

May you be happy always

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May you be happy always

by [raspberrbubblegum](#)

Summary

Tine and Sarawat are both nine years old when they meet for the first time. It is not all rainbows and sunshine and immediate liking. Rather, their first meeting is angry (Sarawat) and tearful (Tine) and both boys come home to their mothers to complain about mean and stupid boys at the playground.

In which there are soulmates, a wedding and two boys just trying to figure it all out.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance if this is hella choppy. I've never written a fic in this format before.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Twenty-four

There are bouquets of artificial white lilies all over his dressing room- a compromise Tine had struck with his mother, months before the wedding. It had been one of those things he did not want, when he had insisted against having a traditional wedding. If it were entirely up to him, he would have rather eloped and avoided the madness but him and his husband-to-be couldn't, under good conscience, lest both of their parents disinherit them or worse guilt trip them well into their adult lives.

He hadn't even thought that having flowers at his wedding were an option, as he's still terribly allergic to anything with pollen, but his mother had insisted- beautiful, frivolous and expensive as they were.

Flowers have all sorts of meanings , she'd said. Lilies- lilies mean *happy union for one hundred years* . Her insistence upon them a fervent wish for her youngest son's love to last for decades.

(He had pointed out to her that it was entirely possible that the flowers themselves would last longer than a hundred years or longer than his marriage- seeing as they were made out of plastic and cloth. She had hit him on the arm and told him to stop being sassy and get back to planning. That had been it, artificial white lilies it was.)

The artificial flowers are beautiful in their own way- possibly not as beautiful as the real thing but they are good quality imitations- not too obvious unless up close. It is fortuitous that the plants could not die, and therefore could be repurposed by someone else. It would have been a complete and utter waste otherwise, seeing as, there might not *actually* be a wedding today.

No, there might not be a wedding at all because Tine- in his white suit jacket and black bow tie, Tine- who is one of the grooms in this wedding and therefore necessary for its proceedings, is contemplating escaping out the window.

Happy union for one hundred years, my ass. I 'm not eve n sure if-

Before he can start planning his escape, he catches sight of himself in the mirror. There is a white gold chain around his neck. At the end of the chain, tucked underneath his suit, is a small ring he's had since he was twelve years old- too young to know anything for sure, but a promise of forever. Near it, etched onto the skin on his right bicep, is a soul mark that for all intents and purposes is more tangible proof of forever.

And he wonders, not for the first time, if staying is the right choice.

Tine and Sarawat are both nine years old when they meet for the first time. It is not all rainbows and sunshine and immediate liking. Rather, their first meeting is angry (Sarawat) and tearful (Tine) and both boys come home to their mothers to complain about mean and stupid boys at the playground.

Nine

"Sarawat Guntithanon, what did you do?" It is unfair really, the accusation already in his mother's voice.

He'd just gotten home and was about to flee directly to his room when his mother catches him. Sarawat's mother is an elegant woman- quiet, sophisticated and deadly when angry.

"Nothing. I did nothing." She gives him a once over- notes the ruffled uniform, the wild eyes and the uptick to his voice that indicates he's lying and Sarawat knows he's been caught. He never could hide anything from her.

"It was his fault, he took my red power ranger without permission so I pushed him."

His mother, having known him since forever- having given birth to him after all, deciphers his hurried explanation and gives him the *look*. It is a look he is unsurprisingly familiar with- the look of disappointment that says he is in for another lecture.

She motions with her head for him to take the seat in front of her at the kitchen counter. She's holding a knife, chopping carrots and for one agonizing moment, he fears for his life. He climbs onto the high stool obediently and keeps his eyes pointedly away from her face.

"Wat, look at me." he doesn't want to, he's already feeling bad- the weight of his actions and the accompanying guilt, having crept in on him on his way home, is bubbling onto the surface.

"Wat, honey, look at me, please." He feels like crying. He knew what he did was bad and he doesn't want her disappointed face to confirm it but he raises his head anyway. He's always been stubborn but he finds himself unable to resist that tone.

“Wat, what did I say about pushing people?” She asks him gently.

“That it's not okay.”

“What else?”

“That it's never okay to hurt someone, not unless I was trying to protect someone else.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“I was angry.” She puts the knife down and moves her hand to unfurl his tiny balled-up fists over the counter.

“Wat, it's never okay to hurt someone just because you're angry.” He wants to argue. He wants to explain himself- tell her that he was angry because he doesn't like it when others touch his things. He wants to remind her that Phukong does it all the time and always gives his things back mangled and broken.

But he remembers the teary-eyed gaze of the other boy from the ground after Sarawat had pushed him and he'd fallen and scraped his palms and Sarawat feels awful. He wisely doesn't offer up his excuses.

“You're a big boy now and being big means, you need to be understanding and gentle, Wat. You need to use your words when you're upset and you need to tell someone when they do something you don't like.”

He feels something he doesn't yet know the word for- *shame* .

The next morning, his mother accompanies him to the playground. He refuses to hold her hand, the way there, because he's a big boy now and big boys fix their own messes.

