care of someone you want to take care of. In fact, they’d be grateful and might fall in love with you there and then :3

- - -

Being partners for one project was a great chance for him, but the week was long and he had other subjects to focus on. It was midterms week and most of his classes were piling homework after homework on top of their multiple exams. Makoto felt like he would regret not buying coffee and energy drinks by the third day he had to stay up for a project.

Except, he didn’t have to.

Both he and Sousuke had busy schedules, but Sousuke would never forget to heat up water every night so Makoto would have some to use on his tea. And when Sousuke was too focused on studying and forgot to hydrate, Makoto would sit by his side on the couch and nudge a bottle of Pocari or his favorite flavor of Gatorade at him.
During one particularly bad day, Makoto found a pack of 5-hour energy drinks on the kitchen counter, with a post-it note that said: “This one’s on me :) Use as needed. Don’t get high on energy drinks, Makoto. Good luck."

In response, Makoto bought salon pas and restocked their Gatorade. He left the salon pas at their living room table, and put a note on top. “Don’t overexert yourself, Sousuke. We can do this :D”

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The week passed by like that, swamped by school work and unable to talk to each other much. Makoto spent most of his time after class studying in the library or hanging out at the old building in STIC’s clubroom. Sousuke spent most of his time practicing for the relay meet he had qualified in a few weeks ago.

Soon enough, it was Saturday morning and Sousuke was knocking on his door.

“Good morning!” Always so chipper so early in the morning. He obviously ramped up the enthusiasm to annoy Makoto.

Makoto sat up and grunted as greeting. He picked up his phone, refused to acknowledge how early it was, then moved to open the door. “Mornin’,” he mumbled, pushing Sousuke to the side so he could trudge towards the bathroom. “Just gonna… ‘m just…” He yawned. “Bath. Then go.”

He could hear Sousuke laughing as he closed the bathroom door.

“Awake now?” Sousuke had tea ready on the table when Makoto got out of the bathroom. He had a pleasant look on his face as he sipped his own.

“Thanks,” Makoto mumbled, dropping on the couch while rubbing at his hair with a towel. He’d been so tired yesterday that he fell asleep before taking a bath, so showering was dual purpose in making sure he was clean and presentable, and in forcing him to wake up properly. “I’ll get my things,” he said, placing the towel down on the table. “We should—”

Sousuke picked up the towel and placed it back on top of his head. “Take your time,” he said. He nudged Makoto so his back was to Sousuke before putting both hands on the towel and rubbing lightly at Makoto’s hair. “If you don’t dry it properly, you’ll get a cold.”

“Okay,” he agreed, and wondered, not for the first time, whether this was Sousuke being touchy as always, or if… maybe… (He couldn’t even finish the thought in his head. The words just won’t come. It was impossible to him.)

They were about to go out of the apartment when Makoto remembered that he was studying last night and his notebook was still in his room. It had the outline of what he thought they should discuss in their presentation.

“Oh, uh, I left my notebook. I’ll just—”

Sousuke shook his head, easily taking off his shoes and stepping inside their apartment. Makoto had more things in hand and he was already wearing his laced shoes, so it made sense. It took a minute for Sousuke to come back with the notebook. For some reason, he looked thoughtful, holding on to the notebook and staring down at it even when Makoto was pulling it away.
“What is it?”

“Hm.” Sousuke looked away, dropping his hand to his side. He sat down to put on his shoes again. “Nothing,” he said.

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“ONII-CHAN!!!”

Before he’d even opened the door completely, the twins were already barrelling towards him, arms flailing for a hug. He could hear Sousuke laughing in amusement at his back. “Hey,” he greeted warmly, patting both of them on the head before crouching down to meet them in the eyes. “We have a visitor.”

Ren immediately tugged at his arm, as if intending to hide behind him. Ran, on the other hand, sneaked a glance before waving enthusiastically. “You’re tall!” She hopped towards Sousuke with a wide smile. “Are you taller than big brother?” She stopped then, narrowing her eyes. “I know you.”

Sousuke smiled and nodded. “I was in another Swim Team.”

“An enemy!” Ran jumped back, tugging Ren with her. “Nii-chan, an enemy!”

Makoto stood up and sighed, urging them inside. “Come on, that’s not how you greet a guest.”

Ran pouted but properly stood a few meters away and bowed down. “I’m Ran Tachibana,” she said. “Nice to meet you.” Ren echoed her.

“How polite,” Sousuke mused, following along as Makoto lead them towards the living room. “I’m Sousuke Yamazaki. I live with your brother in Tokyo and we’re going to do a group project together.”

The two made identical looks of disgust. “You won’t play with us?”

“After our project, I promise,” Makoto said. He then looked at Sousuke, offering an apologetic smile as the twins went off to the couch to continue watching their Saturday morning cartoon.

“They’re cute kids,” Sousuke said. “Must be nice, having little siblings.”

“You’re an only child, right?”

Sousuke grimaced. “Yeah. It’s a bit lonely. I’d love to have siblings.”

“By the end of the day, the twins might adopt you into the family,” Makoto teased, “they did that with Haru. You’ll regret saying that.”

“Somehow,” Sousuke said, looking over at the twins, “I doubt that.”

Makoto’s mom was cooking a feast when they got to the kitchen. “Welcome home,” she greeted warmly when she noticed them standing by the doorway.

“I’m home.” Makoto walked over to hug her, leaning over to peek at the casserole. “That’s a lot of curry.”
She giggled, batting him away. “Well, we have a visitor and Haruka-kun is home. The other children might visit him, and I’m worried they won’t have anything to eat.”

“Except mackerel,” Makoto finished, laughing.

Sousuke cleared his throat, taking back his attention.

“Oh! Yeah, um. Mom, this is Sousuke Yamazaki. He’s the one I talked about, my housemate.” He gestured towards Sousuke, willing himself not to blush or think about phrases like *meeting the parents*.

Bowing respectfully, Sousuke introduced himself. He then asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?” He gestured to the pot.

“But you’re a guest!” His mom looked extremely pleased with the offer though. She practically glowed with approval.

“I’d be glad to help,” Sousuke said.

“He said he wanted to learn cooking from the best,” Makoto shared, laughing quietly as Sousuke looked at him with betrayal in his eyes. “He’s got an ulterior motive.”

“I’ve heard great things about your cooking, ma’am,” Sousuke said smoothly, clearly intent on charming Makoto’s mom. “I’d love to see how it’s done firsthand.”

“Oh my,” his mom gushed, “you’re such a nice boy. Makoto told me you cook for him too! Of course you can help. I have a few secrets up my sleeves.”

Sousuke smiled gratefully and walked to her side. “Thank you.”

They chatted about the recipe, his mom readily handing over the ladle. With an offhand wave, they told him to go back to the living room and wait there with the twins.

He spent the next hour watching TV with his siblings and listening to their stories about school. He focused everything he had on them, carefully not thinking about how happy it makes him to see Sousuke in their kitchen or talking with his mom. He sealed that thought alongside his other dangerous thoughts. It was getting too large, that collection.

“We’re done,” Sousuke said as he placed a big bowl of curry in the middle of the dining table.

The twins immediately stood up and rushed to the kitchen to help set up. Makoto followed after them. In the kitchen, his mom had a tupperware of food waiting. She smiled and handed it over as soon as he came in, saying, “go over to Haru’s, would you?”

He nodded easily. This was always his task before. Walking through the dining area, he told Sousuke, “I’m going to give this to Haru,” and then raised the tupperware up.

Sousuke nodded, clearly distracted with setting up the table. “Yeah, okay.”

Haruka let him into his house with a resigned nod, taking the tupperware and walking over to his fridge. “Nagisa’s coming over with Rei. You should eat dinner here with us.”
That sounded like fun. He’d missed them, and even though Nagisa always sent him gossipy e-mails to tell him everything happening in Iwatobi, it was still a different experience to hear from them in person. It would be nice to hang out with everyone again.

“Okay,” he agreed, and then stopped. He’d almost forgotten. “Sousuke’s with me though. We’ll come by later?”

Haruka raised an eyebrow in question.

Makoto flushed, shaking his head hastily. “Just for a project!”

The raised eyebrow did not move.

“We’re going to interview mom and dad for Socio. It’s nothing big.”

Silence. He could feel Haruka judging him hard.

“Really, it’s not like I’m asking him to meet my parents.” He laughed awkwardly. “It’s an interview. For school.” It didn’t feel like a strictly-for-school thing, but he’d rather not say that out loud. “And I’m working on the other thing. Kisumi’s, um, he’s helping me.” It has been a while since he last talked to Haruka, now that he thought about it. The midterms and his meetings with the club made it hard to find time to call. Haruka was similarly swamped with schoolwork, he knew. That would explain why everything was bursting out of him right now. He had needed to vent for so long; he didn’t even realize it.

“Helping you?” Haruka continued staring at him.

“He—” He’s teaching me how to seduce Sousuke, he didn’t say. “He told me about how he handled having a soul bond with Asahi, about how they got together.”

Haruka’s expression turned a shade softer as he nodded in understanding. “So this is your update?”

Makoto nodded, remembering his promise. “Yeah,” he said, “this is what I feel right now.”

“Good for you.”

“Thanks, Haru-chan.”

Haruka smiled a bit and glanced over to the door. “You left Yamazaki with your mom, though.”

“What?”

“Your mom,” he repeated patiently. “She’s going to ask questions.”

Ask quest— Oh. Asking Makoto to give this right now instead of after eating when he and Sousuke were more free made more sense now. He didn’t even see it coming. His mom was definitely preparing for a thorough interrogation. He almost didn’t want to come home to that.

“Have you eaten lunch?” Maybe he could stay here, safe and away from that mess.

Haruka pushed at his back, shoving him towards the door. “You know the twins would wait for you before they eat.” He paused. “Sousuke would, too.”

“I know,” Makoto sighed. “I’m scared.”

“It’ll be fine,” Haruka said as he opened the door. “Stop worrying.”
He had every right to worry. As soon as he opened the door, he could hear the laughter from the dining area. Even Ren was laughing.

“He mixed up the salt and the sugar,” his mom was saying.

Oh no.

It wasn’t an *interrogation*. He was sent out to make sure they could talk about him without him interfering. The dread increased as he got closer and closer. They were still talking about his abysmal skills in the kitchen.

Before he could make his presence known, he heard Sousuke say, “Don’t worry, Ritsu-san. I promised to teach him, and I know he has a class in nutrition this sem. I heard their last requirement was a practical exam.”

*Ritsu-san*. They’ve moved to first-name basis.

“That’s really nice of you, dear.” His mom had such a fond tone, as if she was talking to her own child.

Makoto wanted to get out and escape into Haruka’s house, at least until this whole talk was over. Or until he had calmed down and convinced himself that this *didn’t mean anything* and *doesn’t feel perfect.*

“It’s nothing,” Sousuke replied humbly. “Makoto has done so much for me already.”

Torn between wanting to hear more and making his presence known to stop them, he took a deep breath and stepped forward. Eavesdropping wasn’t good, especially when Sousuke was saying stuff like that. If he wanted to know this, he should *ask*.

“I’m home,” he said out loud, to get their attention.

The picture his family and Sousuke made was enough to make him falter in his steps when he stepped in the dining area. They were all looking at his direction, smiling. Sousuke looked like he *belonged* there. It felt like a balloon full of air was lodged in his chest, expanding the more he saw Sousuke here. He wondered if it would pop, if it would hurt.

“Come here and eat,” his mom tutted, pointing towards the seat beside Sousuke. “The food’s getting cold.”

“Sorry,” Makoto said, “me and Haru-chan haven’t talked in a while, so…”

Sousuke glanced at him with a surprised expression. “Really? I thought you talked every night. Rin seems to think so.”

“We’ve been busy. You know how it was.”

With a considering hum, Sousuke nodded. “Yeah, you fell asleep on the couch three times,” he said. “I guess I thought you made time even with all that.”

“I’m not superhuman like you,” he retorted, smiling teasingly.

Sousuke huffed. “Have you forgotten how we fell asleep on the couch at the same time?”
Makoto’s been trying to forget that. It happened when they were studying beside each other and hoping to stay awake by kicking each other when one of them drifted off. It was a bad idea, since it ended with them falling asleep on each other. Sousuke had woken up earlier, and blandly informed him of what had happened, so at least he didn’t wake up snuggling on Sousuke or anything as bad as that. Simply the thought of it was bad enough, he didn’t want the experience etched in his mind.

“My poor boy,” his mom sounded worried, and when he looked at her, she was frowning deeply. “Sousuke-kun told me about how hard it’s been. I’m glad you take care of each other.”

“Sousuke-kun’s good at taking care of me,” Makoto said honestly. *Go with the flow.* “I always say thank you, I swear.” When he looked at his side, Sousuke was pouring curry on his rice, staring down intently at the food. “I’m not sure about taking care of him though.”

Sousuke looked up at that, frowning. “You do,” he said, “you’re good at it too.”

“Onii-chan is really good at taking care of people,” Ren said, looking more confident now. He must have softened up to Sousuke while Makoto was away.

“He’s the best,” Ran corrected.

Ren nodded, eyes wide and earnest. “He is!”

Sousuke laughed, nodding at the two. “You’re right, he is.”

After lunch, the two separated into different rooms to commence with the interview. To make it easier and to get as much information as they could, they’d already planned to do solo interviews and then join everything together when they get home and make the powerpoint presentation. Makoto was tasked with interviewing his parents, which was good because he was worried about letting Sousuke and his mom spend any more time together. The twins happily invited Sousuke into their room for his interview. Makoto was joking when he said his siblings would adopt Sousuke into the family, but it seemed it was coming true. (Another dangerous thought piled and hidden with the others.)

Interviewing his mom was… interesting. He grew up watching them move around the house and use their telepathy with each other. He grew up thinking it was the most perfect kind of relationship. But it was more complicated than he thought.

“Do you think it’s easier to handle a family with your two-way telepathy compared to other people who don’t have one?”

His mom looked up thoughtfully, pursing her lips. “It’s an advantage, that’s for sure,” she agreed, “but we can only read each other’s minds, you know? It didn’t help us read your mind or your siblings’. We were young when we had you, so it was difficult despite it.” She leaned her cheek on her hand as she paused to think more. “It was useful for a lot of things, but parenting is hard no matter what.”

“How was it useful to you?” He jotted down her answer quickly and moved on to the next question.

She laughed, obviously remembering something. “There are things we like to talk about but you can’t know, or thinks we *needed* to talk about but wasn’t for children, so being able to speak
through our minds was a life saver.”

He thought about letting that go, fearing awkwardness, but he knew he needed to do this properly. “Any specific instances?”

“Well,” she started, “remember when you decided to study in Tokyo?”

“Yes, you said it was fine.” They’ve agreed almost immediately, saying they wanted him to have the best.

“That wasn’t completely true,” she revealed, smiling apologetically. “We were worried, and your dad didn’t want you to leave town. We thought—” She eyed him for a moment. “Our concerns were wrong, it turns out.” There it was again, that pleased look. “You make us proud, Makoto.”

He flushed, embarrassed but thrilled with the compliment. It delighted him to hear that. There was nothing more he wanted than to make his parents proud.

“We fought sometimes, when you asked us about studying there,” she continued, “since I wanted to support you but he didn’t want you to go too far away. If you needed us, we wouldn’t be able to go there easily.” She sighed, placing her hands down on the table and lacing her fingers together. “Of course, we couldn’t talk about it in front of you or worry the twins with our arguments.”

With increasing realization, Makoto said, “you never fought in front of us.” He thought married couples were supposed to be like that. He thought marriage meant not fighting and always being able compromise without shouting. He’d been naive.

She grimaced. “Never verbally,” she acknowledged. “Your dad sometimes tells me he hates the telepathy, and sometimes I agree with him. It’s… tiring isn’t the word, really, but something like that.”

He stared at her, wide-eyed and shocked. This all sounded new to him. It was a revelation, to hear his mother talk about something he’d admired his whole life as something tiring; not necessarily a bad revelation, but a disconcerting one. His view shifted. No family was perfect, not even his own, not even the one he’d assumed was one this whole time.

“Sorry,” she said, raising one shoulder in a shrug. “You’re old enough to hear it.”

He sighed heavily and nodded. “I know,” he agreed. He’s been getting that lately. Why is growing up so hard, Sakura had said. He still didn’t know the answer, but he knew it was true. It was really hard.

“Makoto, every couple fights. It’s what they do to make up that’s the difference.” She was looking at him as if she knew he needed this, and she probably did, since she knew him best out of anyone. “We all learn to compromise, in the end.” She smiled then, knowingly. “I see you and Sousuke-kun already know how to do that.”

As soon as she said that, it felt like all the blood on his body rushed to his head. His whole face was undeniably red. “No,” he said, shaking his head repeatedly, “we’re not—” He looked down. “We’re not like that.” A small voice, like a scared child.

“Oh.” Understanding and sympathy was clear in her tone. “But you…?”

This was embarrassing. Way more embarrassing than telling Haruka. “Yes.”

“He’s a good kid,” she said approvingly. “And I can see he’s very fond of you.”
It felt like he would just have to get used to the blush on his cheeks, because it wasn’t disappearing any time soon. “He is,” he agreed. He wasn’t blind. He knew Sousuke treasured him as one of his closest friends. He knew how much Sousuke cared for him. And sometimes, Makoto could even see a hint of more, though he was still scared to dwell on that, to believe that. He’d always been scared of the unknown, most of all. “But we aren’t like that.”

His mom nodded as if it all made sense to her. It was the first time he got that reaction. Everyone else has been trying to tell him to do something. “Take your time,” she said.

He looked down at his list of questions and cleared his throat. “How did you decide on what to tell your children regarding the soul bond?” It was plain to see how he was diverting attention away from that topic.

She smiled and answered graciously, as always trusting him to decide on his own.

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**Kisumi-sensei’s Subtle Seduction Tip #3:** Skinship! Skinship! Skinship! ♥♥♥

**Kisumi-sensei’s Subtle Seduction Tip #4:** *Show him you trust him by displaying a side he’d never seen before!*

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Once they were finished with the interviews, they were left with some free time before dinner. As expected, the twins latched on to them and refused to let go, saying they should play video games while they still had a chance. Ran, with an adorable pout, said they deserved it as a prize for answering all of Sousuke’s questions. Sousuke, obviously amused, agreed.

Mario Cart was the game of choice. The twins immediately took their usual controllers and sat down on the bed, side by side and leaning against the wall. It left Makoto and Sousuke to the space on the floor.

Picking one controller up, he patted on the space beside him and then offered the controller when Sousuke sat down. Their thighs were pressed together where they sat and Makoto could feel the warmth at his side. He should be used to it, having sat with Sousuke in their couch every now and then, and even having slept on him, but it still sent a thrill down his spine.

The game was simple but fun. And above all, it awakened the competitiveness in both of them. When the twins were playing, Makoto and Sousuke let them win, pretending to be disappointed with the loss or angry about being left behind in the race track. But the moment the two flopped down and said, “I bet ‘nii-chan can win against you, Sou-chan”, it was as if a switch was turned on.

Sousuke was known for his competitiveness. Only Rin and Haruka were worse.

But Sousuke, never having played video games with Makoto before, could only watch in shocked silence as Makoto threw a bomb strategically at his car and smiled innocently at him. The wide-eyed gaping transformed into a delighted smirk. “Oh, you’re on,” he said with a low voice.

“If you can catch up,” Makoto said with an air of someone who knew they won’t be defeated.

And he wasn’t.
Sousuke was good, better than his siblings, but he wasn’t Makoto. He might be better at swimming and more competitive in that, but this was Makoto’s territory. Aside from competitions, this was the only time he fought this hard, the only time he felt he could turn off the modesty and politeness. Anyone’s who’s played any type of game, may it be video games or card games, knew not to mess with him. Sousuke knew that now.