The other boy is there again- smiling, laughing and playing with his friends, as if nothing happened. The only sign that yesterday was not a dream he'd conjured up are band aids on both the boy's palms.

Sarawat feels guilt heavy in his stomach but marches towards the other boy anyway. He stops a couple of feet away from the boy and calls out a loud 'Hey' to get his attention. The boy's laughing, happy expression quickly changes to fear and if Sarawat was sorry before he's even sorrier now for putting it there.

An older boy with an angry expression is rushing close to them when Sarawat quickly follows up with “I'm sorry for pushing you.”

The other boy smiles shyly at him and replies “It's okay, I forgive you.”

The boy's smile is prettier than anything Sarawat has ever seen and Sarawat vows, silently to himself, never to put anything but smiles on that face again.

The soul marks appear at random- no rhyme or reason, black thumb marks on otherwise blank skin. There are some with more marks than one but they are rare (though one woman in the U.S. has been recorded with four different soul marks). Not all have marks, but those that do not have one, have reported no significant detriment to their lives as a result of being unmarked.

Five

Tine is five when he first becomes aware of soul marks.

He remembers, vaguely, playing in the garden with his mother and getting covered in mud from head to toe. His mother laughs and laughs at his antics- shining beautifully in the afternoon sun in her pale-yellow dress, with both her cheeks covered in two perfectly shaped little mud hand prints.

He remembers her picking him up, carrying him inside and telling him that it was bath time. He remembers the two of them in the bath tub, mud all cleaned up and covered in lightly scented bubble soap.

He remembers seeing the small black thumb print above her left chest, over her heart.

He remembers knowing almost instinctively to put his right thumb over the mark only for nothing to happen- no spark of recognition, no pulling in his belly or in his chest, no bright light surrounding either of them or loud ringing in his ears.

Remembers feeling disappointment that he doesn't yet understand.

His mother only smiles at him, pulls his tiny hand away from her chest and close to her mouth- pressing a kiss at the center of his right palm. She then pulls his other hand and places both his right and left to her cheeks and pulls his head closer so that they are forehead to forehead.

She whispers to him in low tones "Little one, I love you so very much." and he remembers feeling content at the knowledge that he is loved, *always*.

Later, his father finds them both in the bath tub playing with rubber duckies, bubbles almost gone and palms pruned. He strips and gets into their tiny bath tub- too big to fit, that they are crammed in like human sardines, but it isn't uncomfortable- instead it feels safe and warm. He gathers what little is left of the bubbles onto his palm and rubs it onto Tine's hair, gently shaping his hair into a big fin.

He laughs and tells Tine he looks ridiculous and him and Tine's mother discuss getting a bigger bath tub next time.

Tine's father has a white thumb mark on the left side of his neck and when Tine reaches out to touch it, his smile is a little sad.

Later, P'Type will come home to find all three of them in the bath tub, bubbles gone and palms pruned. Their parents both turn to the new comer, then turn back to each other to share an evil smile that P'Type, in his nine-year-old wisdom, understands immediately.

P'Type starts running, he doesn't get very far. Tine remembers the shrieking and laughing as his father dumps a fully clothed P'Type onto the bath tub, but most of all, he remembers, being the happiest he's ever been.

Ten

Sarawat is ten when he first understands what the soul marks mean.

There is a girl in the playground that kids make fun of all of the time. Kids that do not yet understand what it means to be big- to be understanding and gentle like his mother always reminds him to be and what he is slowly becoming- thanks to a certain boy with a pretty smile.

Her name is Pear and, if it were not for the small black thumb mark on her right cheek below her eye, Sarawat thinks she would be very pretty. She is quiet and shy, even more so because kids are mean and tease her constantly for what they all assume is a defect.

But Sarawat knows better- knows that it means something- knows that the mark is important because his mother and father both have marks just like it.

(Theirs is a deep bright blue (*the color of the ocean* , his mother says). Theirs are both on the inside of their wrists and when they hold hands a certain way, their thumbs overlap over each other's marks perfectly.)

One day, when Pear is sitting by herself on the swings, careful not to meet anyone else's eyes, her long hair covering the half of her face with the mark, another girl approaches her.

She seems to flinch at the stranger's approach, obviously afraid that the newcomer would react like so many unkind others who have stared at the mark for too long and laughed.

The other girl does not prove her right. The other girl sits on the swing next to her and introduces herself softly- says her name is Earn and would Pear like to be friends.

Pear looks up from where she is staring at the floor and stares up in wonder at Earn. Earn looks at her face- at the mark that is so obviously placed and holds up her right hand. Pear

shrinks onto herself, as if afraid to be hit, and turns away and if Sarawat was braver he would intervene.

(He's had enough of watching on the sidelines but he's still not all that brave and if Tine were only here, he'd tell Sarawat it was time. Tine has been trying to convince him that they should approach Pear for weeks.)

He's debating the merits of approaching Pear when Earn says "You don't need to hide. I think your mark is very pretty. I have one of my own, see." and pulls her hair to one side to show the black thumb print on the side of her jaw near her ear.

Pear turns back to Earn and looks at the mark disbelieving. She seems conflicted but raises her hand as if to touch it and Earn smiles encouragingly at her. "Go ahead, touch it, it's fine." Pear presses her thumb onto the mark and something unexpected happens.