“Woah,” Sousuke said, the third time he lost. The twins were napping behind them by then, bored of watching. “This is new.” He looked at Makoto like he was looking at a new other person. “Why don’t we have game consoles at home?” There was wonder in his voice.

Makoto shrugged. “I don’t have any extra.” And he’d thought it would be a distraction from school. (Games had nothing on Sousuke though, so it was a weak reasoning.)

“I’ll get mine,” Sousuke promised. “We need to do this more.”

“You’re enjoying losing,” Makoto said, with uncharacteristic arrogance. It was a trait that came out every now and then, something that amused Nagisa and Rei more than anything.

Sousuke stared at him for a moment, amused grin widening. “I’m enjoying this,” he said vaguely, then turned back towards the screen. “I’ll definitely win.”

(He didn’t.)

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The twins pouted and complained when they said they had to leave for Haruka’s house, begging to join them, but Sousuke easily swore that he would give them something good tomorrow, if they behaved. Makoto was not used to anyone but Haru being able to appease his siblings like this. Sousuke, for his part, looked pleased the whole time.

When they arrived at their destination, the one who opened the door was not Haruka. Instead, they were assaulted with a huge hug, a flash of blonde hair their only warning.

“Mako-chan! Sou-chan!”

Nagisa snuggled in between them, voice ecstatic. He turned to Makoto, eyes wide and bright. He looked like he was shining, as he always did. Just being around him made Makoto felt like his energy was being recharged. “I missed you,” he said. Then, more deliberately, he turned to Sousuke and latched on to his arm. “Mako-chan calls me sometimes, you know? Sou-chan doesn’t even reply much!” He puffed up his cheeks as he dragged him inside. Makoto followed after them.

“I’ve been busy,” Makoto heard Sousuke say. It probably wasn’t that at all, though. Sousuke still found time to text Makoto and skype Rin, so it was perhaps more about not knowing what to write back. Nagisa was particularly hard to handle if you weren’t used to his tangents. He jumped from one topic to another without pause. Usually, people backed off because of it. He thought maybe Sousuke needed more time to adapt.

He left the two to their conversation and went ahead towards the kitchen where Rei and Haruka were working seamlessly in the kitchen. It was obvious Rei was at home here, opening cupboards and taking out plates like he owned the place. Haruka had a small smile on his face as he stirred at the pot. He was heating the curry and adding chocolate on it.

“Chocolate?” He walked over, surprised.

“Makoto-senpai!” Rei jumped a bit, but didn’t drop the plates, thank god. “It’s been so long!”
“It has,” he agreed. “Looks like you’ve been getting more lessons, huh?”

Rei blushed and nodded shyly. He always got embarrassed, when it came to this. Rin used to tease him of being Haruka’s favorite. (Makoto thought it was probably true.) “When Haruka-senpai comes home, Nagisa-kun would go here without warning. So I thought, maybe, I could learn more to help.”

Makoto nodded in understanding before walking closer to the stove. “Why the chocolate, though?”

This time, Haruka answered, “Nagisa,” as if that explained everything. And, well, it did. He looked up, regarding Makoto with a searching gaze. “Where’s Sousuke?”

“I left him with Nagisa,” he answered, leaning on the kitchen counter as he watched.

“That’s unexpectedly evil,” Rei commented, laughing. Haruka nodded almost imperceptibly.

Makoto shrugged, not wanting to explain. He figured those two needed the time to catch up, and that both he and Sousuke could use some time away from each other. Or at least, he did.

“This would be ready in a few minutes,” Haruka said after a brief moment of silence. “Help Rei set up.”

They sat around Haruka’s low table, Nagisa dragging Sousuke to his side and pushing Rei in front of him. Makoto sat beside Rei. Haruka sat between Sousuke and Makoto, a move that Makoto recognized as a protective gesture and a way to assert some sort of authority. Makoto really did not understand how Sousuke and Haruka’s relationship worked, but the way Sousuke narrowed his eyes and then sighed confirmed enough of his suspicions. Those two played a weird game that nobody else understood. (Makoto knew they enjoyed it, though, if the easing of tension from Sousuke’s shoulders or the twinkle in Haruka’s eyes were any indication.)

“-but it’s unfair,” Nagisa was saying, enthusiastically tugging at Sousuke’s arm like a child. “I wanted to be in a class with them both!”

“Rei is your soulmate,” Sousuke explained with a tone like he’d said this more than once. “It’s the rules. You can’t be in the same class if you have telepathy.”

Nagisa crossed his arms petulantly. “The rules are stupid.”

“The rules are there for a reason,” Sousuke said.

To Makoto’s side, he heard Rei sigh. Haruka was quietly putting food on his plate.

“For what reasons?”

“You know what reasons.” Sousuke simply raised an eyebrow at Nagisa knowingly.

Nagisa pouted for a long minute before he sighed. “Yeah, I guess,” he conceded. It was a funny scene, and Makoto saw that he wasn’t the only one entertained by it. Rei was laughing quietly, and Haruka was watching with a quirk on his lips. Makoto, Rin, and even Haruka would always end up agreeing to Nagisa, or being pulled into his weird reasonings. Sousuke, with his iron-clad principles, was the hardest opponent when it came to this.

Putting that whole ordeal behind him though, as you’d expect of him, Nagisa bounced back with a
question, redirecting all their attention. “How about you, Sou-chan? You won the relay, right?”

Sousuke nodded, surprised.

To answer his unasked question, Nagisa explained, “Mako-chan updates me about every-thing.” He grinned. “We talk about you a lot.” He said it as if Makoto has been divulging every embarrassing moment in Sousuke’s life, which he hasn’t. Makoto gave vague updates, in contrast to Nagisa’s over-involved narrations. “When’s the next round?”

“How about you, Sou-chan? You won the relay, right?”

“About a month from now,” he answered. He then turned to Haruka, asking, “I saw your school in the list of participants.”

Haruka nodded, unperturbed. “They are.”

“You’re not part of the team?” Sousuke sounded taken aback. Makoto understood the feeling. It was strange that Haruka wouldn’t be immediately part of the team, given his advanced skill. But then, Makoto also knew how Haruka worked. He knew how slow Haruka was to warm up to people. It was relieving to know his new team understood that.

“Our team has many good swimmers,” Haruka answered, to Makoto’s astonishment. “They don’t need me yet.” Yet. It was self-assured, with a touch of pride for his new team. Makoto could almost weep. Haruka probably knew what he was feeling, because he glanced at Makoto next. There was softness in his features, an openness he rarely showed. “I’m glad I go there.” Thank you was what he was saying.

Makoto genuinely might have wept, if he wasn’t surrounded by people. Haruka has a new team, has a new school, and he was happy. He accepted that change and was willing to go forward with them. Like Makoto, and like Rin, Haruka was finding his own path. It hit him, suddenly, that he wasn’t the only one growing up. They all were. It filled his chest with emotions he didn’t know how to handle right now.

“We’re going to beat you, anyway,” Sousuke said, loudly and with enough cheer in his voice to erase the sentimental feel around them. “Sorry.”

Haruka narrowed his eyes, the moment completely disappearing as he said, “You can try.”

- - -

When they went back to the Tachibana household, Makoto’s mom told them to get some sleep and that Makoto’s room was ready. It didn’t click at first what that meant, until they both walked up and there was a futon right beside Makoto’s bed. They had a guest room. This was completely unnecessary.

“I’ll—”

Sousuke shook his head, sitting down the bed. “It’s fine. I don’t mind.” He paused. “Do you?”

“No,” he answered. Yes, he thought.

“Where does Haruka sleep, when he’s here?” It was casually asked, with no inflection.

“Here,” he answered. “Ran and Ren likes to crash in my room when Haru stays the night.”

Sousuke hummed, nodding. He stood up and stretched, sliding down towards his futon, his back leaning against Makoto’s bed. Makoto sat at his side, his thigh pressed to Sousuke’s arm.
Silence, for a long while, reigned.

When Sousuke spoke, it was soft and quiet, befitting the time of the night. “He looked happy, didn’t he?”

“You really helped him, you know?” Sousuke looked up, eyes clear. “Both of them. You were a big help.”

“You were, too.”

“Not as much as you,” he said, shaking his head and looking down at his knees. “I was…” He paused, cleared his throat. “I wasn’t much help, until you…” Another pause, longer this time. Makoto almost thought he wasn’t going to finish the sentence. “You helped me too,” he ended with a wry smile.

“I didn’t do anything,” Makoto said, frowning. He knew he helped Haruka, and by extension, Rin, but he couldn’t think of any time he was particularly helpful to Sousuke. He’d been avoiding him back then. When did he allow himself to be close enough to help?

Sousuke, as if in answer, reached towards him and held on to his wrist, squeezing gently. It was a move he’d done so many times before, a gesture that’s expected by now: a good night, a sweet dreams, a thank you. “Remember when we were planning our last joint practice?”

He did. It was a mess, from Rin’s admission that he was going back to Australia, to the underclassmen’s doubts on whether they were strong enough to be the next leaders of the club, to Haruka’s breakdown over his uncertainty of the future. Everyone was high-strung, and the three captains thought they could ease some of those with some good old fashioned competition.

He remembered meeting Aki and Sousuke in Samezuka’s cafeteria, and how he suggested they eat at Sousuke’s favorite restaurant. It was a curt meeting, all-plans and not much leisurely talk. He didn’t remember what they talked about, specifically, nor did he remember what they ate, but he remembered Sousuke’s face vividly. Sousuke was tired and worn-out. He looked flayed open and helpless.

“What about it?” Makoto couldn’t remember anything else but Sousuke’s pain.

Sousuke let out a disbelieving laugh. “Rin was right about you,” he muttered. And then— “You told me to trust Rin,” he said, “and to trust Haruka. You told me you were there, and that you knew I was there to support them.” Another laugh, shorter and more of a sigh. “You told me to trust myself, because you knew I’d always be there for Rin.”

Makoto could hear the words in his own voice. It was a simple comment, a throwaway line in the grand scheme of things. “I was just saying the truth,” he said, because he was. It wasn’t important enough to warrant that kind of expression from Sousuke. Those were facts. Rin and Haruka could handle themselves, and when they strayed from happiness, Sousuke and Makoto were right there to remind them of where the right path is. They were a special kind of team, the four of them. Makoto knew that deep inside.

“You were,” Sousuke agreed, “but it was a truth I needed to hear.”

“A truth you needed to hear?” He didn’t understand what that meant, or why Sousuke was looking at him as if he saved him from something. It was a dangerous look, something that gave him a heady feeling.
Sousuke turned to face him completely. It was weird, looking down at his face. (Makoto pretended he didn’t think of Sousuke kneeling on the floor, offering his love and his everything.) His face had that expression he’d been wearing more and more lately, that tender look as if Makoto was precious. “You made me realize something I should have known already,” he explained quietly, the words heavy between them. “Haruka loved Rin, but I never—”

He grimaced and looked down, letting go of Makoto’s wrist. “It’s always been in the back of my mind, how Haruka could hurt Rin again, because Rin loved more than anyone. I thought the bond tied them together and that’s why everything was happening.” In a painfully honest voice, he finished, “I thought their love wouldn’t be strong enough.”

Makoto could hear what wasn’t said. I thought my love was stronger, he filled in.

“It was arrogant,” Sousuke admitted with a laugh. There was no hint of pain, only nostalgia. “You made me realize it wasn’t like that.” A slow grin appeared on his face as he looked Makoto in the eyes. “Do you remember? That’s when you said you were going to Tokyo.”

It was. After Makoto’s fight with Haruka, it was easier to announce it. He was able to steadily face people and say, “I’m studying in Tokyo and living on my own” with his head held up high.

The fond smile was back, made softer by the atmosphere in the room. Outside, it was dark and quiet, as if they were the only ones awake. “I thought back then ‘ah, he’s moving forward’ and I was jealous.”

“But you knew what you wanted,” Makoto said incredulously. Sousuke was goal-oriented and had a clear view of his dreams. He knew who he loved, he knew what he was aiming for, and he knew where he wanted to go. Makoto was lost back then, and Tokyo was his first step. Comparing the two of them was like comparing a newly-made pool to a powerful river. It was absurd.

“I knew what I wanted,” Sousuke agreed, and then added, “but not what I needed.”

Makoto waited for an explanation. Sousuke offered none.

“It’s getting late,” Sousuke said, after a long silence. “We should sleep.”

With a nod, Makoto lied down on his bed, pulling the blankets up to his chin and ignoring the measly space separating them. In the haze between wakefulness and sleep, a memory faintly flickered in his mind.

“Trust in yourself,” he’d said when they were separating ways, reaching out to touch Sousuke’s wrist, a touch he’d never allowed himself to give but was giving now, not for his own curiosity but to offer comfort. Sousuke was weakened by the situation, and Makoto was willing to offer what he had, what he could give, as support. “You know you’ll always be there for Rin,” he said, and then, much more quietly, barely a whisper and most likely lost to the wind, “as I will, for you.”
[To: Makoto

From: Aki

In Iwatobi rn?]

.

[To: Aki

From: Makoto

Yea

? ]

[To: Aki

From: Makoto

Me and Sousuke r doing the proj remember?]  

.

[To: Makoto

From: Aki

O yea. In Iwatobi rn too.

We’re driving back to Tokyo after lunch. Wanna join us?]  

.

[To: Aki

From: Makoto

If it won’t be much of a bother?]  

.

[To: Makoto

From: Aki

lol of course not
After lounging in bed for about half an hour after waking up, Makoto sat up and checked his bedside clock. It was 8 am. He had woken up at 7:30 to see Aki’s text, and the message tone wasn’t even the one that woke him up. He naturally woke up with little fuss. It felt a bit unnatural, to be honest. His body must have gotten used to waking up early during the weekends.

This was all Sousuke’s fault.

Speaking of, he woke up with the futon beside his bed already tidied up, so Sousuke must have woken up early to jog as usual. He was probably still outside.

Wait.

“Oh no,” he groaned, standing up quickly and running down the stairs in a hurry. If Sousuke decided to jog around the neighborhood, where would he be now? He wasn’t from here! He didn’t know the twists and turns of this neighborhood, despite having been to Haruka’s place a few times during high school. He might end up in the forest behind the temple, or stuck in the beachside, or —

“Good morning,” Sousuke greeted, eyebrow quirking up when he noticed how panicked Makoto looked. Ran was on his back, clinging to his neck while he held on to her legs in a piggyback. She had her cheek pressed to his shoulder and her eyes were half-lidded with sleepiness.

“What… are you doing?” He stopped on his tracks and stared.

“We jogged outside!” Ren jumped forward, answering with a huge smile. “We went to Haru’nii!”

That would explain Ren’s enthusiasm. “Okay,” he said. “Why is Ran sleeping on Sousuke’s back?”

He felt like that was the most important matter here.

“I’m not sleeping!” Ran shook her head weakly which did not help her argument at all. “I’m helping.”

“Helping?”

Sousuke nodded, and with a faux-serious tone, he said, “Weight training.” As if to prove this, he jogged in place and then did a show of stretching side by side without dislodging her. Ran giggled and clung tighter.

The bubble of feelings inside Makoto felt like it would pop any time soon. They were all being so adorable. There was affection in the way they interacted with each other, and it made something settle inside him. Something warm and right.

He couldn’t help but laugh as he walked down the last steps of the stairs. “Good job, Ran,” he said, patting her on the head. “How about you, Ren? Did you help too?”

Ren hopped in excitement. “Haru’nii carried me,” he said, stars in his eyes. He looked like it was the best thing that ever happened to him. “We were faster!”

“They weren’t!” Ran puffed up her cheeks and protested. “Sou’nii was faster!” She bumped her chin with Sousuke’s shoulder. “Right?”
“It was a tie,” Sousuke said diplomatically, grinning at Ren. “We’re both pretty fast.”

It was Makoto’s time to raise his eyebrow at Sousuke. “You raced?” He would have forced himself to wake up earlier if it meant he could see that. Sousuke with Ran on his back and Haruka narrowing his eyes as he kneeled down to let Ren climb on to his back… it was a weird image, but a funny one. Did they seriously race?

Sousuke shrugged, holding on to Ran’s legs to make sure she won’t fall from the movement. “The twins wanted to come with me and we didn’t know how to bring them with us to jogging.”

That explains carrying the kids. It was early, after all. But— “That doesn’t explain the race,” Makoto noted knowingly.

“Yeah, well.” Sousuke huffed out a laugh. “It was Nanase’s fault.”

“Do I even want to know?”

Sousuke shook his head. “You don’t.” Whatever it was, it clearly amused him to no end. His eyes were gleaming with glee. “You really don’t.”

Ran yawned widely, hiding his face on Sousuke’s back. “I’m hungry,” she mumbled.

“Do you want to help me and your mom finish making breakfast?” Sousuke shook her gently, turning his head towards her. There was complete confidence in that sentence. He knew Makoto’s mom would let him help.

“Ohkay,” Ran agreed. She tugged on his shoulder and said, “Training is over.”

Sousuke laughed and kneeled down to let her go. When he stood up, he turned towards Ren with a serious expression. “Do you want to join us or do you want to tell your brother about what we did?” He asked it as if it was a very important mission. (Sousuke was good with his siblings. Makoto felt the thought hit him and settle in his mind, like a single drop of rain joining the flow of the ocean.)

Ren tilted his head to the right, considering it carefully. “I wanna tell brother,” he answered.

With a nod, Sousuke patted him on the head and walked off with Ran.

Like a soldier with a command to obey, Ren tugged him to the couch and proceeded to explain how Haru’nii definitely won the race but Sou’nii was pretty fast too.

---

They all ate breakfast together, the twins happily talking their ears off and Makoto’s dad interrogating them about living in Tokyo when there were lulls in the conversation. Sousuke talked about his plans for the future, about swimming competitively and hopefully winning in international competitions. Makoto’s parents were impressed by his stories, especially when they heard he was currently nationally ranked in the 100m butterfly division. He expected Ran to pout and say something when Sousuke mentioned Samezuka winning in the relay last year, but it seemed like Sousuke has won her over completely because of this morning. (Makoto wondered if this was what Kisumi felt like, when Hayato talked about him.)

After, Makoto sat down with his dad to finish his interview, while Sousuke went to the living room to watch a movie with the twins and his mom.
“I need to take a picture,” Sousuke said as soon as they were all outside the house. Aki had texted that they were on their way to fetch them, so the two of them were in the process of saying goodbye to everyone. “Our presentation needs it,” he added as explanation. He gestured for the whole family to stand in front of the house before peering into the viewfinder. “Say cheese!” Two consecutive flashes. “Looks great,” he said, as he looked down at the screen.

“I want a picture too!” Ran immediately broke off from their pose to rush towards Sousuke. She raised a hand as if volunteering while trying to reach the camera with the other. “Let’s take a picture with Sou’nii.” Sousuke playfully held the camera just out of her reach, moving it around while laughing. Ran pouted at him and crossed her arms. “Sou’nii!!!”

“I’ll take the picture!” Makoto’s mom readily stepped forward, smiling as Sousuke passed over the camera without hesitation. They shared a look that Makoto did not understand at all.

Sousuke grinned and picked up Ran, chuckling as she squealed happily. She was definitely too big to be picked up so many times, but her glee was palpable. Sousuke looked at Makoto with an expression like he was saying What are you waiting for?

With a sigh, Makoto picked Ren up too and stood by Sousuke’s side. Sousuke bumped his shoulder wordlessly.

Makoto’s mom looked so giddy with all of it. She giggled for a second before saying, “3, 2, 1… Say cheese!”

When their ride arrived, Makoto was surprised to see Aki on the driver’s seat. He didn’t know she knew how to drive. Sei got out of his passenger’s seat and greeted Makoto’s parents and the twins, then helped them haul their backpacks into the back.

“Hey,” Aki said, smiling at them through the rear-view mirror as they shuffled into the car. “Did you kids have fun?”

“We had a great time, mom,” Sousuke answered in kind.

“I will leave you in the middle of nowhere if I were your mom,” Aki shot back with a laugh.

“That’s not very nice,” Sousuke said, faking an offended tone.

“To be fair,” Sei interjected as Aki started up the car, “you’re not very nice either.”


“Unfair. Makoto thinks everyone’s nice,” Aki said.

Makoto shook his head, widening his eyes in a show of innocence. “Leave me out of this.”

Sousuke laughed, elbowing him again. They were sitting extremely close. “You think I’m nice though,” he said in an undertone.

“Sometimes, I guess,” Makoto offered teasingly. “I’m not sure right now. You were trying to steal my siblings away, so…”
“Hey! I wasn’t!” Sousuke looked vaguely offended at the idea. “It’s not my fault they liked me. I’m likeable.”

Sei hummed at that, turning towards them with a smirk. “I remember the first years who were scared of you all year, Sou. I think we all do.” Sousuke was a strict captain with a hint of enough gentleness to make him approachable. Despite that, the youngest members were still scared of him, especially since they had to go do more laps than anyone to get into proper shape for Samezuka’s level.

“I was a doting captain compared to you,” Sousuke retorted.

“True,” Aki agreed, nodding, before Sei could say anything.

“Ouch!” Sei looked at Aki with an exaggerated frown. He clutched his chest as if he was wounded. “I was on your side!”

Without looking away from the road, Aki reached up and patted him on the cheek in a move that would look condescending if it wasn’t so tender. “Babe,” she said, “you were a scary captain. It’s a compliment.”

“Huh,” Sei said, nodding in understanding immediately. He pursed his lips and stared at her. “Okay, if you say so.”

“You were good. Everyone respected your authority,” Aki added genuinely.

“Except you,” Sei said, chuckling.

“I respected your authority,” Aki said, “but I wanted to punch you half the time. It was a very complicated feeling.”

Makoto smiled while watching the two, enjoying their back and forth. He glanced at his side, hoping to share a commiserating look with Sousuke, but found him frowning in confusion at the two. “Sousuke,” he whispered, poking at his side.

Sousuke looked at him and mouthed, “Babe?” He looked so bewildered at the word.

“Hm?”

“Since when does Aki say babe?” He leaned closer so as not to be heard.

Makoto did not see how it was such a big deal. Aki was practical and often blunt, but she was also very affectionate with the people she liked.

“What’s happening back there?” Aki glanced at them for a second, sounding suspicious. They were sitting plastered against each other’s sides despite how big the space was. Plus, Sousuke was leaning too close, whispering directly to his ear. Makoto could see why she’d be curious.

“Nothing, mom,” Sousuke said, subtly sitting back properly.

“That’s cute,” Aki said sarcastically.

“Anyway.” Sei turned towards the back again, effectively cutting off Sousuke and Aki’s standoff. “It’s a long drive. Do you want to eat on the way or go for drive-through?”

“Whatever’s easier for you,” Sousuke answered, shrugging. “Would it be easier to rest for Aki? Driving that long would be tiring.”
Aki shook her head. “We’re switching,” she explained. “Sei’s driving for the other half. I’m fine with anything.”

“Then drive-through? We’ll get to Tokyo faster.”

“Good plan.”

---

It was the first week after they became third years when the official Joint Captain Lunch Meetings started. Before that, they’ve all been hanging out together as a team or talking with each other through skype or text messaging. This was the first time it was only the three of them, and the first time Makoto agreed to eat out in a small group with Sousuke.

“Long time no see,” Sousuke greeted Makoto with a perfunctory nod, sitting on the booth beside Aki. He playfully poked at her hip, saying, “How’s my favorite captain-in-law?”

Aki gave him a withering glare. “Samezuka sucks,” she said.

“Weak,” he said, grinning. “Are you softening up to us?”

“Never,” Aki replied, more rote than anything.

They already had a dynamic between them. They were used to each other’s presence. Makoto felt like an outsider. He was friends with both of them, closer to Aki than Sousuke, but he hadn’t had much time to interact with the two of them at the same time. He’d hoped this meeting would be straightforward and more about their clubs. (He thought it would definitely be, since it was those two. Aki and Sousuke were already captain-like during their second year, more so than Makoto who was actually a captain at the time.) He was wrong though, judging from their teasing and easy smiles. This was not a serious meeting at all.

Aki waved a hand in front of his face, taking his attention. “Makoto-kun!”

“Ah. Hi.”

Sousuke chuckled, looking at him now with a quirked eyebrow. “You nervous or something?”

“It’s just us,” Aki said, smiling. “You know Sousuke isn’t really scary.”

“And Yazaki likes you,” Sousuke added, “so you’re lucky.”

Makoto sighed, forcing himself to relax. “Right.” He smiled a bit stiffly. “So what’s today’s agenda?”

---

Sousuke spent half the ride watching Aki and Sei, making increasingly confused expressions at Makoto. When they switched, Aki fed Sei fries as he drove, and Sousuke looked like he was going to have a conniption.

“Why are you so surprised?” Makoto couldn’t help but ask, when they were already about half an hour away from their destination. Aki wasn’t overly sweet, and Sei even had his usual flirtiness in moderation, so he couldn’t see what was so surprising.

“I didn’t think they’d be like this,” he explained. “It’s so… weird.”
Aki, having heard the answer, looked back at them with obvious amusement on her face. “Oh yeah,” she said, lengthening the syllable in a mocking tone, “you thought I broke up with Sei.”

Sei made a disbelieving sound, but didn’t comment.

“We’re not talking about that,” Sousuke immediately said.

“Aren’t you curious?” Aki smiled at Makoto, ignoring Sousuke.

“I feel like I shouldn’t ask,” Makoto answered, glancing at the two of them. Sousuke didn’t want to talk about it, and Aki, despite teasing Sousuke, hasn’t revealed anything either. She could have sent him a message about it if she thought he needed to know. “If Sousuke-kun wanted me to know, he’d tell me.”

“Ah.” Aki turned back to look at the road, laughing quietly. “How nice. You gave Sousuke-kun a pass. It would be great if Sousuke-kun said something, though.” That was obviously a bait.

Sousuke, unexpectedly, did not rise to it. “I’ll tell you next time,” he whispered softly.

They got home before it was dark. Makoto thanked Sei and Aki for the ride as Sousuke took their bags from the back. Sei told them to visit his apartment when they have time, and Aki told Makoto “good luck” without any context. Aki then dragged Sousuke down by the collar and whispered something seemingly threatening at him, but Sousuke simply laughed and said “yeah, I know”.

As soon as they were inside the apartment, Sousuke dropped down their bags at the side of the couch and sat down, leaning back comfortably. “I missed you,” he said, patting the cushion.

“Was our couch not good enough?” Makoto asked in jest.

“Your couch was comfortable and not lumpy like this thing,” Sousuke said. He was still lovingly patting it like it was a pet. “But I’m most comfortable here at home.”

Home.

Makoto understood the feeling, even if Iwatobi was still his primary home. He knew Sousuke didn’t have attachments in Sano and barely thought of his family’s home as his own. This apartment was where he spent most of his free time. This was the place where he could truly relax.

“I’d love to come back, though,” he added, smiling at Makoto, “if you’d invite me again.” There was a hopeful lilt in his voice.

Makoto walked over to his side of the couch and sat down, examining Sousuke’s expression. “You want to?”

“Yeah,” Sousuke said easily. “I love your family. The twins are great. And Haruka’s not that bad. He’s a decent jogging buddy.” He shrugged. “And you’re pretty okay too, I guess.” He said the last word exactly the same way Makoto had used it earlier.

Makoto playfully kicked him on the shins, and then added, “You’re always welcome,” with complete honesty. To lessen the weight of his words, he raised his hand and jangled the bracelet. “You’re stuck with me, remember?”

Sousuke smiled softly, nodding. “Yeah,” he sighed, “forever, huh?”
“Well,” Makoto intoned, heart beating nervously, “as long as this bracelet is intact.”

The joke didn’t land. There was a tension in the air, as if something was about to happen.

Sousuke stared at him for a moment then slowly reached over, grabbing his wrist and tracing the bracelet with his thumb. His touch felt electric. Makoto held his breath.

“Last forever, okay?” He said it to the bracelet, soft like a prayer. “I want—” He froze, hastily letting go as if burned. He cleared his throat. “Speaking of tied together,” he said with forced casualness, “I saw something.”

The moment was gone, just like that.

In its place was an air of awkwardness, the feeling of disappointment. “What?”

“Your notebook.” He pointed towards Makoto’s bag. “The one I got from your room?”

Makoto waited. It was his Socio 204 notebook. Was there something in there? Was there—

Oh no. He felt himself pale. He wasn’t sure what he wrote down, but what if Sousuke figured something out because of it? He’d never written Sousuke’s name, he was always careful about that, but maybe… Maybe there was a clue there.

Sousuke examined his expression for a moment, realization dawning. “So it was about you?”

He did not have any idea what this was about. “What?”

“There was a note at the back,” Sousuke explained. “Telepathy: none. Intensity: weak. Sensory—”

“It was just a note!” Makoto shook his head immediately, frantically. “It wasn’t important.”

“Makoto,” Sousuke sighed, resigned. He was moving away, settling on his side of the couch, a few inches away. “You don’t have to hide it from me because of what I believe in. You know I’ll always support you, right?” He looked so earnest, and it was such a nice thing to say. But it was also the worst comment he could give. “If you—” He looked down, took a deep breath. “If you’ve met them, I want to support your decision. I want you to tell me when you need anything.”

Fall in love with me, he thought. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, tone unexpectedly cold. He couldn’t control it. It was what he felt at that moment. Cold. It felt like a giant piece of ice dropped in his gut, making him cold everywhere from the tips of his toes to his wrist where his bracelet lied. He could feel the dying embers of the earlier moment being extinguished completely.

Sousuke must have heard it in his voice, because he nodded and stood up. “Okay,” he said curtly. It was one word, but somehow it communicated how hurt he was. He must have felt like he wasn’t being trusted. Makoto couldn’t do anything about that. “Sorry,” he muttered before going back to his room and locking the door behind.

Makoto let his head fall back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. This weekend had been so good. They were happy. It felt like something was going to happen.

Why did it have to end this way?

To: Makoto
From: Sousuke

I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to find out like that.

Talk to me?]  

Was this considered a fight?

Makoto remembered how he shut out Sousuke completely back when they first talked, how he never replied because he was so angry that Sousuke had the audacity to blame Haruka for the pain Rin was experiencing. He remembered the way he refused to think about Sousuke at all.

This wasn’t like that.

Sousuke didn’t do anything wrong. Not really. It wasn’t his fault Makoto fell in love with him, or that he wasn’t in love with Makoto.

He was being nice when he said he wanted to support Makoto. It wasn’t an empty promise. It wasn’t designed to hurt. If anything, it came from a good place, from affection and friendship.

But… It hurt anyway.


The problem with the situation was this:

a) Makoto did not know how to talk to Sousuke without blurting out information that would not help the situation

b) Makoto did not want to lie (because Sousuke trusted him)

c) Sousuke was his housemate and they would eventually see each other

d) Sousuke was his groupmate and they haven’t finished their presentation for tomorrow  

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

I’m sorry. My reaction was over the top.]  

Makoto knew he was delaying the inevitable, but he couldn’t stop himself. Instead of going straight home after his one Monday class, he decided to go to the STIC room to finish the remaining bracelets for the members. He had finished Sakura’s and Pika’s, so there were only two left. The different environment and the mindless task might be able to help him relax and find a way out of this mess.

The room was empty when he arrived, so he sat down and went to work.

The familiar movement of his hands, the rhythm of it, made him feel at ease. He indulged on the
He was halfway done with the last bracelet when the door opened to reveal a tired-looking Sakura. She trudged inside and sat down on the chair opposite him before waving one hand in greeting.

“Are you alright?” He continued tying the braid but moved his gaze to her.

“Exam,” she said in way of answer. “Two exams.”

“Ow,” he said in commiseration. Most of his midterms were done so he had the time to do this. He felt bad for other students who were still going through hell week. (It was the one stroke of luck in this situation. If he was in the middle of midterms right now, he’d probably fail everything.)

“I still need to meet up with Touka-chan later,” Sakura moaned, dropping her head down on the table in despair. “This is a mess.”

He frowned, unsure how to comfort her. “What time are you supposed to meet her? You can nap here first if you still have time. I can wake you up.”

She raised her head a bit then settled her chin on the table, smiling up at him. “You’re super nice,” she said. “Next time, we should be partners.”

That reminded him. “Yeah, about that… You asked Touka-chan to be your groupmate, right?”

She yawned then nodded. “Mm,” she confirmed.

“Why?” It didn’t make sense to him.

“She’s very smart,” she answered, “and she’s the coolest person in the class when you get to know her.” She sat up straight and stretched before pulling her bag to the table. “She makes me want to learn more.”

“But you’re always arguing,” he said, remembering the way Sousuke frowned every time he got back home from meeting the two. He always looked so stressed, and he complained that ‘those two are going to be the death of me, and I’ve survived Momo, Makoto’.

She shrugged. “Touka-san is just passionate about her beliefs. I admire that about her.”

Makoto could understand that. They all believed in different things, but the conviction with which Touka believed in hers was astounding. That applied to Sousuke too. Though… “Doesn’t it hurt you when she says those things about soulmates?”

“She has a point most of the time,” Sakura explained, “but hm. Well, I guess it’s more that I get sad for her? It’s sad that she thinks so badly of the bond. The ways she talks about it, it’s a sad way to live.” She crossed her arms, obviously thinking about it deeply. After a few seconds, she added, “She has her reasons, though. Everyone does.”

That was true. Touka had her reasons for thinking like that, the same way Makoto had his reasons for having mixed-feelings about the soul bond, and the same way Sousuke hated the idea of having a bond. They’ve all experienced things that changed them.

“But it’s good,” she said as she took out her notebooks and pens to lay it out on the table. “Saying what you think is important.” She grinned. “Communication is the key to a good relationship!” She
posed with her thumbs up like some kind of encouragement poster.

“Is that your tip as a psych major?” He smiled back.

She nodded enthusiastically, seeming to have recharged a bit. “Yeap.” She opened her notebook and picked up a pen. “Go on and finish that,” she said, gesturing to the bracelet. “I don’t think I’m in the mood for a nap.”

He went back to working on it, emptying his mind.

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[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

Can we talk?]---

Makoto stared down at his phone, then at the time at the top right corner. It was sent an hour ago and he hasn’t replied yet. Sousuke would be walking home by now.

Makoto still did not know what to do.

This whole weekend was a testament to how Sousuke fit into his life, how Sousuke belonged there, how happy they could be. More than that, it was almost enough to give him hope. The what-ifs were stronger than ever.

What if I told him he was my soulmate? What if I told him I love him?

What if he likes me back?

What if I don’t have to keep these feelings to myself? What if he felt the same way?

What if we could be happy? Together?

The message on the screen mocked him, taunting him to do something.

.

When Makoto looked up from his phone, Sakura was already placing her things back inside her bag, ready to meet Touka at the cafe where they were supposed to meet.

“See you tomorrow, Tachibana-kun,” she said absently. She opened the door—

—and jumped up in surprised when she saw Sousuke standing there. “Yamazaki-kun!” Her eyes were wide. “What are you doing here?”

Sousuke flashed her a fake smile and said, “I’m just fetching my groupmate.” His posture was defensive, shoulders stiff and arms awkward at his sides. He looked like he wasn’t sure if he was welcome here.

“Oh,” she said, oblivious to the tension in the room. She nodded. “Okay.” She sidestepped him and went out the room, shouting “good luck on your presentation!” before disappearing down the hall.
Makoto was frozen on his seat, completely unprepared. He was hoping to practice whatever he would say on the way home. Right now, his mind was still a jumble of feelings and incomplete thought. “Uh,” he said, staring at Sousuke’s unnaturally rigid posture. “I was— I was going to—”

What was he supposed to say? *I love you and I don’t know what to do?*

Sousuke sighed, stepping inside the room and closing the door behind him. “I’m really sorry,” he said, looking at Makoto with pure sincerity written on his face. He was nervous. Way more nervous than in any situation Makoto has seen him in. “I shouldn’t have been nosy. If you wanted to tell me, you’d have told me.”

*I didn’t know how to, Makoto thought, I still don’t.*

“But,” he continued, looking down at the floor between them, “I didn’t want you to carry that burden alone. If there’s anything I can do to help, I want to be there for you.” He smiled, and there was something in his expression that was off, something that reminded Makoto of back when they first met. It was that smile; the *I’m trying hard to be happy because they deserve it more than me* smile; the *I hope they get their happiness even if I can’t get mine* smile.

“You’re…” His voice was rough and full of emotion when he said, “you’re really important to me. I want to be your support, as long as you need me.”

Maybe it was that voice, or that expression, or the millions of moments that’s been carefully piling up in his heart. Maybe it was the fact that Sousuke went here to say this, instead of waiting at home, as if he needed nothing else but to reassure Makoto. Or maybe it was that Sousuke had *I want you to be happy* radiating all over him, startlingly similar to his *I would be happy as long as he’s happy.*

Maybe it was the way he looked at Makoto, that warm tenderness so clear in his eyes, the way he’s been looking at Makoto for weeks now; the way he’d looked only at Rin before.

Maybe it was the *what ifs* finally winning over the *it can’t be possible.* Maybe it was the surge of courage he’d been building up since he realized he was in love.

Makoto didn’t know what spurned him to do it, wouldn’t be able to pinpoint if pressed, but the next words out of his mouth was:

“It’s you. *You’re* my soulmate.”

Chapter End Notes

Just two more chapters to go! (J^ω^)ﾉ*:・°✧
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL THE COMMENTS!!! I'm so sorry I couldn't reply ;o; I was focusing on writing this as fast as possible (because cliffhangers make me feel anxious ;;)

As always, thanks to Naya who suffered with me through all of this *_* We're so close, guys. We can survive this.

This is almost double the usual word count ;; I'm not really sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“\textit{You’re my soulmate.}”

It was awful to watch as those three words sent his whole world toppling down. Or at least, it felt that way. The world was in slow-motion. There was a ringing in his ear, like a bomb just exploded right in front of them and he couldn’t do anything about it. He stood there, helpless, as everything unravelled.

As soon as the words were out, he knew it was the wrong thing to say.

Blood drained from Sousuke’s face. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then took one step back. He looked like he was scared, or horrified, or wanted to run away. He looked like he wasn’t looking at Makoto, but at a different person, a person he didn’t know.

It was just one step back. It was one single movement, and yet.

\textit{I guess I got this all wrong} was all Makoto could think.

With increasing realization, his eyes widened and he hastily picked up his bag.

He ruined everything. This was it.

This was the end.

“I’m sorry,” Makoto said, before dashing out of the room, passing the frozen Sousuke.

---

Nagi-senpai saw him running down the stairs and upon catching sight of his expression, concern appeared on her face. She gently stopped him with a hand on his arm. Her grip was steadying.

“You want to sit down with me?”

He thought of the club room, of what he left there. “I can’t— I need to get out of here.”

Confusion flashed through her features but she immediately pulled him towards the exit, calmly saying, “Keiichi works at a 24 hours coffee shop. You can terrorize him with me.” Nagi maneuvered him towards the parking lot, pushing him into the passenger seat of her car. “He’s
she said, keeping up the chatter. “You know, we used to work together there before I got an internship so we were always together. He loves the freedom he has now that I’m not there to order him around, but I bet he misses me.” She continued talking about the coffee shop and Keiichi as she climbed on the driver’s seat and started the car. She talked the whole time she was driving. She didn’t even care about Makoto’s silence.

It was... comforting. Her chattering was white noise to him, but her tone remained level and that was what ultimately calmed him down.