A bright light bursts out of Earn- so very bright that Sarawat sees nothing of the two girls- only a ball of light that grows to cover them both.

The kids, at the playground, stop what they are doing to come closer and form curious crowds around the light. It only lasts a minute but when the glowing finally stops- it is chaos after. There are kids screaming and calling Pear a freak and a witch. Like a hungry pack of wolves, they circle around her, screaming taunts one after the other and when a boy picks up a rock and moves as if to throw it at her, a woman rushes towards them.

At the sight of an adult, the kids scatter. Sarawat inches closer to where Pear is crumpled on the ground crying. He watches as the woman grabs onto Earn's wrist and whispers something to her. Watches as the woman lets go of Earn to crouch next to Pear and gently pull the tiny crying girl to a stand. Watches as the woman pushes both girls closer and Earn holds her hand up to press her thumb to the mark on Pear's cheek.

And just like that, as if watching lightning strike the same place twice, another burst of light suffuses them both. It lasts for only a minute and Sarawat feels a tiny bit disappointed.

If Sarawat was any closer, he would see that in the aftermath of that light something had changed between the two girls. In place of the black thumb print on Pear's cheek, is the same mark in a pale pink that matches the one on Earn's jaw.

From his vantage point, he doesn't realize but it doesn't matter anyway. There is already instant recognition in him of what had transpired. He doesn't understand how or why but he knows now what it means and what they had all inadvertently witnessed. He understands because as soon as Earn had touched Pear's cheek, his soul had felt as if it was also reaching for something or someone.

“Tine, do you promise we’ll be together forever?”

They are too young, too young to know what it means, too young to know what love is, too young to make promises of forever, too young to be in love, too young to know what it takes to make love last. But when Sarawat slides the little plastic flower ring on Tine’s left ring finger and declares loudly that he’s going to marry Tine one day, everyone will smile at their cuteness but only Sarawat and Tine will understand that he means business.

“Yep, I promise.”

Sometimes it’s as easy as breathing- falling in love with a friend.

Fourteen

To everyone else (fangirls included) Sarawat is an enigma- talented and gorgeous but also aloof and clearly unattainable. And maybe it is because he is an unattainable ideal that girls and boys flock to him in droves but Tine knows better.

Sarawat is far from perfect. He is petty. The first time Tine forgets to text Sarawat that he’s gotten home safe and sound, Sarawat ignores him the entirety of the following day. He is jealous. When Tine finds a love letter in his locker, Sarawat snatches it up and throws it into a bin right after. He is mean when he wants to be. When Tine tries to meet the girl, who sent him the letter, Sarawat appears at the designated meeting place, takes one look at the girl and tells her that Tine isn’t interested and that her attention was unwanted. (The girl leaves crying and Tine couldn’t have been more mortified in his life.)

He doesn’t bother to let anyone down easy, doesn’t care for trampling on feelings, doesn’t sensor his words to soften the blow when him and Tine argue. He still sometimes pushes Tine around when he doesn’t get his way or sulks when Tine doesn’t give him enough attention. He doesn’t like to share- will not share Tine, not even with his brother, and he doesn’t like Scrubb- says they are a passable band but nothing special.

Tine has a long list of Sarawat’s faults and, yet, if anyone asked him for a list of his positives- the list ought to even out.

Sarawat is considerate. When Tine misses class because of a cold, Sarawat brings him his notes- carefully written and legible. He teaches Tine all the lessons he misses and helps him with his homework. He brings Tine soup from Tine’s favorite place and blows on the soup to make sure it isn’t too hot for Tine to eat. Sarawat is generous. He gets Tine presents that Tine’s mother always insists he returns because they are too expensive- a new phone, when

Tine accidentally breaks his, a replacement scientific calculator when Tine loses it, a guitar when Tine expresses a desire to learn how to play it. He even gets Tine's family presents for Christmas- little ones so Tine's parents don't complain but thoughtful and sweet, nonetheless. Sarawat is gentle when he wants to be. He carefully bandages Tine's fingers when Tine hurts them playing guitar. He teaches Tine breathing exercises to calm himself when Tine gets a panic attack over something stupid. He holds Tine close and rubs his back when Tine gets upset and always carries a hanky to wipe Tine's tears.

He whispers praises to Tine's ears when Tine does something well- tells him he's amazing and Sarawat is proud of him. He still pushes Tine sometimes but always makes sure that Tine lands on something soft. He always shares his things with Tine- food, toys and sometimes clothing. He doesn't like Scrubb but he'll sing their songs for Tine, if Tine asks.

Tine has a long list of things he doesn't like about Sarawat but there is also an ever-growing list of things he loves about him.

To everyone else (fangirls included) Tine is an open book- beautiful and sweet and wears his heart on his sleeve. And maybe it is because Tine is not unexpected, does not appear to be hiding anything underneath all that brightness and cheer that girls and boys flock to him in droves but Sarawat knows better.