When they arrived and she had parked the car, Nagi took one look at him before taking out her phone and clicking the #1 speed dial. “Hey,” she said, as soon as the other person picked up, “bring me two cups of frappucinos here?” She waved her other hand at someone inside the shop. Probably Keiichi. “I’ve got our giant son over here, yeah. It’s too noisy inside.”

She hung up soon after, turning back towards Makoto. “Do you have anyone you need to call?”

Makoto realized, with a shock, that it was dark now. He frowned and took out his phone from his bag. There were no new messages. He didn’t know what to do with that.

“Maybe later,” he said with a sigh. Then, because the events finally registered in his mind, he said, “Thank you for doing this. I’m sorry for springing this on you.”

Her smile was fond when she shook her head. “Kid, we’re here for a reason. Helping with heartbreak is par of the course for us senpais.”

“How did you…” Was he that obvious?

“A hunch,” she said, reaching over to pat him on the shoulder. “You need anything else? A cake? Alcohol? It’s totally against the rules, but we’re gonna break every rule for you.”

Makoto shook his head, smiling a bit for the first time. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

On Keiichi’s break, he joined them in the car, sliding on the back and staring at Makoto. “You okay, dude?”

“He isn’t,” Nagi replied for Makoto, rolling her eyes. “Obviously.”

“Just asking!” Keiichi raised both hands up before leaning forward, draping his arms on the back of their seats. “Do you want to sleep over at ours, Mako?”

“I can?” Makoto turned towards him, eyes wide.

“Anything for our beloved kohai,” Keiichi said with a smile. “We only have leftover coffee shop bread for dinner, though. You okay with that?”

Makoto nodded, dazed. “Yeah, thank you.” They were being too nice. “Are you... You’re not going to ask me about what happened?”

“Are you going to tell us?” Nagi raised an eyebrow at him. “If you don’t want to talk about it, we’re fine with that.” She shrugged. “I’m not your real mom. I don’t have any right to force you to tell me anything.”
“We’re here to listen, though, if you need someone to.” Keiichi brandished his phone and added, “or we can call the other applicants, if you’re more comfortable with them.”

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head. Bothering the two was enough trouble. He didn’t want to bring the others into this. “I just need space, I think.” He needed to be away from Sousuke, for now. He needed to give Sousuke space, too. Sousuke must have felt betrayed. Or worse, manipulated. Would he think of Makoto like that? Despite everything they’ve been through? (Or maybe he would think that because of everything that happened?)

He shook his head again, dispersing those thoughts. He didn’t want to think about that right now.

“Okay,” Nagi nodded. “Keiichi, go back to work. Me and Mako’s gonna go to your apartment to sleep. Do you have enough blankets?”

Keiichi pouted but opened the car door to get out. “Nagi, if you take my lucky blanket...”

Nagi waved a hand, unconcerned by the comment. “Get out.”

“Don’t take my blanket!”

Nagi launched into another story about Keiichi, this time about his lucky blanket. Makoto let his head drop to the side, and let her voice lull him to sleep.

- - -

[To: Sousuke
From: Makoto

I can’t go to class tomorrow. I’m sleeping over at Nagi-senpai’s. I’ll send you my slides.

Sorry.]

[To: Aki
From: Makoto

He found out about it.]

[To: Haru
From: Makoto

I told Sousuke, Haru]

- - -

Haruka immediately called, as expected. “What did you tell him?” was the first thing he said, no hi or hello.

“He found out I’ve met my soulmate and I said it was him.” Makoto figured the summarized version was enough. He didn’t want to recall the whole mess of it.

“And?”
“I ran away.” It was shameful, maybe, but it was the only thing he could do in that situation. He was tired of getting hurt. “He didn’t say anything, and…” He gulped, surprised by the pressure in his chest, the lump in his throat. He felt like crying. “Haru.” He didn’t want everything to end this way. “He looked at me like… He looked at me like he was scared of me.” In a small voice, he added, “He hates me now, doesn’t he?”

“He wouldn’t,” Haruka replied, almost vehement. “He would never hate you.”

“But Haru…”

“Give him time,” he said firmly. He was leaving no space for arguments. “Don’t jump into conclusions.” A pause, loaded with both of their thoughts. “Everything will be okay. I promise.”

Makoto wasn’t sure he could believe that. “I hope so.”

---

[To: Makoto  
From: Aki

‘Found out’ means you weren’t ready to say it?]  
.

[To: Aki  
From: Makoto

Don’t know if I was ever going to be ready]

---

For the first time since stepping foot in the university, he missed a class.

Nagi-senpai let him stay in the STIC room while cutting Socio, urging him to work on other subjects ‘so there will be karmic balance’. He sat there, focused on reading through his notes and talking to the applicants that passed by, and tried to convince himself that he wasn’t dying inside at the thought of Sousuke doing the presentation on his own.

---

[To: Makoto  
From: Aki

Sousuke didn’t come by for lunch either. Kisumi is looking for you.  
How are you coping?]  
.

[To: Aki  
From: Makoto
Not sure.

[To: Makoto

From: Aki

Meet me at the Fine Arts pavilion?]

[To: Aki

From: Makoto

Not today?

I think I need time.]

- - -

It wasn’t difficult to evade everyone. Sousuke was in the science building, and was probably avoiding him just as much. Kisumi had a conflicting schedule. Aki knew to respect his wishes for space and time, and was busy with the art projects she needed to finish.

Makoto had other classes to attend, other classmates to talk to, and a whole club to keep him company while he moped. (He was moping. Mizoguchi kindly read him the dictionary definition when he tried to deny it.)

The world continued, even if Makoto felt stuck.

Sousuke’s first message arrived after class, when Makoto was wondering if he should ask Nagisenpai for a place to stay tonight as well. The preview was “You can come home…” and for a moment, Makoto felt traitorous hope, even when the image of Sousuke’s reaction was still clear in his mind.

The message, when he opened it, felt like another nail in the coffin.

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

You can come home now. It’s your house.

I’ll stay at Sei’s.]

It’s your house, too, was Makoto’s first thought.
Do you hate me now?, was the next one.

Was I mistaken about everything?, was the final thought that made him delete the message and lock his phone.

---

[To: Sousuke

From: Makoto

I’m sorry ]

---

The apartment felt empty without Sousuke.

Makoto knew it was just his imagination, of course, because Sousuke’s things were still here. His extra shoes were on the rack besides his indoor sandals. The ladle he bought on a sale was in the kitchen. There were post-its on the refrigerator. His door was closed, but Makoto knew most of his things were still inside.

Sousuke didn’t move out. Not yet.

It still felt empty, anyhow. It felt the same way his chest felt, like the bubble has popped and something hollow was left inside.

With the weight of it all, he dragged himself to bed and slept for hours.

He didn’t think he could feel worse, but the morning without Sousuke hit him harder than everything that happened. There was no breakfast on the table, or a new note taped on a tupperware to remind him to heat it up properly.

Sousuke has seeped into his life, in every aspect of it, and Makoto wasn’t sure he could survive the whole day while being reminded of this.

And then he remembered.

He had Socio 204 today.

---

Makoto wasn’t sure if it was luck or not, but Professor Mika went to their room only to leave instructions on what their next activity will be. “A debate about the law for next week”, she’d explained, “check your e-mails for the specifics”. They were allowed to choose their partners this time around too, as it will be a three-person debate panel.

“You’re in my team,” Sakura immediately said, smiling warmly at him.

He nodded and refused to look at the back. “Thanks.”

She had no issue looking though, and when she did, she sighed gravely and slumped her shoulders down. “Oh,” she said sadly, “I think Shigino-kun wants to be our groupmate.”
Out of politeness, and guilt for not texting Kisumi when he was so clearly worried about Makoto, he looked back to see the aforementioned boy walking over to them. Unconsciously, he found himself seeking Sousuke who was in deep conversation with an equally serious Touka.

Makoto swallowed back all the emotions that threatened to spill, and turned back towards Kisumi. “Hey, groupmate,” he greeted, forcing a smile.

Kisumi did not smile back, eyes narrowing at him. “Not buying it,” he said, hauling himself up to sit on their table. He looked at Sakura. “Is it okay if I join your group?”

“Of course,” she said, nodding. They shared a look, quiet for a few beats. “Want to go to the library right now?”

“Yeah, we should. Let’s go.”

Without waiting for Makoto’s response, Kisumi dragged Makoto out of his chair while Sakura picked up their bags and followed suit.

.  

Makoto dreaded whatever will happen in the library, but despite the way they pulled him away and seemed to know something, the two didn’t ask questions or say anything to cheer him up. Instead, they made him search for books in the shelves and distracted him with the task at hand.

- - -

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

I just need time

I can never hate you

You should know that.]

It was a good message, a message that should have given him hope for the future, but all he could think was: *That doesn’t mean you can love me.*

- - -

It was early in the morning when he received the next text. Makoto was awake, having woken up from a nightmare he couldn’t remember. He was already feeling so vulnerable but he couldn’t stop himself from opening the message anyway.

[To: Makoto

From: Sousuke

How long have you known?]  

It was the first time he’d acknowledged it. Makoto decided to be honest, since it has come to this. He had nothing to lose now. He’d already lost so much.

[To: Sousuke
From: Makoto

Since our first joint relay practice]

Makoto waited for a reaction, for anger or disappointment, or maybe even hatred. Anything.

But, no matter how long he waited, Sousuke gave him radio silence.

---

Everyone was supportive, from Haruka who called every night to check on him, to Nagi-senpai who brought the whole club a tub of ice cream and a variety of board games, to Sakura and Kisumi who were obviously trying their best to occupy every free time he had with thoughts about the debate instead of his problem. Aki sent text messages every now and then (I’m just here, okay?), but mostly gave him the space he needed.

Makoto did not see Sousuke or hear from him.

The pain in his chest persisted, no matter how much he tried to tell himself he was lucky to have so many people worried about him.

---

That Saturday night, Makoto opened his skype in hopes of talking to Haruka face-to-face. They’ve only been exchanging texts and calling each other, since Makoto still felt too raw with his feelings to face anyone. But he felt ready now. It’s been a week. He could do this.

So of course, instead of Haruka, there was an immediate call notification from Rin.

When it rains, it pours, doesn’t it?

He stared down at the rectangular box (Accept or Deny) and debated answering it, wondering if he had the energy to do this. Rin was… Rin was too close to the issue, would be a reminder of everything Makoto got wrong. (He was arrogant, maybe, to think Sousuke would look at him that way. Rin was special. He has always been.)

But they haven’t talked in a very long time. None of this was Rin’s fault. He could not just leave him hanging like this, with no explanation. Politeness, as always, won out.

“Hey,” he greeted as soon as it connected and he could see the familiar image of Rin sitting on his bed in his beige-colored room.

Rin didn’t greet him back, opting to lean closer as if examining Makoto’s surroundings. “Is Sousuke there?” He sounded serious, worried even, with no trace of his usual exuberance.

Makoto fought the urge to wince or grimace. “No.” This wasn’t his fault either. (Maybe.) He shouldn’t feel this guilty.

“Did something happen?” Rin continued watching him with narrowed eyes. He didn’t look accusing. Rather, he seemed to be closely observing with barely concealed concern.

“Yes,” he answered honestly. Then he stopped, not knowing how to explain everything else.

“What happened?”
“Rin,” he sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t want to talk about it. I— Can we not?” It was a
difficult favor to ask, especially for someone like Rin. He wanted all the answers, and he usually
would not rest until he got them.

But instead of pestering him, Makoto was surprised to hear Rin sigh in defeat. “Sousuke hasn’t
talked to me in more than two weeks,” Rin said, which was news to him. They didn’t talk as
frequently as Haruka and Makoto, but they still kept up contact. It was important to both of them,
especially after everything that happened before. “It’s probably my fault, but—”

“No,” Makoto cut in, eyes wide, “he’s just… he said he needed time alone. I think that’s why he
hasn’t talked to you.” Right now, at least. He didn’t know why it’s been two weeks. It’s not like he
could ask. He knew though that Rin did nothing wrong. He was living his life innocently in another
country. It was no good to make him worry like this.

Rin was quiet for a long time, just staring at him. When he spoke, his voice was soft and quiet, like
the tone he used when he gave the underclassmen advice. “I don’t know what happened,” he said,
“but he really thinks highly of you. Whatever he did, he must have a reason for it. He wouldn’t do
anything to hurt you.”

“Why would you think it was him who did something?” It felt like a huge assumption to make.

With the way Rin’s lips turned into a knowing smile, Makoto thought he’d say something along
the lines of “You would never do something like that”, but instead he said, “He would have called
me, if you did.”

It was a bit refreshing, to hear something like that. Makoto was not perfect. He could hurt Sousuke,
and… he already did. Probably. But it also was such a new concept that it didn’t make sense to him
at all. “What do you mean?”

This time, Rin looked away. “That’s a secret I’m not allowed to spill,” he answered, in that tone
that meant he was scared to accidentally blurt out something important. “Ask him, when you make
up.”

“Okay,” he conceded. He wondered if they would ever do.

That wasn’t a good thought to dwell on, so he took a deep breath, counted to five, and exhaled all
the tension away. He smiled and asked, “How are things over there?” It was a blatant topic change.

Rin graciously allowed him the out, grimacing dramatically as he launched on a tale about how he
went to a zoo with his teammates and took pictures of every animal for his snapchat, and how
Nagisa pestered him for a koala plushie because of it. Makoto responded in kind with a story about
STIC and how they marathoned Disney movies earlier that day, eating popcorn and ending up
being scolded by a passing teacher because of how loudly there were singing along to the songs.

When he finished the story, Rin looked more comfortable. “So aside from the other situation,
you’re doing well?”

Yeah,” he answered. It wasn’t a lie. If he removed all the thoughts about Sousuke and what would
happen in their future, he had a stable life here. He had an apartment, good grades in class, and a
group of friends who would support him with his problems. He built this life for himself. Sousuke
is, was, part of it, but he could survive without him. It would hurt. It would hurt so much, but he’d
survive. Tokyo has made him stronger. He knew that.

Rin smiled, his enthusiasm coming back in increments. “How about that class? Haru told me about
it.”

Makoto bit his lip. Of course their conversation would go there. He should have expected this. “We’re discussing laws and rules about soulmates this time,” he answered, mostly with a level voice.

“Oh,” he said, grimacing. “There’s a new one over here. The sports commission is monitoring soulmates in team sports.” His face showed exactly what he thought of that. The anger and disgust was clear. “My friend has one, so they can’t do the relay together. It’s stupid. I’m really going to protest if they go with it.” He crossed his arms, and with an almost petulant tone, he added, “I wanna do the relay with Haru.”

It was his dream. Makoto knew Rin would do anything, even go against an authority in a different country, to make sure he could swim in a relay with Haru. But if it was already being implemented, Makoto wasn’t sure how effective his protest could be.

Sometimes life just doesn’t go your way. It would probably have been easier if they weren’t soulmates. Without the bond to complicate things, they could join the relay together with no worry. That thought hooked in his mind, and lingered.

“Do you ever think about how it would be if Haruka wasn’t your soulmate?”

Rin looked surprised at the question. He blinked, once, twice, before looking down at his keyboard. He was deep in thought for almost a whole minute before he spoke. “I’d still fall in love with him, I think…” He hummed. “But then, I’m not sure if I would have changed schools?”

Another thoughtful pause, then a decisive nod. “I feel like I would, because the bond has nothing to do with how good he is with swimming, and it was the first thing that attracted me to him… I don’t know.”

He shrugged. “I’m thankful for the bond, despite everything,” he said, “It’s helped me understand him more times than I can count. It gave me the opportunity to know him more.”

Makoto nodded slowly, already expecting that answer, but— “Didn’t it just make everything complicated?” Their bond was beautiful, and was overwhelming. It was something Makoto admired and loved watching from afar.

It also gave them both more pain than any person should have.

“I guess, yeah,” Rin agreed easily. He knew it more than anyone. Five years of nightmares couldn’t be forgotten that easily. “But we fought for it, didn’t we? And it was worth it.” He said it with complete confidence, with so much certainty, in that sure way he said things like I’ll definitely go to the Olympics or we’ll all be alright. In an almost shy afterthought, he added, “Haruka will always be worth it.”

Makoto couldn’t help but grin. “That’s so sweet,” he teased.

Rin rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

They talked about other things after that, catching up with each other.

Later, when he closed the laptop, he wondered if fighting for his bond would be worth it, too.

One week was enough moping. That was what he decided when he woke up that Monday morning.
to his empty apartment. One week was quite enough. He’d talked to Rin, and had skyped with Haruka last night. He was getting there.

(He forgot to buy groceries that weekend, because that was Sousuke’s task. There wasn’t bread in the cupboard, or tea, or Pocari. There was a single gatorade left inside the fridge, and it was Sousuke’s favorite flavor.)

(There was mold in the leftovers that Makoto forgot to throw away.)

(A single pack of salonpas was inside the bathroom, forgotten and left behind.)

Makoto was fine. Everything was going to be fine.

---

[To: Aki
From: Makoto
I’m ready to talk ]

[To: Makoto
From: Aki
Ready to listen.
Fine Arts Pavilion?]  

---

The Fine Arts Pavilion was mostly empty since it was in the middle of the day and most students were either in class or eating somewhere. When Makoto came in, he saw Aki sitting with her sketchpad at the far corner. She was squinting at whatever she was drawing, concentration fully focused.

“Hello,” he greeted when he was close enough.

The intensity of her stare didn’t lessen, only changed its subject. She watched him for a few beats then gestured towards a chair beside her. “Take a seat,” she said, with a voice like she was his potential boss and this was a job interview.

He sat down and looked at her squarely. She deserved his full attention and honesty. “I’m sorry it took me this long,” he said.

“Heart,” she said, “You’re not here for me, you know? I’m here for you. Don’t mix it up.”

“Still,” he said, “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Fair,” she said. “But stop saying sorry, okay? Literally none of this is your fault.” Her expression darkened and her eyes narrowed as she looked back down at her sketchpad. “It’s Sousuke’s.”
He was shaking his head before he even realized he was doing it. “Hey, hey, no,” he said.

“Shut up,” she said, glaring at him. “Let me have this.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” he insisted. That hasn’t changed. This was because of Makoto hiding the bond. Sousuke was just reacting to it.

She swiftly hit him on the arm for that, her frown deepening. “He is being an asshole. You should see that. Acknowledge that.” She pinned him with a look. “You know, don’t you? He isn’t perfect. You know that. You like him despite that.”

In his mind was an echo of Sousuke’s words: “I know you’re not perfect. You’re just... You’re way better than most people.” He wondered if Sousuke still thought that.

But, well. She had a point. He knew Sousuke’s silence was unfair, too. He simply refused to admit it to himself, because blaming himself has always been easiest. If he thought about what Sousuke was doing, he felt like he would minimize the magnitude of his own mistakes. This is my fault, he thought repeatedly, because he started this, and having himself to blame was way easier than the pain of thinking Sousuke chose to do this. If he thought about that, everything would be worse than it already was. He fell back on old habits, to have a semblance of stability.

“I know,” he replied, after a long moment. He then sighed, remembering Haruka’s words. “But I’m giving him space. Haru said I should be patient.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nanase-kun is the last person who should say that.”

Despite himself, he couldn’t help but huff out a laugh. “Yeah, I know.”

“You’re already too patient,” she added.

“With this,” he said, thinking about the past few days, “I’m really not.”

She raised an eyebrow. Her expression, from the stern displeasure, turned into something softer and lighter. “Come on, then, tell me all about it.”

He told her everything.

From the magical weekend, to that moment on their couch, to the discovery of the notebook, to finally spilling the secret he’s guarded for so long. It was a good thread, something that put everything in perspective again. He’d been trying not to think about it all. Haruka didn’t ask for specifics, and Rin didn’t know anything, so Aki was the first one to squeeze everything out of him. It was freeing, to lay it all out, to map out the whole situation from where it started. A lot of things, he realized, still did not make sense. Sousuke had a lot of explaining to do.