Tine is far from perfect. He is not all rainbows and sunshine and smiles. He overthinks things. When Sarawat forgets to text Tine that he has gotten home safe and sound, Tine immediately thinks Sarawat is ignoring him. He is jealous. When Sarawat spends too much time with his new soccer friends- Man and Boss, Tine sulks and ignores him for days. He is mean when he wants to be. When Sarawat blows off another lunch with him to play games with Man and Boss, Tine goes to his house, takes the video game from his play station and smashes it into a thousand tiny pieces. (The tantrum is massive and Sarawat couldn't have been more mortified in his life.)

He is needy, a mess at taking care of himself and constantly craving attention from Sarawat. He still bosses Sarawat around most of the time- commands him to pick up chips for movie night, clean his room (never mind that Sarawat is comfortable in his own mess), separate the whites from the colored if Sarawat is helping him with laundry. He cries too easily and doesn't like any other band except for Scrubb.

Sarawat has a long list of Tine's faults and, yet, if anyone asked him for a list of his positives- the list ought to even out.

Tine is ambitious. He dreams of becoming a lawyer and maybe one day a judge and for all the right reasons- not for money or for fame but because he genuinely wants to help people. He encourages ambition in others- in Sarawat. He convinces Sarawat to go after his dreams, no matter what they may be and believes in Sarawat so absolutely, that Sarawat rarely doubts his own abilities. Tine is loyal- ridiculously, fiercely so. When Sarawat gets into fights with other boys, whose girlfriends follow him on social media, Tine is always there to defend him

and get scraped up alongside him. He won't tolerate anyone abusing his friends and loved ones- will get into fights to protect anyone who is *his* . Tine is constant and not at all flighty. Regardless of Sarawat's faults (of which he is aware he has many), Tine always stands by him. He never flinches or shies away from Sarawat when Sarawat blows up at him unexpectedly. He always gives as good as he gets, fights back, but never ever gives up on or abandons Sarawat completely.

He yells encouragements to Sarawat's ears- tells him he can do anything and Tine will always be there to support him. He still bosses Sarawat around most of the time but the commands come from a place of caring- *don't sleep with your hair wet- you'll get sick, eat this- you are getting too skinny, clean your room- it'll help with your concentration*. He cries too easily but he can be strong for Sarawat when Sarawat is the one who feels like breaking down. He doesn't like any other band except for Scrubb but he will accompany Sarawat to another band's concert, if Sarawat asks.

Sarawat has a long list of things he doesn't like about Tine but there is also an ever-growing list of things he loves about him.

According to a recent census, only twenty percent of Thailand's population has soul marks- one out of five people that have thumb marks on their bodies belonging to another person.

Fifteen

"Wat, there's only one bed."

I should have known . Tine thinks to himself as he surveys the room in increasing panic. This whole trip is beginning to feel like the universe conspiring against him. First, none of his other friends could make it- not Phuak , not Ohm, not even Sarawat's friends could make it and Tine is still a little annoyed with them (for hogging his best friend) but he wouldn't have minded having the two idiots join them- or anyone really. *Anyone is fine as long as we aren't alone*. Second, the hotel that they had booked had messed up their reservations. Tine had booked them two separate rooms but there was a wedding party, the night before, that had gotten just a little too wild and several guests had to extend their reservations. The hotel had downgraded them to a single room and, to make matters worse, there's only one bed.

Tine would laugh at the absurdity of it all- the romcom setup, if he wasn't this close to a panic attack.

"Oh, well, it's not like you and me have never shared a bed before. It'll be fine. I promise not to hog the blankets or kick you in my sleep." Sarawat replies as he drags their luggage further into the room.

Easy for you to say. It's not like you're sharing a bed, on an unintentionally romantic weekend away, with the completely clueless love of your life. Tine silently fumes to himself.

The thing is:

Him and Sarawat are best friends. They've known each other all of their lives or at least it feels like that to Tine- six years, they've known each other six years. From nine-year olds on the playground to pimply faced hormonal teenagers, they grew up together.

(They experience a lot of firsts together- first sleepover, first playdate, Tine's first fight with someone who isn't his older brother, first heartbreak (when Sarawat picks another boy over Tine while playing tag with all the other kids in the playground) a first kiss that Tine will never admit he remembers.)

And really it shouldn't be a surprise, because they're so close (they know each other's habits- good and bad, they know each other's secrets, dreams and fears), that inevitably, at some point, one of them was bound to fall in love.

For Tine, it has always been there- slowly growing beneath the surface, but he'd never wanted to acknowledge it.

(Not even when he'd felt insanely jealous over Sarawat's other friends, not even when he'd felt his heart thumping and trying to escape out of his chest whenever him and Sarawat were sat too close together on the couch- watching movies, not even when he'd been next to Sarawat in bed, when sleeping over at his house, and wondered what it would feel like to just lean in and kiss him, *finally* .)

And he'd never wanted to say anything to Sarawat either. Because him and Sarawat are *best friends* and best friends lasts longer than lovers and if they're careful- really careful with each other, they'll last almost as long as *soulmates* .

All of that, however, does not stop him from wanting Sarawat and it is increasingly difficult to be close to Sarawat and not to tell the other boy how he feels.