Don’t jump into conclusions, Haruka had said. Makoto was still unsure which conclusion was wrong.

For a moment, he thought about Sousuke’s face when he said last forever, okay? and wondered what it all meant.

“That bracelet sure is something,” Aki pointed out, glancing at it meaningfully. He was tracing it with his fingers in an absent gesture, a mannerism he’d acquired ever since Sousuke gave it to him. “I think you should tell him everything,” she added with an encouraging smile. “Not just the soulmate part. Everything. You didn’t come to Tokyo to escape, Makoto,” she reminded him, “you came here to make a change. And whether that change is with Sousuke or not, that’s your decision.
Tell him.

Tell him you love him.

Tell him you want to stay in his life.

Tell him that you’ve been hurt by all of this, and you want everything to go back to how it was before, but you know you can’t, not anymore. Tell him there’s a part of you that wants things to change, has been wanting the change, since you both wore your bracelets and promised to stay by each other’s side forever.

Tell him you’re in love with him, and ask him what he feels.

“I will,” Makoto said, decisively. “I’m ready.”

- - -

The plan was to talk to Sousuke after Socio 204, after the debate and after everyone was gone. The plan was to catch him while everyone was moving out of the classroom and ask him to stay for a few minutes, to listen for a while.

But this was Soulmates in Society, and it was never going to be that simple.

When Makoto came into the room, Sousuke was reading through his notes and did not look up. And then, when the debates started, Makoto was too busy listening to the groups in front to even try to look at the back. It was better that way. He needed to focus on the class for now, and then act on his plan later.

The debates were interesting, anyway. The topics were about the Laws, both passed and pending, regarding soul bonds. Two group composed of sports students got asked to argue about the laws prohibiting soulmates in team sports. The next batch was a question on divulging soul bond information by media personnel, and it was for two groups who were studying in that field.

As they got more heated, it became obvious how much Professor Mika knew. She’d tailored the questions for specific people, hoping for a more in-depth answer than what was on the books.

It felt like she was toying with them, or maybe guiding them to some higher consciousness.

That thought was proven right when she stood in front, smiled that truly terrifying smile and read the next question: “Should there be a law against a person keeping the bond a secret from their own soulmate, if they knew their soulmate has not realized it themself?”

Everyone knew who she would call. They knew how she worked now. Everyone’s eyes were on Kisumi even before she said, “Kisumi’s group, you’re up.”

Makoto felt his muscles freeze in panic, but he forced himself to relax. This was fine. The question hit too close to home, but the whole class’ attention was on Kisumi, who dramatically gasped and exclaimed, “me?! I wonder why!” which made the class laugh in amusement. When he stood up, he placed a hand on Makoto’s back as a comforting gesture, once again reminding Makoto that he was not alone in this and that even though Kisumi did not know exactly what happened, he’s proven time and time again that he was willing to help in any way possible.

Their group walked over to one side of the podium where three seats were prepared for them. Now,
all they had to do was wait for the group Professor Mika would choose.

“Touka’s group, you’re up.” She was smiling, but there was something sharp in her eyes, like she was analyzing the situation at hand.

This time, he really felt like panicking. He glanced at Touka’s group at the back, expecting to see Sousuke staring at Professor Mika or, perhaps, him; but Sousuke was watching Touka’s every move with a concerned frown on his face.

Touka was the one staring at the professor, an expression of distaste openly visible on her face. Then, with the subtlest change in her posture, she stood up with all the grace of a goddess, walking down to the front of the class as if she was on a red carpet and she was on her way to her throne. Her back was straight, her hands calmly swaying as she walked. She looked unflappable. She looked, quite honestly, ready for battle.

And… oh. Olt.

Kisumi was the one the professor called, for their team, because he was the one who’d admitted to having a bond and hiding it. The question was tailored for him. Sousuke was not the one called. It was Touka. It was her question. Professor Mika knew that.

*You’d learn more about yourself!* the reviews had proudly proclaimed. For the first time, Makoto realized how true that was. This was the promised prying of secrets, of revelations.

Adrenaline shot through him anew. He had been waiting for this.

They were given five minutes to convene with their group, to discuss the information they’ve gathered and choose their side in the debate.

Their group, of course, chose to side against the proposed law.

Kisumi and Touka met at the middle of the podium to decide on who would speak first. Touka won in rock-papers-scissors and she asked Kisumi to go on. She sat back down and whispered at her groupmates, clearly preparing for a rebuttal immediately.

“Soul bonds vary in strength and type, and thus, there are instances when one of the soulmates don’t perceive the bond,” Kisumi started, reading through his notes. “This happens for a variety of reasons, ranging from the strong denial of the bond’s existence, to a lack of self-awareness.” He looked at the audience, quirking a grin at them. The charm was affecting the class, Makoto could see. “In my case, as you know, my soulmate did not understand what the bond was.” He laughed, sounding helplessly fond. “He thought I was just really handsome.” He waggled his eyebrows, making everyone laugh. The atmosphere was good, and everyone was listening to him with a smile.

“And because he didn’t know, I hid it from him.” He glanced back down at his notes. They’ve compiled so many facts about the laws, and they were not as ready for a hypothetical topic such as this. Their experiences were their only weapon, as Professor Mika designed. “This is an anecdotal evidence,” he said, echoing their professor’s words, “but it is important to take it into consideration. When talking about bonds, we forget sometimes that it’s about real human beings. We’re complicated. We have complex feelings, and we make complex decisions. The situation is not black and white.

“For me, I hid it from him because it would confuse him, because I knew him, and I knew it would
be unnecessary to complicate things further. I wanted him to decide on his own. I wanted to protect him.” He looked around, a small smile on his lips. “And I don’t think protecting someone by withholding information is unethical.”

The class applauded when he stepped back, most students clearly impressed with his speech.

Sousuke stood up as the next speaker. He looked determined, shoulders stiff and fists clenched at his sides.

Professor Mika tilted her head, asking “You’re not going?” in a voice soft enough to only be heard by the groups in front.

It was obvious who she was talking to.

Touka touched Sousuke’s elbow, looking at him meaningfully. Whatever Professor Mika knew, it seemed like Sousuke knew as well. There was something protective in the way he frowned when he sat down, the way he glared at the professor. Touka gritted her teeth and stood up, taking a deep breath. “You’re a monster,” she said, just as quietly, expression unchanging.

With head held high, she stepped up towards the center.

Her aura, as always, was commanding. She looked the class from left to right, willing them all to look at her and listen. “Good morning,” she said, “I would like to thank Kisumi-san for his speech, and would like to offer my own counter-arguments.”

Everyone was watching her, unable to look away.

“The matter of soul bonds has always been a complicated topic. Kisumi-san was right; people are complicated beings and there are various reasons to conceal a bond.” She glanced at Kisumi in acknowledgement before turning towards the class again. Her gaze landed heavily on Professor Mika who was sitting in front. “But we are not lawless beings, and soul bonds affect two people. Is it not arrogant to think you know what is good for them?”

The mood in the class turned heavier. They were all uncomfortable with this argument. Kisumi was right there. This felt personal.

As if figuring that out, Touka pursed her lips and sighed. It was one of exhaustion, of defeat. Makoto could see the way Sousuke’s eyebrows furrowed and the way his knuckles turned white from clenching them too hard. Something was about to happen.

“Kisumi-san offered anecdotal evidence, and so I’d like to offer one as well, as a reminder that his was one instance. There are different sides to a story.”

The earlier quiet was no match for the ensuing stillness those words caused.

“My little sister met her soulmate on her third year of middle school, on a tour around the campus of a public high school near hers. She was smart and she had high dreams. She was going to the most prestigious all-girl’s school in the country.” She paused, expression changing for the first time. She looked angry. “Her soulmate was a second year high school student, a boy with no dream. He realized it as soon as he saw her. She didn’t. She had a lot on her mind, with exams and the tour. She simply thought he was being nice, and that she felt comfortable because he was being welcoming.”

The bitter smile on her face displayed what she thought of that. “He knew she wasn’t going to his school, and he thought it was his only chance to be with his soulmate. So on the day of the exams,
she felt it. Pain not bad enough to be a cause of concern, but enough to distract her to make her fail the exam for her dream school.”

A few students gasped in shock, including Kisumi. Makoto glanced at his teammates and saw Kisumi’s deep frown as he stared at Touka. Sakura was staring down at her lap, unwilling to look anywhere else. She looked pained. Was this news to her as well? Or did she know?

“Noiception,” Touka continued, “as you may have guessed. He used the bond to make sure she will be with him. She didn’t realize until he became her boyfriend.” She spat out the word like poison. “He held on to a bond she didn’t even know, because he could use it to his advantage.”

It felt like the whole class was holding on to her every word, cringing in unison at the idea of this asshole who used the bond in such a convoluted way.

“We filed a restraining order on him, after our lawyers forced his family to make him break the bond.” This was said without emotion, like she was reporting an impersonal account. “But if there was a law against hiding the bond, that wouldn’t have happened in the first place. My sister would be in her dream school. Her life wouldn’t have been ruined. At least, we would have gotten the justice we deserved.”

She straightened her back, as if asserting herself after the vulnerability she let them see. “Kisumisan was lucky he was loved back, but it is unfair to hold on to something without saying it’s there. If you have never considered breaking the bond, despite your soulmate not feeling it, does it not mean that you are planning to bind them to yourself forever? Without their consent? I think we should approach the subject from this angle as well. Thank you.”

When she stepped back, there wasn’t an applause. Instead, there was a loaded silence. They were too stunned to react.

Makoto’s head was reeling with the information. It felt like a huge boulder was dropped on to his chest, and he couldn’t breathe. His mind was moving at a pace he couldn’t follow, in places he didn’t want to go. If you’ve never considered breaking the bond, she’d said. That was something he never thought of, that was true. He knew he was being selfish, but to have his own story resound with someone like that boy… It felt like a punch in the gut.

He did not want that.

Professor Mika was calling his name. He was the next speaker.

He needed to move. His legs felt like they were submerged in asphalt. The boulder on his chest refused to budge.

And then, with an energy he didn’t think he had, he looked up, and saw Sousuke staring right at him. He didn’t look angry, or betrayed, or disgusted.

He didn’t look like he hated Makoto.

What was reflected in those eyes was worry, clear as day. He was worried.

Sousuke has lived with Makoto for months now, has known him for years, and he knew how Makoto’s mind worked. You’ve got the second worst guilt threshold I know, he once said, we should fix that.
And Makoto was stronger now than he was back on that day, on that first week of college. He was ready to speak his mind, to defend himself. He wasn’t going to lie down and wait for someone to help him up. He was going to stand there, in the middle of the class, and fight.

For his soul bond.
For himself.

“Good morning,” he said, rubbing his hands on his leg to make it stop shaking. He was going to do this. He could do this. “I— um. I know what you’re all thinking. Believe me, I find it horrible too,” he said. “Someone using the bond to hurt their soulmate, there’s a law for that: imprisonment for six months or more. I know this does not appease Touka-san’s family, but I think rather than making a law against the concealment of bonds, we should refine the laws against its abuse.” He looked directly at Professor Mika, watching her expression. She looked curious. “As Kisumi-san had said, we all have our reasons. Whether those are good reasons or not, is the question.

“That person kept the bond because they wanted to use it for their own means, and that was bad. The pain he caused their soulmate should be enough reason to send him to jail. But the concealment was not the issue there, it was the misuse of the bond.”

He steeled his nerves and looked at the side, where Sousuke was staring at him with wide eyes.

“I’ve had a soul bond with my friend for more than two years now,” he admitted.

A cacophony of sound followed that: people whispering, intakes of breath, and overall chaos. At the back of his mind, he wondered if Kisumi and Sakura understood what this meant, if they saw where Makoto was looking and understood the implications of it. But he didn’t have time for that now.

Touka captured their silence with her overwhelming aura. Makoto did not have that.

So, instead, he used what he had. As he was taught by his Education teachers, he calmly looked at the audience as if they were unruly children, and when the noise was at a level he could handle, he raised his voice, “I do not regret my choice of hiding it from them.”

Slowly, the room calmed down. They were all looking at Makoto in wonder, as if waiting for someone to flip the page of their favorite story book.

“This is another anecdotal evidence, but hear me out, okay?” He smiled a bit, trying his hardest to be more natural and less awkward. “Hiding the bond was about me, I would admit that. I was afraid of what they would say, if we wouldn’t be friends anymore. Touka-san was right. Not thinking about breaking the bond might have been wrong of me, but I’ve never thought of using it to hurt them.” He looked down, hit so suddenly by the enormity of this moment. “I would always want to protect them. I know this isn’t universal, that there are bad people who use whatever they could to hurt others, but a majority of soulmates are happy. We have statistics backing that claim. We know soul bonds are not inherently evil.”

He looked at the class and poured into his voice all the emotions he had been feeling this whole week. “Sometimes, you keep a secret to protect the people you love. We have freedom to do that. Forcing someone to disclose their bond is an infraction of that right. If—” He gulped. “If someone forced me to tell my soulmate that we had a bond the first time we met, I think we wouldn’t have been friends until now. I think they’d have been awkward around me, or would have hated my existence. They didn’t believe they would want a soulmate, so I would have been a nuisance to them.”
Professor Mika was smiling now, proudly, like someone who had just watched their child walk for the first time. There was a change in the atmosphere too, mixed reactions from people who were choosing which side they believed in.

Makoto did not worry about what they would think of his speech. They weren’t the ones he was talking to.

This was a public letter to Sousuke, and he knew Sousuke would get that.

Not quite ready to see Sousuke’s reaction, Makoto kept his gaze on the crowd.

“Being soulmates gave me a chance to prove myself, and yes, it might be selfish, and it might be unfair, but I was doing what I could with what I was given.”

_Taking advantage_, he thought. Sousuke should be proud of him, really.

“Bringing pain, taking too much, and going over the line, those are things that should be stopped by the law. But the right to protect yourself, or to protect the one you love, I don’t think it should be stopped at all.” He smiled, satisfied, and said, “thank you.”

He was looking down at his feet as he walked back, and was surprised to see Sousuke’s shoes standing on his way. Surprised, he looked up.

Sousuke looked… Makoto did not know what that expression meant. He looked confused and hurt and so many complicated feelings. Makoto stood there, frozen.

Until Sousuke grabbed his wrist and pulled him towards the door.

“Wait—” He turned towards the class, which was filled with confused faces. Professor Mika was not one of them though. She nodded her head in permission before standing up. The last thing he heard before they got out of the room was “Touka, do you want to fill in?”

Sousuke’s grip on his wrist was almost tight enough to hurt, but Makoto let it be. He has missed this touch. It felt like too long. He didn’t know what this was about, but he’d laid down everything. No matter what happened, he would not have any regrets; he was sure of that.

They ended up at the fire exit, away from prying eyes.

Even when they stopped, Sousuke did not let him go, simply loosening his grip.

With a calmness that came from spilling his guts out in front of a whole class, Makoto was able to look Sousuke in the eyes. His expression was still too muddled for Makoto to understand.

“Do you want to break the bond?” It felt like the right step, to ask that. If Sousuke hated it, Makoto was willing to sacrifice that much. Between Sousuke and the bond, it was obvious which was more important. It wasn’t even a question.

“What?” Sousuke was so taken aback by the question that he let go of Makoto’s wrist and stepped back. “Do you want to break the bond?” He shot back the question, as if his opinion hardly mattered, as if Makoto’s answer was the most important thing here.

Makoto blinked. “No,” he answered. There was a tranquility in this situation, he thought. There was a kind of freedom in being cracked open. “I like the bond. I _feel_ it.”
Sousuke’s mouth twitched, like he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

“You don’t feel the bond,” Makoto added, scanning Sousuke’s expression for changes.

He was rewarded with a sigh, a deep one like it came from the core. “I didn’t know,” Sousuke groaned, stepping back some more until he was leaning on the railing. He gripped it with both hands on either side of him. “I didn’t know it was the bond. Everything… A lot of things make sense now that I know it was the bond.”

Makoto stared at him, feeling like he just missed a step. The tranquility was very quickly disappearing as the idea settled in his head. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t know it was the bond,” he repeated, making a frustrated noise from the back of his throat. “Haruka could read you like an open book! Rin always tells me how he cherished your opinion! Rei and Nagisa talks about you like you’re the kindest person on earth! Kisumi kept on touching you. How was I supposed to know what I was feeling was different?” He rubbed a hand on his face, annoyance clear in his whole posture. “Everyone, everyone, we meet becomes halfway in love with you.” He said it with certainty, like it was a fact of life. And then, with a humorless laugh, he added, “I thought Aki was in love with you. I thought Sakura was.”

His calmness has well and truly left him by now. “What?” He didn’t even know where to start with that.

“It made sense to me,” Sousuke argued, voice still pitched high like this was a fight. “Who wouldn’t fall in love with you?”

A bitter laugh pushed out of Makoto. “You?”

Sousuke stared at him, eyes wide. “But I am,” he said, and it was a defeated tone, like he was letting this one secret go, like he was going to be rejected. “I’m in love with you.”

Makoto went very, very still. “You… you avoided me,” he said, feeling displaced and unsure. This felt like an alternate universe. Like an impossibility. “We haven’t talked in a week. You moved out.”

“I didn’t,” was Sousuke’s immediate response, as if that was the most important point. He stared Makoto in the eyes. “I really did need the space,” he said in a somber tone. “I didn’t know what you meant, and I was trying to… prepare myself.” He sighed. “I’m still not sure what this means.”

“You’re in love with me,” Makoto said. His voice was filled with awe, he knew. This was… He thought about this moment so many times, and yet, the feeling was still a shock. He crouched down, and then sat down on the floor, leaning on the wall beside him. It felt like all of his energy was zapped out. He sighed out in relief. “Good.”

“Good?” Sousuke kneeled on the floor in front of him, looking down at him with his face contorted in confusion.

“I’m in love with you too.” It was so easy to say it, now. The words has been clawing up his throat for so long, but now he could just blurt it out as a simple truth. He felt so free.

There was a thump as Sousuke sat back on his legs, tension seeping out of him. “You… do?”

Makoto tilted his head to the right, contemplating Sousuke. “I thought it was obvious,” he said. You weren’t, with your disappearing act and your confusing reactions, he thought.
“You didn’t want to talk about the bond,” Sousuke complained, scowling. “And then you tell me it’s with me. What was I supposed to think?”

Makoto frowned. “What did you think was happening?”

“I thought you didn’t tell me because…” He shrugged, then looked down, clearly embarrassed. “I thought you wanted to be friends forever without the bond complicating things. You’ve known since second year. You were avoiding me a lot back then…”

“Oh,” Makoto said, as he realized what it must have looked like. He thought about Sousuke’s perspective: finding out about the bond and then connecting the events from their high school years. In a way, it might have looked like Makoto was purposefully running away from Sousuke because he didn’t want it. “I just didn’t want to pressure you into anything. And you hate the bond.”

“I don’t hate it,” Sousuke said, shaking his head. He reached forward, touching Makoto’s wrist again and playing with the bracelet idly. “I just think it shouldn’t be your only reason to fall in love.” He smiled, almost shyly, and said softly, “It wasn’t, for me.”

A hit straight to the heart. Sousuke really knew how to make Makoto’s knees go weak. He was glad he was sitting down now, or else. “It wasn’t like that for me, either,” he confessed, because he needed Sousuke to understand that. “I’m choosing you, because I want to.” He smiled, bright and happy. “You’re not perfect, but you’re… you fit into my life perfectly, he wanted to say, but instead he said, “you make me happy.” Both were equally true.