Tine's lashes are longer and fuller than they have any right to be. It isn't fair. Sarawat thinks to himself while lying next to Tine. And this was an awful idea. He knows he should have offered to just sleep on the couch. There's a small one in the living room that looks hard and

uncomfortable but *safe*. He's had practice in self-denial, from years of being in love with Tine, but it is increasingly difficult not to do anything, when the completely clueless love of your life is sleeping in the same bed as you on an unintentionally romantic weekend away.

He hadn't really planned for things to go this way. It was supposed to be just a little overnight trip with his friends to the beach- a gift from his parents for a job well done this semester. His first trip without his family, his first trip without his classmates, just him and the boys, but they had all cancelled (and Sarawat will murder Man and Boss later) and now it's just him and Tine- beautiful, bright, innocent, needy Tine, who he wants to kiss and hold and never let go of ever.

But him and Tine are best friends and, while Sarawat knows that Tine keeps the little plastic flower ring Sarawat gave him, when they were twelve years old, in a little box inside one of his drawers for safe keeping, he'd never do anything. Because him and Tine are *best friends* and best friends lasts longer than lovers and if they're careful- really careful with each other, they'll last almost as long as *soulmates*.

"Wat, I love you." Tine whispers, in the dark, to a silence that holds no answers, to a sleeping friend- who is right there, next to him, so close and yet still so far. And it hurts, it hurts just a little bit to say the words out loud but to be too much of a coward to say it and be *heard*.

In the end, it is Sarawat who confesses first.

Sarawat runs his hand to fix his gelled-up hair one last time before he enters the restaurant. He's dressed in a light blue shirt and a pair of white slacks- his Sunday best and in his hands is a neatly wrapped present. He has no idea what's inside it- didn't bother to question his mother when she had chosen the present weeks ago.

The restaurant, the Aekaranwong's picked for their twentieth wedding anniversary party, is a cozy little place. The interior is filled with warm light from exposed bulbs hanging from low ceilings and it must be P'Type's influence as the venue is simple, warm and elegant. As Sarawat scans the room to find his best friend, he spots a few familiar faces- Aunt Jenny with her adorable four-year-old twins, Uncle Mike with his conquest of the week, Tine's terrifying cousin Tharn with his boyfriend- people Sarawat knows from having gone to several Aekaranwong family events throughout the years. They acknowledge him when he passes by- all warm welcoming smiles, as if he was another member of the family and the thought makes Sarawat ache.

He finds Tine sitting blessedly alone, at a table near one of the windows, looking pensive out onto the gardens- no overprotective P'Type anywhere in sight. And he's so gut wrenchingly gorgeous surrounded by warm lights that, if Sarawat was not distinctly aware of Tine's

family scattered around the room, he'd be crossing that distance to Tine, pulling him out of the room and into a dark corner somewhere.

(He doesn't really know what he would do alone with Tine, in some dark corner somewhere- has vague notions of getting his mouth on Tine- plush, soft lips and all that pale smooth skin. He thinks back to all of those romantic movies he'd vehemently deny watching- girls and boys trading soft kisses, pressed up against each other. He thinks about running his hands across Tine's jaw and maybe leaving marks on that unblemished neck. He thinks about holding hands, because he's never really held hands with anyone before and Tine makes him want to try.)

He's thankful for a handful of the nosy relatives, no doubt watching the two of them, preventing him from making a potential mistake but it is increasingly difficult- to be around Tine and not do *something*.

Their weekend together a month ago has done nothing but solidify his feelings for Tine and he can't stand it anymore. He can't stand to be around Tine and not kiss him- can't stand to be close and not hold Tine in his arms, can't stand to be beside Tine and wonder if Tine will find someone else one day and leave him. He wants to tell Tine how he feels before the feelings can't be contained anymore, before it bubbles up at the worst possible moment and he ruins everything with a poorly and vaguely worded confession.

Sarawat brushes thoughts of plans and Tine's lips away, takes a deep breath and calls out to Tine with a soft "Hey" and Tine turns to him with a smile.

"Hi, Asshole." Sarawat laughs at Tine's brilliant ability to ruin a mood and sits on the chair across from him.

"Oh what's that?" Tine says as he points to the gift Sarawat gingerly places on the table.

"Um.. I don't know. Mom picked it." Sarawat holds the present near his ear and gives it a few shakes to try and figure out what's inside but it's no use. He puts it back on the table and gives Tine a shrug.

"Oh. Well I'm sure they'll like it. Your mom has the best taste."

"Sure. I guess."

"You look nice." Tine motions with his hand to Sarawat's attire and Sarawat feels the tips of his ears go warm at the compliment.

"Thank you. You look nice too." Sarawat returns and Tine does look nice- in his mint green shirt, hair carefully styled in loose waves. *But then again, you always look nice.*

There's an awkward pause where Sarawat can't think of anything else to say to the other boy- can't think of another topic to talk about. He fiddles with the cuffs of the shirt he's wearing- unbuttons his cufflinks and buttons them back up again. He doesn't want to rush through a confession now and risk ruining everyone's night and causing a scene if Tine rejects him but he's never been good at waiting.

"Look Tine, there's something I need to talk to you about." He keeps his eyes on the table as he says this.

"Hmm.. about what?" Tine replies.

"I've been meaning to tell you for a while now, I-" audio feedback from a mic interrupts Sarawat before he can go on.

"Hi everyone. I'd just like to say thank you for coming today to celebrate our parent's twentieth anniversary. We have a short program planned so if you could all take your seats. We'll be starting shortly." P'Type interrupts and Sarawat is grateful for the reprieve. He's got a speech all planned out in advance but sitting in front of Tine and trying to deliver it is making him so nervous he's forgetting all the words.

"Hold that thought. We can talk in the garden after the program. Dad made this really cheezy presentation about how him and Mom met." Tine leans across the table to half whisper conspiratorially.

Tine's parents appear seemingly out of nowhere to join them at their table. They exchange greetings, Sarawat hands them the gift and they thank him for it and for coming to the party. It's comfortable and not at all awkward- like it is with his other friends' parents (a consequence of them bearing witness to a lot of Sarawat's more embarrassing moments with Tine). Tine's dad asks him about soccer and tells him a story about his own soccer playing days while they wait for the program to start.

The video is cheezy but Sarawat doesn't pay it much attention. His palms are starting to get clammy from the nerves and he can feel his shirt sticking to his skin through the presentation and all throughout the long dinner after. Conversations go on all around him and he offers short answers, when addressed directly, but he drifts for most of it. Time is simultaneously too slow and too fast and before he knows it dinner is concluded.

Tine's parents get up to mingle with their guests and it's just the two of them again and Sarawat is contemplating whether to go through with this or not. On one hand, he's dying a little inside- keeping his feelings in, on another, he's scared shitless at the prospect of losing his best friend.

The short walk to the garden is silent. They find an empty bench at the middle of it and sit down next to each other. There are fairy lights all around the garden and Sarawat is thankful that everybody else is too preoccupied inside the restaurant to pay them any mind.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about."

"First, I'd just like to put it out there- I'm not expecting anything. So please keep that in mind before you get mad or something. Not that you don't have the right to get mad- just maybe don't get too mad because I didn't really mean for this to happen and I just-"

"Wat, breathe." Sarawat takes a deep breath, turns to look at Tine straight in the eyes and begins again.

"Tine. Since the first moment I met you, you've been a nuisance to me. You stole my red power ranger and you never apologized for that by the way-"

"What? What are you trying to-" Sarawat holds up a hand to cover Tine's mouth and Tine is beginning to look angry. Sarawat pushes on.

"Don't. Lemme just... you stole my red power ranger, then you wormed your way into becoming my best friend in the whole world and now I don't really know what I would do with myself without you. Still, you nag too much and you're really needy." At this, Sarawat can see Tine's face morphing into an angrier expression and he can barely make out the protests from behind the hand muzzling Tine.

"But you're also really kind and good and sometimes really funny and you're smart and brave and I have a list of things... but um. Never mind that. And well you're also really pretty. Shut it, there's nothing wrong with being pretty. And you're just.. amazing. And I... I like you." Sarawat notices Tine go still at that. He's so still that Sarawat isn't sure he's breathing and his eyes are so wide that he looks like a cartoon character.

"Scratch that. Not just like... I- I love you, Tine. I just wanted you to know that." Sarawat removes the hand covering Tine's mouth and waits for Tine to respond.

"I- " Tine looks lost and confused and Sarawat feels dread pooling in his stomach. He stops looking at Tine, turns his head to stare straight back at the restaurant. He can see Tine's family inside- going about their business- smiling, laughing and completely unaware of Sarawat making a fool of himself.

"How long?"

"A long time."

"Oh."

"It doesn't have to change anything." And it kills Sarawat to say it but he'd rather have Tine as a friend than nothing at all.

"Okay, but if it did change things, what exactly would change?" At that Sarawat quickly turns back to Tine and to his wonder Tine is smiling at him softly.

"What do you mean?" Tine has to be clear. Sarawat won't be able to take halfhearted acceptance but his heart feels like it's beating out of his chest and he's hoping, hoping-

"Say I feel the same... the same way about you, I mean. What would change?"

"Oh. I guess.. well- then we'd date. You'd be my boyfriend. We'd hold hands and stuff and probably kiss at some point-"

And Tine kisses him. And it's quick- a barely there press of lips. As quick as Tine had leaned in to do it, he pulls away again- before Sarawat can even register or kiss back.

"Okay. Asshole."

“What?”

“Okay. We’re boyfriends now.” Tine smiles up at him happily and Sarawat could just scream and cheer but that would be totally not cool.

“Yeah?”

“Yep. And just so we’re clear. I love you too.”

“Does that mean I can kiss you again? Cause that kiss was way too short and I-” Tine holds up a finger to Sarawat’s lips.

“Nope. Just because we’ve known each other a long time, doesn’t mean I don’t still expect wooing.”

It doesn’t change much.