Sousuke scooted closer, letting go of his wrist, and sat down on his side. Their sides were pressed against each other. It felt like coming home, after weeks of being lost. He reached for his wrist again, then froze. “Can I…” Instead of his wrist, Sousuke went for his hand and loosely interlaced their fingers. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. Warmth was filling him from the tips of his toes to the crown of his head, especially where they were connected on their sides and where they were clutching each other’s hands. They’ve touched so many times already, sitting together at home, but this felt so much more, because Sousuke was in love with him. “This is good.”

Sousuke gripped his hand like he didn’t want to let go, like he was still scared this wasn’t real. “When I saw your notebook, I thought you were bonded to someone else and I was—” For a moment, his grip tightened painfully, but he seemed to force himself to relax. His shoulders slumped down. “It was a nightmare.”

I thought it was happening again, was what he meant. Sousuke thought the bond was taking Makoto away from him. “It connected me to you instead,” Makoto said softly.

“I’m thankful,” Sousuke said, pulling their joined hands towards him and changing his hold so that Makoto’s wrist was facing him. He leaned forward and, very lightly, placed a kiss just below the bracelet. “I feel like the luckiest person right now.”

Makoto could feel his face burning. His arm might spontaneously combust too, if Sousuke continued doing that. “I, uh—”

Sousuke grinned, his whole face lighting up with it. “You could say all that in front of the class but you’re embarrassed by this?” As if unable to stop himself, he placed another kiss on Makoto’s wrist, this time smacking his lips loudly. Then, he interlaced their hands again, returning to the tight hold.
“I was saying the truth,” Makoto said, looking at their entangled hands. “You’re being embarrassing.”

“I want to do this,” Sousuke whispered, voice earnest, “all the time.” He squeezed Makoto’s hand once, then added, “I think I have been, for a while now.”

“Me, too,” he said. It felt like the right moment to talk about everything that has happened, about the bond, and about how he fell in love. *Communication is the key to a good relationship;* Sakura’s advice echoed in his head.

Makoto looked Sousuke in the eyes, and started talking.

Chapter End Notes

One chapter to go (ノ∩ェ∩)ノ*:・¨✧
Lesson 9: Reflection

Chapter Notes

This is 3x the usual word count but I was like "you know what?? it's the end and nobody cares" so I just went with it. I had A Lot to say, sorry guys.

I'd like to thank everyone who commented in the past chapter. You have been so kind and all of your comments made this fic possible. (Literally. I'm so bad at writing without positive reinforcements, so your comments pushed me forward.)

Thanks to everyone who read WwOL because of this fic, or those who read this fic because of WwOL, you are super cool and I love ya (˚˘'*˚˘*)

Last notes:
> WwOL was blatantly made for Rin; it was my love letter to him and my way of changing the narrative to make everyone interact with him and tell him he's loved. In that same way, 404 was made for Makoto and his strengths. This was always going to be about him fighting for love, of understanding that he deserved to fight for what he deserved. I love him so much and he deserves everything. /gets really emotional/
> The fic is called "404" because Sousuke didn't find the bond and they had to...
refresh the page... (srry)
> Everything in this fic is dedicated to Naya, who is my soulmate and inspiration (● ˘ □ ˘ ●)♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They say that experience is the best teacher. Socio 204 is exactly that: an experience. It was not only a class that taught us about definitions and theories, although it definitely did that effectively. It was so much more. It gave us what we asked for, and more.

Makoto and Sousuke waited until the last minute to come back to class. They were hoping to talk to Professor Mika alone, but the moment they opened the door, at least half of the class was still inside, gathered around the podium where the professor was sitting comfortably on the table. She was gesturing around as she talked, and the students were laughing at whatever she was narrating.

"The lovebirds are back!"

Kisumi saw them first, since he was obviously watching the door instead of listening to whatever the professor was saying. “Hey~” He ran towards them with his arms spread wide. Sousuke sidestepped him, leaving Makoto to be bear-hugged. Perching his chin on Makoto’s shoulder, he whispered, “You didn’t need my seduction tips at all!” Then, in a louder voice, he added, “If I knew you two were soulmates, I would have locked you up in a room until you confessed!”

Sousuke not-so-gently hauled him away. “Thank god you didn’t know, then,” he said in a deadpan. “Hands off, please.” There was definite warning in that tone that amused Makoto to no end.

Most of their classmates were looking at them now, a myriad of different expressions on their faces. One of Sousuke’s seatmates whistled teasingly, and said, “Finally got the man, huh!”
That launched a few more jibes and comments:

“Our very own loveteam!”

“Congratulations, Tachibana!”

“Make sure to use protection!”

“Your man’s so passionate, Makoto!”

“You can finally be part of the family, Sou!”

It was equal parts embarrassing and hilarious. Makoto was torn between laughing out loud and hiding his face in his hands. He couldn’t do the second one, though, because the next moment, Sousuke interlaced their fingers again as he pulled Makoto towards the front of the class. “Come on,” he said.

Their classmates were laughing in amusement, and a few cheered at the clear display of affection. Professor Mika was watching them with a fond and proud smile. “Back already?” She was teasing too. “That was fast.”

Makoto turned red. “We’re sorry for causing trouble,” he said. The class parted and gave them space to stand in front of the professor, but nobody left. This was prime entertainment for them, it seemed.

“Oh, Makoto. It wasn’t much trouble at all, don’t worry,” she said, waving a hand. A few of the students were nodding. “I was just telling your classmates about one of the past batches. We cancelled class one day because we were all asked to be part of a marriage proposal.”

He gaped at her, eyes wide. She said that as if it was a minor inconvenience, like it was something that happened normally to her.

“Besides,” she said as she crossed her arms and raised her eyebrow, “you didn’t have a choice in that, did you?” She pointedly turned to Sousuke.

“I’m sorry for leaving in the middle of class and dragging Makoto,” Sousuke said in reply. “I accept all responsibility.”

She nodded, satisfied. “2 thousand words essay on what you learned in today’s debate, plus what you would have said if you were able to give your rebuttal.” She laughed. “I know it would be hard, but be sure to counter Tachibana-kun’s points.”

Sousuke immediately grimaced. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” she said with a laugh, “your team lost. So no additional points for you, either.” She pointed to Makoto and added, “You won so you get bonus points.”

“We won?” Did Sousuke’s group have a hard time without him?

She grinned, as if she could see what Makoto was thinking. “It was a close match,” she explained. “Touka was… passionate, and she was ready with arguments.” She placed a hand on her mouth, hiding a giggle. “Sakura, though…”

“Sakura was on a war path,” Kisumi finished for her, laughing out loud. A few of their classmates joined in. “She had statistics and pending laws all memorized, and she used psychology on Touka.”
He sounded so proud of her. They really bonded over taking care of Makoto the past week.

“It was quite a sight,” Professor Mika admitted. “She knew all of you had experiences so she used that to her advantage, to use pure facts and psychological studies instead.”

Kisumi clapped a hand on Makoto’s back. “Sakura won it for us, but you were really cool too.”

A girl from behind agreed with “You were so cool, you took Yamazaki-kun’s heart!” Another round of hoots and laughter followed.

Makoto felt embarrassed beyond anything, but he couldn’t keep the wide smile off his face.

---

When I was browsing the subjects I could take for an elective, Socio 204 immediately took my attention. I have always been interested in the topic of Soul Bonds, primarily because my best friend met his soulmate at a very young age and they went through a time when their bond became partially broken. The helplessness I felt at the time made me eager to learn everything there was to learn. I wanted to prevent that from happening again. It was a formative event in my life.

---

“If you do that again, I’ll come over.”

Haruka’s voice was calm from the other end of the line and it was a simple sentence, but both Makoto and Sousuke knew it was a threat. If Sousuke left again or if he made Makoto sad in any way, Haruka would ride a train to Tokyo and… do something. The ambiguity made the threat all the more scarier. Makoto couldn’t help but laugh, especially when he saw the way Sousuke looked determined and serious, as if this was a duty he needed to fulfil. He was staring at the phone on the low table as if he could convey his seriousness through it. The severeness of his expression added to the hilarity of the situation.

“Makoto,” Haruka said his name like a reprimand, perhaps because of his laughter. “I’m serious.”

“You’re scaring Sousuke,” Makoto explained, quirking a grin at his soulmate.

“I’m not scared!”

“That’s not my fault.”

The two spoke at the same time, and Makoto could almost see Haruka’s expression of distaste at the thought. Sousuke had a similar expression on his face, lips twisted in a grimace. Makoto burst out laughing again.

“You’re laughing too much,” Sousuke scolded, elbowing him on the side lightly. He turned to the phone. “Your best friend is giggly. I didn’t expect that.”

There was silence for a beat, and then, in a soft voice, Haruka said, “He isn’t that bad, usually.”

You make him that way, was what he meant. Makoto felt warm from the approval in his tone. Haruka was one of the most important people in Makoto’s life, a part of his family, and his approval of Sousuke meant a lot. By the look on Sousuke’s face, the awe and the delight, it was obvious he was thinking the same way.

“I’ll take care of him,” Sousuke said earnestly.
Haruka hummed. “Don’t let him take care of you too much.”

“Ah.” Sousuke nodded. “Yeah, he does that, doesn’t he?”

Makoto frowned at the phone, then at Sousuke. “What does that mean?”

With an adoring expression on his face, Sousuke leaned in to place a soft kiss on his forehead. He lingered there for a beat, as if cherishing the moment. “You’re too good for me,” he said when he pulled away.

“Yeah,” Haruka agreed immediately.

“I’m not,” Makoto protested. Sousuke was handsome, smart, and kind. He had a beautiful dream he was working towards, and he was the sweetest person Makoto knew. He might be stubborn sometimes and often tried to solve problems on his own, but he knew when to say sorry and he was open to compromise. Makoto didn’t know if he deserved someone like that.

Sousuke studied his expression, correctly parsing what he was thinking. “Did you already forget how I said everyone we meet falls halfway in love with you?”

Makoto frowned and raised a hand, listing his shortcomings while counting with his fingers: “I haven’t gotten groceries for this week.” He put one finger up. “There was mold on one tupperware and it was so disgusting that I threw it away so we have one tupperware left now.” Two fingers. “I almost melted your ladle because I left it inside the pot while I—”

“You tried to cook?!” Sousuke interjected, his jaw dropping and his eyes widening in fear. “Makoto!”

“I’m not that bad.”

“You left my ladle in the pot while the stove was on,” Sousuke repeated as evidence to his incapability to cook.

“That was one time,” Makoto argued. He was distracted with Aki’s text then, and he was feeling especially lethargic because of seeing Sousuke’s stupid ladle (that he proudly bought at a sale).

“Before you left for Tokyo, you set fire to my kitchen,” Haruka chimed in.

“Haru!” It was an exaggeration. Yeah, there was fire. But it was minimal and did not do any damage. Except burn Makoto’s elbow a bit and almost singe his eyebrows. It was nothing.

Sousuke was staring at the phone now. “I’m so sorry for leaving,” he said, stunned. “I’ll never do that again.” He reached down to hold on to Makoto’s wrist, as if feeling his pulse.

“You’re being overdramatic,” Makoto complained. “I was fine.” He paused. “It wasn’t great, but I survived.” It was probably the most awful week of his life, but Sousuke did not need the specifics.

“You deserve better than that,” Sousuke said. He pulled Makoto’s hand so his wrist was resting on Sousuke’s thigh. The closeness seemed to give him comfort. “Let’s buy groceries together tomorrow? I’ll cook us a good dinner.”

There was a huff from the other end of the line. Haruka was sighing. “I’ll leave you two to talk, then,” he said. “Bye.” He hung up without waiting for their reply.

Sousuked laughed as he took the phone and passed it over to Makoto. “Your best friend is weird,”
he said with a shake of his head. Expression softening, he added, “but I’m glad he’s like that.”

---

_Beyond that, a majority of the reviews I saw in the school website was positive. Both the subject and Professor Mika got raving reviews and complete As on the grading sheet. The reviews endorsed Socio 204 as something that everyone in the university should try. A particular one that cemented my decision went like this: “You’ll learn more about yourself!”_

_It was true. I learned a lot of things about myself, and about other people._

---

Aki had a full load between varsity and making her projects for her Art classes, so she wasn’t able to eat lunch with them anymore. She texted a lot though, and asked them how they were doing often. One night, he called her to relay everything that happened, when his heart was calm enough to talk about it.

“Oh my _god,_” she gushed, tone disbelieving. “You have to visit me with Sousuke as soon as possible. Okay? I’m always at the Fine Arts building now. Text me.”

Makoto dragged an unwilling Sousuke to the Fine Arts Pavillion, sternly telling him that Aki has always been a huge help to them and she deserved the chance to shout at them if she wanted. They worried her a lot, too. It wasn’t just this week. She had been worrying about them since high school.

Sousuke scowled at that but conceded and let Makoto lead him by the hand.

“Oh, okay,” Aki said as soon as she saw them walk in. “That’s really cute.”

Makoto blinked at her. “What?”

“The holding hands thing,” Aki replied, pointing at their joined hands. “Also the fact that Sousuke actually came here. Makoto, good job!”

“Haruka already did his version of a shovel talk,” Sousuke grumbled. “I don’t need another one.”

Aki’s eyes shone with interest, curiosity piqued. “Oh? How was it?”

“He was scared,” Makoto solemnly answered.

“I was not,” was Sousuke’s immediate denial.

Aki and Makoto shared a look, then cracked up together as Sousuke continued grumbling at the side. The atmosphere was similar to their usual captain lunch dates, except lighter and more relaxed. Makoto had none of his usual awkwardness; Aki didn’t seem guarded; and Sousuke was still holding on to Makoto’s hand despite their laughter. It was the same, but different; sort of like his life now.

After a few minutes of teasing, Aki straightened up and considered Sousuke. “I’m happy for you,” she said, unexpectedly. “I’m glad you moved out of Sei’s. It was getting annoying.”

Makoto was suddenly aware of the fact that Sousuke was living with Sei for a whole week, and
that Aki was often with Sei when she was not in the university. He observed the way Sousuke sighed and nodded, looking relieved and fond all at once. Aki didn’t see Makoto much the past weeks, except for their talk a few days ago, but she was still on his side despite having seen whatever state Sousuke was in. That was... amazing. It said a lot about their friendship that Aki undeniably stood up for him even when she was in that position.

“Was getting tired of being glared to death, anyway,” Sousuke replied. He stared back at her pensively, taking a moment to consider his words before asking, “Am I forgiven now?”

“No really,” Aki answered honestly, glancing at Makoto. “I know Makoto forgave you easily, because he’s soft.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, but immediately added, “he wasn’t soft at all in class though,” and then—

And then he launched into the story of how Makoto bravely argued against the scariest person in the class, making it sound way more dramatic than it actually was. Sousuke had a proud smile on his face, and his words were filled with praise. He didn’t tell stories like how Nagisa would, with expansive gestures and gushing noises, or like Rin, whose emotions overflowed with his words; but there was a tinge of reverence in his tone that seeped into Makoto’s bones and settled in his chest.

Makoto did not know what it would mean to be with Sousuke, about what would change between them, but he thought he could see it here, with Sousuke holding his hand and bragging about him. Sousuke has always been touchy and easy with the compliments, but confessing to each other seemed to have turned off his limits. It filled Makoto with affection, seeing Sousuke like this. He was thrilled at the idea of always having this, maybe having it forever.

Aki was grinning, pleased, as she listened.

- - -

Finding the exact definition of soul bonds was helpful, on the first place. Growing up with parents who has two-way auditory telepathy, I thought theirs was the norm; and when I realized it wasn’t, I assumed theirs was a perfect kind. Hearing the stories from my classmates made me aware of how little I knew. That was how it went, for most of the semester: me, not knowing enough, and learning.

- - -

It was the Saturday a week later that Makoto remembered about talking to Rin. Taking his laptop from his bag, he walked to the living room where Sousuke was setting up the old gaming system he picked up from home when they were fighting. (Apparently, the way to make Sousuke come home to his own family’s house is an argument of that magnitude.)

“Hey, I’m gonna try to skype call Rin,” he said, plopping down on the couch. “Have you talked to him?”

Sousuke’s eyes widened, freezing on the spot. “Shit,” he muttered, “I forgot.”

Makoto narrowed his eyes, recalling a specific statement Rin said in their last conversation. “You haven’t talked to him in weeks.”

Guilty. Sousuke looked like a deer caught in headlights. “...yeah,” he confirmed, and then looked away.
He won’t escape this time. “The last time you mentioned Rin, you looked like that too.” It was when they jogged together after Makoto’s first STIC-sanctioned Friendship Day. Sousuke had looked away and then ran faster, running away quite literally. “Why haven’t you talked?”

Sousuke was quiet for a long time, but he recognized the stubborn look on Makoto’s face. He knew there was no escaping this one. “He was… He was the first one who talked to me about you,” he said, visibly cringing. “I was talking with him and he asked me why I was still awake. And I said you weren’t home yet, and then…” He rubbed a hand on his nape. He would blush, if he were the type who often did that. “I received your text and he saw my reaction.”

“My text?”

“You said you were walking Sakura home,” Sousuke said, sounding like the words were being yanked out of his throat.

It took a few seconds before comprehension kicked in. “You were jealous?” Makoto knew now that Sousuke was the jealous type, if the way he reacted to Kisumi’s touchiness and Aki’s closeness with Makoto was anything to judge by, but this was weeks ago. He remembered being awkward, back then, and thinking Sousuke didn’t want to talk about Rin because he was still in love with his best friend. He couldn’t have been more wrong, apparently.

“I didn’t know why you’d walk her home,” Sousuke grumbled. “Rin told me I was acting like a jealous boyfriend…” And yeah, there’s the blush. It rarely showed on his face, which made it all the more special. “That was when I figured it out, mostly.”

Makoto tried to bite down on the smile pushing at his lips, but he couldn’t do anything about it. He was so happy. “I win,” he said, to lighten things up. “I figured out before you.”

Forgetting his embarrassment, Sousuke curiously asked, “When?”

“Haru came over because I told him when I figured it out,” Makoto said, chuckling at the memory. “That explains so many things,” Sousuke said in wonder. “Haruka looked like he wanted to kill me.” He paused, thinking deeply. “I’m sorry for not noticing earlier.”

Makoto shook his head. They both didn’t get it, and it took a chain of miscommunication before they were able to confess their feelings. He thought they had to go through that, after all. Success felt sweeter after hardship, right?

“So, can we call Rin now?”

Sousuke took the laptop but didn’t do anything, staring down on it instead. “You said…” He tapped his fingers on top of the laptop restlessly. “You said we should tell each other as much as we could, if we wanted to make this work.”

Makoto said it as soon as things were settled between them, hoping to never repeat an incident of this degree again. Following Sakura’s advice, he told Sousuke as much as he could about what he felt.

Sousuke was gearing up to return the favor. “So before we talk to Rin, I want to say…” He bit his lip, looking frustrated and nervous. “Before I fell in love with you, I was— That is, Rin was—”

He looked like it was taking all his effort to say it out loud, so Makoto took mercy on him and said, “You were in love with Rin for a very long time.”
Sousuke looked up in surprise. “How did you—”

Makoto smiled. He wasn’t sure how nobody else found out, honestly. He thought it was pretty obvious. “Your face said it all,” he said softly. “In our first relay practice, you were so… you were hurt. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You felt it?” Sousuke frowned. “Do you… Is it nociception?” The idea of Makoto being hurt because of him was obviously a cause of distress.

“I don’t… think so.” He’d thought about it ever since they discussed it in class. He didn’t feel *all* of Sousuke’s pain, never after that. He didn’t feel it when Sousuke’s shoulder got sprained in their third year, either. Rather, he only realized it when he was close enough to almost touch. It wasn’t pain-sharing. It was… something else. “I think you were feeling too much, back then. You were overwhelmed. Asahi told me about it. Sometimes, feelings overflow so they can reach your soulmate even without telepathy.”

Sousuke’s gaze went unfocused for a moment, reminiscing about that day. “It must have been awful. That wasn’t a good day for me.”