It’s not all that different- going from being best friends to being boyfriends. Tine is still needy. Sarawat is still an asshole- some of the time. They are both still jealous- even more so now. They still watch movies together on the couch but now, sometimes, they watch in dimly lit theaters after romantic dinners. They still play video games together or Sarawat plays video games and Tine smashes buttons on the controller aggressively but now, Tine doesn’t sleepover as often- says things like it’s not proper. Sarawat still brings Tine soup when he’s sick and Tine still asks Sarawat to help him with laundry but now they share kisses in between, hold hands when they walk together after classes, and tell all of their friends they’re together.

It doesn’t change much- because, really, they are still too young for any of it to matter- it’s still just the beginning.

And well, fate, fate has other plans, you see.

Chapter End Notes

You know how in movies, the couple who are together in the beginning don’t necessarily end up together?

I’m kidding. Or maybe I’m not. We’ll see.

As always, comments are love <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sixteen

Tine is sitting by himself on a bench, scrolling through pictures of him and Sarawat at the amusement park. There is a picture of them from this morning- both fresh faced, posing in front of the entrance- hands held up together shaped into a tiny heart, Sarawat in his dark green hoodie- eyes dancing happily. Sarawat isn't much for crowded places- absolutely hates strangers pressed up against him and the various noise of people all around them- parents trying to wrangle screaming children, groups of girls giggling and gossiping about girl things, whatever those may be. But you wouldn't know it from the picture- he looks like every other big kid, excited for a day of fun on rides, a day of eating nothing but junk food, a day of playing and picture taking.

("Take a picture with me."

"No. You always want to take pictures. Can't we just enjoy ourselves in the moment without you having to constantly document things?"

"Come on. Stop being a grouch and just take a picture with me. One day when we're old and our memories are failing, we'll have these pictures to remind us."

"Okay. Fine. But you only get to document ten things today and I get veto powers over the pictures you post on IG too.")

The day had passed by really quickly as happy moments do. They'd gone on almost every ride- several differently themed roller coasters where Tine will deny he had screamed at each one, a giant swinging boat thing where Tine had almost lost his lunch, bumper cars where Sarawat had meanly rammed into him dozens of times before Tine had given up and refused to play anymore. And though they'd argued throughout the day:

"Tine, stop pouting please. We're supposed to ram each other's bumper cars- that's the point."

"No, Sarawat. I don't want to go into the haunted house. You can't make me."

"Ew. I refuse to wear the headband, Tine. It's lame."

It was a very good day and Tine doesn't want it to end. But the skies are growing darker and soon enough the park will close and the two of them will have to go home. Before they can leave though, there's one more ride that Tine wants to go on.

"Hey, Nuisance. You ready?" Sarawat says as he walks up to Tine. The line for the ferris wheel was longer than either of them had anticipated- something about being the weekend after valentine's day, that the park and the one most romantic ride in it is filled with couples.

"Yep. Let's go." Tine puts his phone back into his bag, picks up the snack wrappers around himself and throws it into the bin before meeting Sarawat in the middle.

The two of them walk hand in hand to the place in the line that Sarawat had reserved for them. A couple in their thirties smile at them as they move to make space in front of where they are standing.

Sarawat introduces Tine to the couple. "This is my boyfriend, Tine."

"Hi Tine. Sarawat was just telling us about you." And Tine smiles at them.

"I hope they were good things." A year ago, he couldn't have imagined Sarawat making small talk with strangers. But Sarawat has been changing little by little- is much more open than he used to be and Tine likes to think it's because of him.

Tine chats, a while, with the couple but before he knows it, they get to the front of the line. He bids them a quick farewell as they each get onto their passenger cars. He is giddy with excitement as Sarawat closes the door behind them and the car starts moving. He's never been on a ferris wheel with a date before and the tiny part of him that is a romantic can already imagine how magical it would be- up there, watching the lights of the park and the city down below.

"What happened with the girl Man is seeing?" Tine fills up the silence on the slow climb.

"You know, the usual. Girl caught him chatting with someone else on Line and she broke it off." Sarawat replies.

"Seriously?"

"Yup. For all that he keeps complaining about how good we have it. He can't seem to stick to just one person."

"He's had how many girlfriends this year?"

"This last one makes three. But there was also that one boyfriend the beginning of the year."

"Oh yeah. I forgot about him. What was his name again?"

"Gun."

Tine can't really blame Man for all the changing partners. He's not a bad guy exactly, though most of the girls and boys he's dated will probably argue. He was the first one out of their friend group that had a girlfriend, the first one to date and break up with someone. But he's young- they're only sixteen after all and he has every right to date, experiment and try things with different people.

(Man is, also, the only other friend they have, aside from Pear and Earn, that has a soul mark. It is a closely guarded secret- known only to Sarawat, Tine and Boss. But Tine supposes all of the dating is in search of the person with his mark and no one can really judge him for it.)

"You ever think about it? Dating other people?" Tine asks and he can't believe he's asking this question, of all things, on their anniversary, but it's a nagging thought in the dark that deserves to be heard before it can take root and do irreparable damage.

"No. What? Why the hell would I think about dating other people, Tine?" Sarawat looks at him, face shocked and eyes hard.

"Do you think about dating other people?" Sarawat asks.