Makoto nodded, because it was. He had felt so helpless, unable to move. Doing the thing he couldn’t do back then, he reached forward to place a hand on Sousuke’s. “I think it made me realize what kind of person you were, though.” It was the one good thing about that. He understood who Sousuke was, at his core, and it was the start of his curiosity for the other boy.

“Kind of person…?” Sousuke frowned in confusion.

“A martyr,” he said, smiling a bit. “A good person, to a scary degree.”

“I win in that, then,” Sousuke said, throwing back his earlier comment. “I knew you were like that before we officially met.”

They fought that time, and Makoto was meaner to him than to anyone he knew. Insulting Haruka was a grave offense, and since Sousuke did that, he was the only one who made Makoto angry. That was hardly a flattering image. If anything, Makoto was surprised Sousuke didn’t hate him.

Seeing his confusion, Sousuke cleared up, “You’re protective of Haruka. I was the same with Rin. I felt an affinity.”

“Oh,” Makoto said, nodding, “that makes sense.” They were really similar, when it came to that. But— “I’m not a martyr though.”

Sousuke raised an eyebrow incredulously.

“I’m not like you.”

“You couldn’t tell anyone you were going to Tokyo until you told Haruka,” Sousuke reminded him, as if that was the same level as what he did.

“That was different,” Makoto said stubbornly. “I didn’t give way so the person I love could be happy.”

That shut Sousuke up effectively.

“You were about to do it again, too,” he added, thinking about Sousuke’s words the moment he found out about Makoto having a soulmate. Sousuke wanted him to be happy, was willing to give
up on his feelings, as long as Makoto could find his soulmate.

“T’m glad I didn’t have to,” Sousuke said, quiet and sincere. There was pure gratefulness in his expression. Makoto was not sure if he was feeling the same way, or if Sousuke’s feelings were so strong that it was leaking into him. Perhaps, it was both.

Sousuke turned his hand and held Makoto’s, the way he has been doing often lately. “I don’t want to let go of this hand,” he said.

And yeah, Makoto could feel it. There was something bright inside him, a feeling that didn’t feel entirely his own, like a shared fire occupying the earlier hollow in his chest.

Tightening his hold on Sousuke’s hand, he said, “You won’t have to. I won’t let go.”

Rin was understandably shocked when they finally called about half an hour later. Their sides were pressed together and even though it wasn’t visible, Rin correctly deduced that they were holding hands. If that wasn’t enough clue, Sousuke opened with “Hey, sorry for not calling. I was having my own soulmate drama.” It was supposed to be a snark, and was supposed to lighten the mood, but Rin immediately started crying in joy.

Because of course.

Later, after they explained most of the situation to Rin, he smiled that warm proud smile, the one that made you feel good about yourself just by being the recipient of it. “I’m so happy for you,” he said. “You’re good with each other.” Then, with an almost smug tone, he added, “I told you, didn’t I?”

Makoto laughed, remembering their skype conversation before Sousuke moved in. “Yeah. Yeah, you did.”

---

On the first day of class, Professor Mika asked us to introduce ourselves and our beliefs regarding the soul bond. It felt childish, at first, but now that I think about it, that exercise made something change in the classroom. In the span of a few minutes, we went from being strangers to potential friends. It felt that way to me, at least.

I am part of the select few who got in not through the enrollment lottery but instead directly thru Professor Mika’s recommendation, so I am not sure if this is a subjective view, but I think maybe Professor Mika chose a few of us to make sure the class was well-balanced and interesting. I’m thankful that she understood my situation and admitted me into the class. We all feel like one family now, after all these months. In this class, I found friends who I hope would always be part of my life.

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Makoto was lounging in the STIC room with all of the applicants one Friday afternoon when a knock startled them into silence. All of the applicants and the two upperclassmen in charge of them was in the room, and the other senior members would come in without knocking. This was either a teacher who had another complaint about them or a student who wanted something from them. Both options were not appealing.
Keiichi grinned, poking a finger at Nagi and waggling his eyebrows at her. He must have said something telepathically because an answering grin appeared on Nagi’s face.

“It’s a bit early, isn’t it?” Nagi looked down at her watch. The sun was setting outside. It was that time of the day when the sky was half lit in a pretty purple. “To think the Ghost of The Old Building would come…”

The applicants turned to them, with varying reactions: Risa laughed nervously; Mizoguchi gulped and stared; Pika’s eyes turned into stars; Sakura blinked in confusion; and Makoto turned back to the door, shaking in fear.

“There can’t be a ghost, r-right?” Makoto’s voice trembled embarrassingly.

Risa laughed some more, waving a hand in front of her. “D-definitely none! It’s too early and besides, ghosts aren’t real!”

“I don’t know,” Keiichi said, humming thoughtfully. “I have heard stories…”

Pika was bouncing on her seat. “What kind of stories?”

“It’s a pretty old building, so a lot of things have happened here,” Keiichi explained. “They say the ghost takes the soul of the students who disrespects it. As a sign, it knocks three times.”

There was a pause, and then—

KNOCK!

KNOCK!

KNOCK!

Risa and Makoto screamed at the same time, jumping off their chairs and running over to the farthest side of the room. Pika was vibrating in excitement as she stood up and opened the door.

It was Sousuke, who was clutching his stomach and laughing wordlessly, and Touka, who was ignoring Sousuke’s fit completely like someone who was used to this.

Makoto was on their side immediately, scowling at Sousuke in disappointment. “Sousuke!” That was scary! He didn’t have to do that!

“You were…” Sousuke was wheezing, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “You were so scared!”

“Don’t be a jerk,” Makoto scolded, calming down now from the earlier fright.

Sousuke arranged his expression to a contrite one. “Sorry.” It was his I-am-not-sorry-at-all tone. “But Professor Mika did say we balance each other, so I need to at least do this to counter you being a saint.” His teasing grin was so charming that Makoto did not have it in him to be mad.

Behind Makoto, all the other members had stood up by then to watch the two.

“Touka-san!” Sakura was the first to react, hopping over immediately to the other girl’s side with a huge smile.

Nagi was staring at Sousuke with narrowed eyes as she crossed her arms and asked, “is this the guy?”
Keiichi had a similar expression on, not fitting his gentle baby face. “Soulmate?”

Makoto nodded immediately, moving to Sousuke’s side. “This is Touka Fujimoto,” he started, gesturing to her, “And this is Sousuke Yamazaki, my soulmate.”

“And boyfriend,” Sousuke added, the same way he used to insist that he was more than just Makoto’s acquaintance and was actually a good friend. That felt like ages ago.

“Yeah, boyfriend,” Makoto mumbled, cheeks reddening. “Um. So. These are my orgmates.” He pointed and introduced them, with Sousuke politely greeting each one and making small comments about what he remembered. (Sousuke asked Risa how their last basketball competition was, because Makoto had mentioned it days ago. He told Mizoguchi to talk to him about the science department professors, if he had any tips, because he remembered where the members were from based on Makoto’s stories. It was sweet of him, to remember so much.)

Everyone waved and happily welcomed them, except for Nagi-senpai who insisted on shaking Sousuke’s hand and glaring him down, out of some ‘senpai duty’.

“Why are you here, by the way?” Makoto was embarrassed to remember Sousuke was actually here with Touka and did not come to visit him.

“Oh, yeah.” Sousuke elbowed Touka, raising an eyebrow meaningfully.

Touka grimaced and then rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she sighed, then turned to Sakura. “I need to talk to you alone?”

Sakura straightened up and nodded, eyes wide. She looked like she was being called to the Principal’s office, probably felt that way too. Touka looked stern and serious despite the earlier lightness of the mood. They walked out together, promising to come back soon.

Sousuke was left standing there on the doorway.

“Shit,” Nagi said, with feelings. “I misread the whole situation, didn’t I!?” She pointed to Sousuke accusingly. “A red herring!”

That made Sousuke smile. He nodded and shrugged without remorse. “I did want to meet you though,” he said honestly. “I wanted to thank you all for taking care of Makoto.”

“When you were being an asshole,” Keiichi filled in for him. He still looked suspicious of all this.

“Are you done with that? Is Mako safe with you?”

“He wasn’t”— Makoto was about to protest when Sousuke answered.

“We’re fine now,” he said diplomatically. “We’ve made up.” He reached his arm around Makoto to pull him by the waist, pulling their sides flush. “Thank you. He told me all about it.” There was complete sincerity in his tone. “Makoto deserves to have good people around to support him.”

Nagi’s expression immediately softened. “He does,” she agreed. “You seem like a pretty cool dude.”

“We’re watching you, though,” Keiichi said mildly. “You’ll see how kind we can be if you make Mako cry.” The smile he gave felt like it was giving off a dark aura.

Sousuke repressed a shiver of fear. “Right.”
“Um!” Pika raised a hand as if reciting in class, eyes filled with curiosity. “You called Mako-kun a saint!”

“Yeah?”

“We have our own nickname!” She huffed proudly, nodding to herself.

Blood drained from Makoto’s face. “No—”

Mizoguchi was faster, laughing as he explained to Sousuke, “Mako-kun isn’t a saint to us, Yamazaki-kun. He’s a dark angel.”

Sousuke’s expression was barely concealed glee. He was so excited to hear more about this, Makoto could see. “So you call him dark angel?”

Pika waved a finger, sniggering. “No, of course not. He’s not just a dark angel. He is The Fallen Angel.”

“Lucifer,” Risa said while giggling into her hands.

“Luci… fer…” Sousuke glanced at Makoto, then at the others, before joining in on their laughter. “Why… Why would you call him that?”

“Stop!” Makoto waved a hand, hoping his orgmates would have mercy on him.

They were on a roll though. They proceeded to explain to Sousuke about the first Karaoke event they held, and how Makoto had won every round of Two Truths and a Lie with his brilliant skill at lying and his hidden deviousness. Mizoguchi also passionately explained that when Makoto was moping about Sousuke, he had this aura of darkness as if he was the angel of death. Risa narrated about the times they played cards and how Makoto became hyper-competitive to the point that it scared Sakura into quitting a round.

Sousuke listened to all of them with that enamoured look on his face, like he was so glad to be here listening to tales about Makoto’s involvement with the club.

And then he shared things too, about his own experiences gaming with Makoto. (They’ve been doing that more often lately, since Sousuke seemed to have taken a liking to his competitive mode.)

Makoto sat back on his chair and watched as two of the most important sides of his college life joined together. They were sharing stories about him, and it should be annoying or embarrassing, but all he could feel was contentment.

About an hour later, Sousuke received a text asking him to meet up with his Swim Captain, so he had to go. “See you at home,” he said, before walking off.

All the members were staring at Makoto when he sat back down from waving Sousuke off. Pika was waggling her eyebrows suggestively and Nagi had a shit-eating grin.

But before any of them could make any comment, the door opened again to reveal a panting Sakura. She didn’t say anything, and simply grabbed Makoto’s arm to pull him out of the room. There were shouts of protest from inside (“FAMILIES DON’T KEEP SECRETS, CHILD!!!”) but she paid them no heed.
Sakura pulled Makoto until they were at the end of the corridor, as far away from their clubroom as possible. She let go of his arm and took a moment to catch her breath.

“What is it?” He was concerned now, wondering why she would be this panicked. What would Touka have said that would make her this way? Was Touka still holding a grudge after that debate? That was weeks ago!

“Touka-san…” She inhaled, and in one breath said, “She confessed to me.”

“What?”

“She confessed to me.” She looked dazed, eyes still wide in awe. “She asked me out for dinner. In a fancy place. She asked me to wear a dress.” Her face did a complicated spasm, like she was still unsure what was happening. “I’m so confused.”

“What?!” Makoto was as shocked as her. He did not see that coming.

“Right?!” Sakura nodded repeatedly, pointing a finger at him. “I thought she hated me!”

Makoto once thought that too, but they were being civil lately, as far as he’d seen. “She doesn’t hate—”

“No, she does!” Sakura was insistent. “She definitely hates me, right?! I ask her for help all the time and she doesn’t say no but maybe she got annoyed?” She gasped. “Maybe she was dared? Or an experiment? You’re not allowed to experiment without the subject agreeing, you know? It’s unethical. But maybe she doesn’t know that and—”

“Sakura-chan! Calm down!”

She slumped, breathing heavily after that outburst. “But, Mako-kun. She’s so… She’s so beautiful and smart? Why would she like me?”

Makoto stared at her, realization dawning. “Oh.” Another thing he did not expect. “Do you— Did you— You like her?”

Head bowed low, she shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she answered meekly. “But she’s not supposed to like me. You’ve seen her.”

Affection welled inside him. He reached forward to pull her into a hug, resting his chin on the top of her head. She collapsed on him, letting herself be hugged. “You’re a cute girl, you know? You’re nice too and you’re smart! You should have more confidence!” After a thoughtful pause, he added, “I’m sure she really likes you. Touka isn’t the type to joke about things like this.” Or at all, to be honest. He has not ever seen that girl laugh at anything.

Sakura was quiet for a while. “I guess,” she conceded. “It feels surreal. She’s really pretty, right? And her hair’s all soft and she’s scary but she’s so cool when she explains things…” She continued mumbling on Makoto’s shirt.

How did Makoto not notice this? (He looked back to their conversations, and wondered if the wistful sighs were not about Sousuke but about Touka, after all. He assumed Sakura was fascinated with Sousuke, like he was, but perhaps Makoto was projecting.)

“So you’re not waiting for your soulmate, then?” Makoto couldn’t help but ask.

“I mean, it’s one date,” Sakura said, stepping back to look at him. She looked determined now.
“We’ll see where this goes. But I know I’ll regret it forever if I don’t at least consider it.” She looked down, embarrassed, as she said, “this is like winning the lottery, right? I don’t want to turn down a million yen just to wait for a mythical jackpot I’m not even sure is coming.”

He smiled. “Go for it, then,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, moving forward for one last brief hug. “Good luck to both of us.”

- - -

“You knew, right?”

Makoto settled at Sousuke’s side on the couch, balancing his plate on his lap. Sousuke has been telling him to watch every time he cooked dinner, so Makoto could see the basics and learn from there first before they started trying to cook together. After which, they would sit on the couch together and talk about their day. It was ridiculously domestic.

He wouldn’t ask for anything else.

“Hm?” Sousuke chewed on his food, staring at the TV and flipping the channels. He was searching for a show Nagisa recommended him earlier. (He was learning how to talk to Nagisa, and it was the most adorable thing Makoto has ever seen. Sousuke was determined to follow after Nagisa’s tangents, and wanted to know as much as he could before diving into their conversations. It was like reading ahead of time for class. His soulmate, his boyfriend, is a nerd.)

“About Touka,” Makoto specified.

“About her sister, or about Sakura?”

“Both?”

Sousuke nodded absently, continuing with his channel surf. “I had a hunch when I saw her and heard her name,” he explained, “but when we became groupmates, her anger with the bond made it all click. I’ve seen a report about her sister, when I was researching about Rin and Haruka’s bond.”

Makoto hummed in thought. “You told Touka-san you knew?”

“Yeah,” he answered, “I wanted to make sure. And then when she knew I figured it out, she asked me to be her groupmate for the family presentation.”

“But you chose me,” Makoto said, and then turned red at his own tone of satisfaction.

Sousuke turned to him and smirked. “Of course, I did. I’d always choose you, and you’d always choose me, right?”

Makoto lightly hit him on the arm as payback for that. “Don’t tease me.” It was embarrassing to be reminded of that, of how blunt he was because of Kisumi’s suggestions.

“Anyway,” he said, mercifully changing the topic, “we had another thing in common after that, so we became friends.”

“Sousuke focused back on the TV. “We both had helpless crushes on people who were too nice for
us?” He said it casually, but Makoto knew there was embarrassment there.

“It wasn’t so helpless though, was it?” He chuckled.

Sousuke smiled, soft and happy. “I guess not.”

---

Socio 204 not only helped my understanding of the bond, but also the way people reacted to it. We read multitudes of case studies. We watched films and documentaries. Real life examples were discussed. It made everything more interesting and our topics more credible. It made learning and digesting information easier.

One of the most important discussions for me was the explanation of the various kinds of bonds and how they differed. During the course of my life, I have met numerous people with bonds from my family to my closest friends and even to new people I met in college. It felt like I was surrounded by them on all sides. Having this class made me see the bigger picture, and gave me a better perspective on everyone I’ve met.

---

It felt like time passed by in a blink. Drowning in piles of research and club activities and exams, Makoto didn’t realize it was almost the end of the semester until Sousuke mentioned it during dinner.

“Gou’s coming over with Rei and Nagisa,” he said, reading a message on his phone. “They want to look around the college since they’re taking the exam.”

Makoto smiled, thinking about how great it would be to have them around more. Nagisa would come over a lot and demand food from Sousuke, which would make them even closer. Rei and Sousuke would go to the science fairs together and geek out. Gou would hang around with Makoto and Aki during lunch and talk about everything under the sun. It was a good image.

Then, he remembered Haruka’s message earlier in the day. “Nationals is next week, right? Haru’s team is coming over to Tokyo. He’ll join them as support.”

Sousuke narrowed his eyes at his phone. “Nagisa said Rin’s going back from Australia, too. He has a break so he’ll stay here for a few weeks before going back to camp.” He frowned. “Everyone’s gonna be here.”

Makoto laughed, understanding now why the underclassmen chose that day to come over. “Aren’t Momo and Nitori coming over to watch the competition, too?” He could see Sousuke’s frown growing deeper. “Aki’s been complaining about it for days. She’s been using Sei’s place as a studio of sorts, but she can’t work if Momo comes over.”

“She still hasn’t finished her project?” Sousuke winced. “I don’t know who I’m scared for more: Sei or Momo. Aki might murder them in a Finals-incited rage.”

“Yeah,” Makoto agreed. “At least for us, we’d be finished with our requirements by then.”

---

Makoto was, in fact, not finished with his requirements by the time the group arrived in Tokyo. His written exams were done, his research papers passed and his reflection paper mostly finished. There was one big exam he had yet to take, though: his practical exam in his Nutrition Class. He
had been planning the meal he would make for weeks now and had been writing the lunch box nutritional explanation, but he has yet to finish cooking the lunch box in the allotted time. Sousuke has been training him patiently, and even more patiently helping him eat the almost-but-not-quite inedible lunch boxes he’d made in the process, to no avail.

(One of Makoto’s biggest fears, he found out, was killing his own soulmate through food poisoning. Luckily, Sousuke helped him enough that the food wasn’t deadly at least.)

It was one such training session, Sousuke standing behind Makoto, his arms on either side, and correcting Makoto’s hold on the knife with a gentle hand, when they heard the sound of their door opening.

There was an immediate “AWWW!” from the foyer, followed by the sound of footsteps. Nagisa was running towards the kitchen, followed closely by Rei and Rin. “That is so sweet!”

Sousuke backed off knowing full well that Makoto’s panic would make him flail and brandish the knife like a weapon. He was far enough not to be nicked by the knife, but close enough to reach over, stop Makoto’s arm and take the knife away. They were good at that, reading each other’s movements and adapting to it. He placed the knife down on the counter and gave Nagisa an unimpressed look. He didn’t say anything, simply raising an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry…” Nagisa said, pouting like a puppy. “But you were so cute and I couldn’t help it.”

Rin was smirking at his side. “Already that type of married couple, huh?”

Makoto turned red. Sousuke levelled Rin with the same unimpressed expression.

“What? I’m just saying the truth.”

Sousuke rolled his eyes and walked over, doing his elaborate handshake with his best friend. “How did you get in?” He glanced at Rei and gave a nod in greeting.

“I have a key,” Haruka said. He was helping Gou with their things, placing them down at the side of the couch. “Makoto gave me one.”

This time, Makoto received Sousuke’s blank expression. “Really? You gave him a key?”

Shrugging unrepentantly, Makoto said, “We always have keys for each other’s houses.” He had a key for Haruka’s apartment too, despite not yet visiting the place. He might go on his second year, when he was more settled here.

Sousuke and Rin shared a look, before sighing in unison.

The agenda of the day was simple: walk around campus to show the underclassmen a tour, and then show the pool and gym to Haru and Rin.

They talked and caught up with each other, each of them rotating around to talk to everyone. (Nagisa did not leave Rin’s side, yelling “I’ve got you the whole day!” as soon as they were outside the apartment, and often times he dragged Sousuke with them too. Gou was curious about Haruka’s school life, since she was also interested in his university. Apparently, she was hoping to get a degree closely related to physical therapy, since she wanted to help athletes and be a trainer
someday. Rei and Makoto leisurely walked behind them, talking about the swim club and their studies.)

Makoto did not realize how touchy he and Sousuke was until he was put under the microscope of Nagisa and Gou’s gazes. They noticed everything, from the way they held hands easily every time they walked side by side, to the way Sousuke leaned into his side on the couch, to the way Makoto easily squeezed Sousuke’s wrist for permission when he was standing up to get something. It was obvious how giddy they were for them, small intakes of breath and widening of eyes indicating their pleasant surprise at every gesture.

“I need to sleep now,” Sousuke said, leaning in and casually kissing him on the cheek before he stood up. “Tournament’s early.”

“Okay,” Makoto said with a nod, distinctly aware of five pairs of eyes watching their every move, despite the movie playing on screen.

Once Sousuke was gone, he turned to them. Haruka was watching him curiously, a question in his eyes. Rin was blushing and pretending to watch the movie. Gou was politely looking away too, the same as her brother, but she was much more subtle about it. Rei was staring down the floor.

Nagisa was outright ogling. “You’re both so soft and fuwa fuwa.” He made a gesture with his hands, indicating something like a cloud or a cotton candy, Makoto wasn’t sure. “I feel so happy for you, Mako-chan. You both look happy.”

“We are,” Makoto said. They were more than happy. His life was going better than he ever expected it to go, and Sousuke was the same. Sometimes, he could feel a whisper of Sousuke’s happiness, overflowing whenever they did something together.

“Have you kissed yet?”

And of course.

Nagisa had no shame at all.

Makoto felt his whole face turn red, blood rushing to his head. “W-we haven’t.”

Rei turned sharply at him, eyes wide. “You— How is that possible?” He sounded shocked beyond belief. “He was touching you the whole time! We’ve been here for hours. We were outside.” There was that scandalized tone again, the tone he uses when the people around him did not make sense at all.

Gou was staring now, as well. “You are dating, right?”

There wasn’t really a transition between “living together” and “dating” for them. There was just “before the confession” and “after the confession”, and the difference was mostly in the level of their visible gestures of affection.

So yes, they were dating. Even though they barely went on traditional dates. (They went out to eat yesterday at a fast food, because they were both too lazy to try to cook or heat up anything. Afterwards, they watched a reality show while snuggling on the couch. Was that a date?)

“We are dating,” Makoto explained, not wanting to elaborate. He was sure Rin would make a comment again about them acting married, which was a claim Makoto could not disprove. “But we
have a bond, and we’re still—it’s not that simple.”

Rei frowned, sideeyeing Nagisa. “Nagisa kissed me in the locker room to prove a point,” he said, disappointment dripping in his tone. “I’m glad you and Sousuke-kun are thinking about it properly.”

Makoto nodded. The two of them were knowledgeable about soul bonds by now after taking Socio 204, and they were careful about handling the bond. Their first real kiss, if they pour their feelings into it, would strengthen their bond and possibly heighten their sense of each other. It was risky, and he didn’t want to push Sousuke into it.

(They have talked about it, early on, weeks ago, despite Makoto being too embarrassed to bring it up. Sousuke lead the conversation and explained his view. He was a realist and he didn’t want Makoto to decide hastily.)

Rin had his eyes narrowed at Makoto, examining his expression. “I would think it was romantic if it wasn’t Sousuke,” he said. “Do you want to kiss Sousuke?”

Makoto ducked his head down, filled with embarrassment. He had been thinking about it a lot. They have been touching so much and it felt like… an inevitability. It felt like their next big step. Makoto wanted it. So much.

There was a sigh, and then someone standing up. Makoto looked up to see Haruka dragging Rin up from where he was sitting on the floor. “We’re overstaying,” he said. “We have a hotel room waiting for us.” He paused. “Gou, you should come with us. There’s no space here.”

“Are you sure?” Gou asked, standing up and gathering her things.

Makoto sighed in relief, glad to be away from the hot seat. Haruka always knew when to bail him out. “You should go with them,” he said. “Nagisa and Rei can take my bed and I’ll sleep on the couch. We don’t have extra bedding.” Haruka’s hotel room had two beds, since he and Rin made plans together, so Gou could sleep on one bed and Haruka and Rin would share the other.

Rin was probably thinking the same thing, because he turned red and stared Haruka in the eyes. Haruka stared right back until Rin had to duck his head and mumble “how are you smooth inside your own head and nowhere else?”

“Is it really fine for us to sleep on your bed?” Rei poked at the lumpy couch dubiously.

“I’ve slept on it enough times to know I can survive one night,” Makoto answered with a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about me.”

“It’s not too late to sneak into Sou-chan’s bed though,” Nagisa quipped brightly.

Makoto shook his head vehemently. “Nagisa!”

“They won’t fit the bed,” Haruka noted blandly. He shouldered his bag and pulled at Rin’s shirt. “Thank you for today, Makoto.”

“Haru’s right,” Rin said, following after. All of them walked over to the entryway. “You should invest in a bigger bed. You could make the other room into a study room or some—Ouch!” Haruka had pinched Rin’s arm, quite hard, judging by the red spot on it. “Haruka!”

“We’re leaving,” he said, narrowing his eyes.
Rin blushed for some reason and nodded, cowed. “Yeah, okay, I’m sorry.” He patted Makoto on the shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

They said their goodbyes and arranged when and where they would meet tomorrow. Then, Nagisa and Rei prepared for bed as Makoto arranged his room and cleaned up a bit.

“You sure about sleeping there, Mako-chan?” Nagisa was not quite teasing, in that way that meant he was assessing the situation and would react accordingly. He was perceptive about these things.

Makoto smiled and nodded. “I’m sure.”

Waiting a beat, Nagisa smiled back. “Good night, then!” The two of them went to the room and closed the door behind them.

As he settled on the couch, he wondered when he and Sousuke would be ready for that next step.

Right in the middle of the semester, we had a debate about the laws and the ethical practices regarding the Soul Bond. This was another pivotal moment in my life, and it would not have happened if not for the help of Professor Mika. She pushed us to dig deeper into our minds and into our feelings. She let us understand ourselves and how we affect others.

More than that, in the consequent days after that moment of self-realization, Professor Mika also offered her services as a Soul Bond expert. It was outside of her duties to give us time from her busy schedule, but she met up with us anyway and explained to us the intricacies of our bond.

Because of her, me and my soulmate finally made sense of our Soul Bond. I have always thought it was weak and have never figured out what kind of sensory type it fell on, but after interviewing us, she explained about one of the most overlooked types there was: Kinesthetic. Instead of mental images or sounds, we communicated most in movement, in touch. It cleared up a lot of things about our interactions and how we moved around each other. She told us that there was no need to worry about the bond, even if we were to strengthen it. That was reassuring to hear from an expert.

Without this class, I would not have this important knowledge about myself and my partner.

Sousuke was gone when Makoto woke up, and Rei and Nagisa were eating breakfast on the couch. There was a plate of omelette rice on the table, with a post-it that said “Special day!”. Makoto couldn’t help but smile at it, picking it up and tucking the note aside. He has a small pile of these by now, hidden in his drawer.

He walked over to Rei and Nagisa to eat with them, glad to listen to them talk. Rei was getting used to Nagisa reading his mind, and it showed in the way they interacted. Nagisa could go on and on with whatever topic he has, and Rei would watch him and look him in the eye every now and then.

Afterwards, they met up with Rin, Haruka, and Gou at the bus stop that went directly to the stadium where the National Swimming Competition was being held.

Aki, Sei, Momo, and Nitori were already in the stadium and had saved seats for them. They exchanged pleasantries (Rin and Haruka being taken into a bearhug by Sei, being gushed over by a
flustered Nitori and being challenged to a race by Momo), before settling down on the stands. Makoto immediately looked around for the contestants, hoping to catch a glimpse of Sousuke before it started.

As if feeling his presence, Sousuke looked up from where he was sitting alone and stretching beside his team. He raised one hand and waved, smiling widely.

Makoto did not feel any nervousness, only excitement and happiness. He wondered if that was his own feelings, or Sousuke’s.

It was weird, sitting there in the audience with his ex-teammates and ex-rivals, watching a competition that only had Sousuke in it. Last year, this time, Iwatobi and Samezuka were swimming against each other in the relay. Last year, Makoto and Sousuke were still in high school and captains of their respective clubs. Last year, Makoto had accepted that their soul bond would never be acknowledged, that he would forever carry this alone.

But here he was, now, watching Sousuke pull forward and ahead of everyone else. Here he was, cheering with everyone as if they were not just fighting for the first place a year ago.

Here he was, watching as Sousuke’s new team got first place, watching as Sousuke looked up into the stands and looked directly at him.

Here he was, feeling his heart overflow with an emotion he knew wasn’t his, feeling Sousuke’s love and gratefulness flowing into his veins.

So much has changed in the span of a year; and next year, Rin would be competing in international competitions and might not have time to come home anymore; Haruka would be competing down there with Sousuke; and the underclassmen would be scattered in different colleges. Next year, everything will change again.

As he watched Sousuke smile widely in their direction, he thought change was not a bad thing at all.

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[To: Makoto  
From: Sousuke  
I still hav sumthin to do  
see you at home?]  

---

“I can drive you to the train station,” Sei offered, standing up with his arm around Aki’s shoulders. “You’re going home, right?”

Nagisa was staring down at his phone, but he shook his head, distracted. “But first, Tokyo Tower?”

“We can visit it later,” Rei said, frowning at his soulmate. “Aren’t you tired?”

Rin eyed Nagisa and added, “More importantly, aren’t you hungry?”
“We can eat at Tokyo Tower,” Nagisa said, stubbornly. “I wanna see.” He raised his gaze to Rei and Rin, giving his most convincing puppy eyes. Gou, seemingly understanding something, turned towards them and did the same. “Please, ‘nii-chan? Rei-kun? It’ll be fun to go there together,” she pleaded.

Aki spoke up next. “I think it’s rare enough for us to be together like this. You should go.”

“Just us?” Sei frowned. “Where are you going?”

“Haven’t finished my project, remember?” She raised an eyebrow, first at him, then at the other Samezuka boys. “I’m gonna go back to the college.”

“I have to go, too,” Haruka said, glancing down at his phone. Did his team message him? “I’ll meet you all at the train station later.” He nodded at their goodbyes but went off without looking at any of them. Aki followed after, waving a hand and jogging away.

Sei had his eyes narrowed at their backs. “That was suspicious,” he muttered. “Oh well. Who wants to go to Tokyo Tower?!”

“ME!” Nagisa was excited enough for all of them.

They spent most of the afternoon sightseeing, Nagisa dictating the pace and destinations alongside Gou. Rei aired his complaints every now and then, but he looked like he was having fun anyway. Rin seemed to be in deep thought at first, but Nagisa had a knack for doing ridiculous things that would take Rin’s whole attention, so soon enough, he was into it as much as everyone.

“We really need to go now,” Rin said, glancing down at his watch. “We can’t be late for the train.”

Nagisa sighed and pouted, but he nodded in agreement. “Then,” he said, walking over to Makoto, “a final gift until we meet again!” He dramatically bowed and then brandished a fancy-looking envelope in front of him. “From us, to you.”

A quick glance around and Makoto could see the confusion in all their faces, except for Sei who looked like he was finally understanding a puzzle he didn’t get earlier.

He picked the envelope and opened it.

**What**: Our First Date

**When**: 6:30 p.m., Today

**Where**: STIC Clubroom, Old Building

**Who**: Makoto Tachibana

---

The STIC Clubroom’s door looked the same as when he last saw it, but the moment he opened the door, he could see the whole room had been redecorated. There were two seats left in the usually crowded room, and the shelves and table were covered in red cloth. There was a small vase of colorful flowers in the middle of the table. The usually bright light was shaded by a simple violet
lantern, giving the whole room a different intimate feel.

Sitting on the table was Sousuke, wearing a light blue polo shirt and black pants. He looked good, especially in this setting.

“Wow,” he said. He looked around one more time, noticing a painting on the other wall. It looked familiar. “Aki did this?”

“Hey,” Sousuke said, clearly offended. He stood up to take Makoto by the hand and lead him to the table, pulling up a chair for him. “I did most of it. She designed the place and let me borrow her supplies.”

Makoto looked down at the table, noticing the bowls in the middle of it. The dishes looked delicious and professional, but he could recognize them anytime. This was a pasta recipe Haruka learned with Rei when they were experimenting last year. “And Haru cooked?” Oh. They all planned this together, didn’t they? Haruka, Aki, and Nagisa... That thought was enough to make him feel warm down to his bones. He felt loved, more than anything.

“For a change,” Sousuke said, nodding.

“They really helped you, huh?”

A smirk appeared on Sousuke’s face as he took Makoto’s plate and scooped food into it. “It’s more like we had a bet?”

“A bet?”

“The relay,” he explained, “if Haruka’s team won, I’d do something for them, but if my team won, they’d help me surprise you.”

Makoto laughed. “Aki bet against you?”

Sousuke shrugged. “I think she wanted to help so she bet against me,” he said, smiling. “She was excited when I told her I wanted to surprise you.”

“She’s invested,” Makoto explained fondly. Aki was so happy for them, and she had been vocal about supporting their relationship. He was almost sure Haruka was the same way, actually, even if he was quieter about the support. He probably made the bet knowing full well that he would lose.

Sousuke was quiet as he placed the plate down in front of Makoto, and then took some food for himself. There was a soft smile on his face, and he was exuding contentment. Makoto could not help but smile as well. It felt like their happiness was bouncing off each other, getting stronger and stronger.

“You know,” Sousuke started, after they have eaten most of the food, “it felt like I could hear you earlier, in the race. I think I get now, what Asahi told you.” He looked at Makoto, expression so full of adoration. “Swimming has always been a solitary exercise, for me. Even in relays, I’m still alone while doing my lap. But earlier...” He sighed, immersed in the vision of what happened in the competition. “Earlier, it felt like you were there with me.”

Makoto was overwhelmed with this revelation, of the first time Sousuke ever mentioned the bond being this strong, of the first time Sousuke mentioned their bond in such a positive way. “I was,” he said, quietly. “I was there with you.”
Sousuke reached for his hand, then instead of holding it as he’d been doing lately, he adjusted and went for Makoto’s wrist. He raised it gently, and took off the bracelet, placing it down. Then, like that day in the fire exit, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it like a whisper, like a prayer.

All of it felt intense, like this meant so much more.

From his pocket, he took out his own bracelet and placed it beside Makoto’s.

“I think,” he said, “we should renew our promise.”

He took the red bracelet, the halo he made, and gently slid it on Makoto’s wrist, holding on to it and feeling Makoto’s quickening pulse. “Makoto Tachibana,” he said, voice tender and full of affection, “I promise to be with you forever, and to always be here with you.” He paused, smiling. “No matter what, even if this bracelet breaks, I’ll choose to stay.”

Makoto felt like he was being weighed down by his emotions, like this was too big and too important. But he didn’t feel like drowning, didn’t feel like he was plunging into an unknown darkness. It felt like an anchor. It felt like finding a new shore.

This time, he didn’t have to hide the hitch in his breath, the blush on his cheeks. His hearthammered in his chest, and he did not care. He cleared his throat and retracted his hand. The bracelet was as light as it always has been, but the weight on his chest was vastly different than it was before. He felt strong. He felt stable.

“Sousuke Yamazaki,” he said, picking up the bracelet with one hand and Sousuke’s wrist on the other, “I promise to be with you forever, and to always be by your side. I promise to choose you, no matter what.”

When he placed Sousuke’s hand down on the table, he put his hand on top of it and met Sousuke’s gaze.

And then.

And then they were leaning towards each other, just like that. An inevitability.

It felt like everything was slowing down, as if everything was fading as Makoto focused completely on Sousuke.

When their lips touched, it was a sigh too long kept inside, was an *I love you* and an *I want you* and an *I have been waiting for this*.

It was a promise, and a wish.

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*It would not be an exaggeration to say that being in this class changed me more than I thought I could. I went to Tokyo thinking of finding a home here, of building myself a new life while finding greener pastures. Socio 204 has opened my eyes to the possibility of keeping my bond safe while growing as a person.*

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The morning after the last day of their semester, Makoto woke up to the familiar sound and smell of Sousuke cooking breakfast, but was startled to hear voices as if he was talking to someone. Makoto immediately walked to the kitchen, stopping short when he realized who was on the line.
Thank god it was a phone and not a Skype call. Makoto would not know what to do if he was seen coming out of Sousuke's room wearing only boxers. He wasn't exactly decent at the moment.

Sousuke must have been thinking the same way because he did an obvious once-over of Makoto and smiled appreciatively. "Ritsu-san, your son just woke up," he said, keeping his voice nonchalant despite the amusement in his eyes.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she greeted. "I can't believe you're still letting Sousuke-kun cook breakfast. After he taught you how to cook and all!"

"He cooked dinner yesterday," Sousuke defended loyally.

It was a simple fried rice from their leftovers but he did not burn it (or the house) and he did not mistake the sugar for salt, so Makoto felt pretty proud of it. In fact, it was delicious; not quite Sousuke-level, or even practical-finals-level (where he got a B+!), but he was getting there.

"I'm very proud of you." She sounded more entertained than anything, though. "Anyway, you're both coming here by lunch, right? I've prepared Makoto's room, if you want to stay for the night."

Sousuke waggled his eyebrows meaningfully at Makoto, making him blush. "I might take you up on that offer," he said. "Thanks, Ritsu-san."

When Sousuke hung up, Makoto went over to his side and punched him in the arm for payback.

Before leaving, Sousuke dramatically plopped down on the couch, patting the backrest with a wistful sigh. "I'll miss you," he whispered lovingly to it.

"You'll come back in just a few weeks," Makoto said. Sousuke would be back here earlier because of swim team training, so he wouldn't be away for long. Makoto, on the other hand, was going to spend as much time as he could at home during this break.

Sousuke sighed again, this time not faking it. "I'll miss you, too," he said sincerely.

Makoto rolled his eyes. "We're coming home together." And Sousuke would surely visit enough times, what with promising to help Makoto's mom with the cooking for special occasions and promising to play with the twins whenever he had time. "Come on." He walked over to bodily drag Sousuke to the entryway, easily lacing their fingers together.

Before closing the door, despite his embarrassment for Sousuke's dramatics earlier, he couldn't help but take one long look at their apartment and whisper a quiet "Thank you. Thank you for being a witness to our story. Thank you for giving us the chance to be together.

---

I will forever be thankful that I got into this class. Thank you for everything, Professor Mika. Thank you for teaching us how to value the Soul Bond and ourselves. Thank you for helping me change for the better.

_Tachibana Makoto_

_1st Year, Bachelor of Elementary Education_
Chapter End Notes

And it's done (ﾉ^ヮ^)ﾉ*:・° ✧

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVE PART IN THE WHOLE FIC?
What do you think of my baby OCs?!?!
Questions? Suggestions? Want to fight me anyway? Drop a comment! (long rambling comments are great, pls do it)
This series is dear to me so I want to end it in a good note. This feels like the right ending.
(But lol lbr follow me @ moeblobmegane if you want to read the Touka x Sakura ft. platonic nagikeiichi ficlets I’m def gonna write)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!