"No. Forget about it." Tine looks out from the window of the passenger car. They are halfway up the highest point. He's almost forgotten what they were on this ride for, but he can't really enjoy the view with the little voice of insecurity that tells him *this won't last*.

"No. Tell me what's going on in that head of yours, little buffalo." And Tine turns back sharply to stare into Sarawat's eyes. He never could refuse Sarawat anything when he calls him that.

"I just... you know how I can listen to Scrubb songs over and over and never get tired. Like I could listen to them a hundred times and know every lyric but still love them anyway?"

"You lost me. Where are you going with this?"

"Well, it's not like that for other people. Most people get tired of listening to the same thing every day. They get bored, discover something new and move on."

"Oh." And Tine is happy that he's never had to say much for Sarawat to get what he's talking about, but sometimes this is the very thing that scares him- the thought that they've known each other too long and know practically everything there is to know about it each other already.

"Tine. I can't promise I'll never get bored. We might well live to be a hundred- if we eat healthy and exercise. And maybe by then, we'll be so sick of each other, we'll be plotting ways to murder the other. But, right now, all I'm thinking about is that I'm so happy to be spending an anniversary with you and I'd really like to make out with you."

"Oh. Okay."

They kiss, in the tiny passenger car- slightly tilted to one side, Tine sat on Sarawat's lap. And, as Sarawat runs one hand over Tine's spine underneath his shirt, other hand rubbing Tine's thigh- never quite venturing higher, they are in a public place after all, forgetting to take in the view of the lights of the park and the city down below, Sarawat makes Tine forget all about his fears.

(Sarawat kisses with the type of determination that he does not reserve for any other endeavor- kisses as if to say- *I'm here. Stop thinking of anything else*- all teeth and biting and

not gentle or gentlemanly that Tine's lips bruise.)

Because, Tine, Tine knows he'll never get tired of doing this with Sarawat and, for now, that is enough.

Seventeen, Summer, Guntithanon Family Villa

They discover new things about each other slowly, and for all that Sarawat has known Tine for years and had been confident in the thought that there was nothing more to learn, realizing he is wrong is enjoyable.

The first time Sarawat gets his mouth on Tine, Tine unravels- beautifully and silently. He makes absolutely no sound as Sarawat takes him apart. Only clings and holds onto any part of Sarawat he can reach- shoulders and hair clutched tightly but otherwise completely still, as if he wasn't sure what was happening to him, can't believe Sarawat is doing this to him. He doesn't pull on Sarawat's hair or push in any deeper, even if Sarawat can take it- wouldn't mind not being able to *breath* with it.

When he finishes and Sarawat looks up at him, his eyes are closed, long lashes an inky black drawn on rosy cheeks, silly mouth still open and he's never been more beautiful. Sarawat stands from where he is kneeling- sore, red knees from tiled floors. He kisses his way up from Tine's exposed belly to his chest to that tempting mouth and tucks Tine back into his tiny indecent shorts.

He leaves Tine, trying to catch his breath, leaning all his weight on the wall, in the living room of Sarawat's family vacation house, and runs outside to cool himself in the ocean.

Later, much later, after Tine had joined him swimming, after they'd played for hours in the water, Tine joins him in the shower. Tine licks the salt from his skin, sets his body on fire everywhere- hands all over, his grip rough, sure and tight as he quickly brings Sarawat to release. He bites- bites Sarawat's neck hard and it shouldn't be hot but it is- and it pulls the heat in Sarawat's belly and leaves him shaking, spent and gasping- *Tine* .

Later still, he learns that Tine has moles all over- a small one in the middle of his chest, one beside his belly button, a mid-sized one on his left hip bone, one on the soft skin behind his right knee, numerous ones all over his back- of which Sarawat's favorite is a tiny cloud shaped one at the base of Tine's spine and, one big one underneath the hidden skin below Tine's left ass cheek. He catalogues each one with lips and finger tips- traces and connects them like his very own constellations.

(He's seen Tine naked plenty of times before- sometimes accidentally- in the school gym's shower room after classes. Sometimes on purpose- because they've been dating for two years and though, Tine still gets shy, some of the time (even when Sarawat reminds him they've seen each other naked plenty), Tine is also a little bit of a tease- is the first one to strip down to his birthday suit when they go swimming at an empty beach.)

But stolen glances at the gym and on purpose staring while skinny dipping couldn't have prepared Sarawat for the first time Tine is naked underneath him.

His face and neck are flushed pink and there are dark, angry hickeys all over his chest- the shape of Sarawat's over enthusiastic mouth. His dark hair- a mess over Sarawat's pillows, the inside of his pale shaking thighs, sticky and covered in bites, and all Sarawat can think of is how he wants to ruin Tine. How much he wants to make space for himself inside Tine, so that Tine never forgets- never forgets- the shape of the only man who's ever owned him this way.

But he doesn't take, not yet- even if, it would be so easy to push in quickly, lose himself in Tine's body- rough, hips stuttering in and out, mindless with lust and heat and Tine is so tight, Sarawat has to bite his lips to ground himself.

Sarawat has to remind himself to be gentle, as he pushes in slow- careful not to hurt Tine. When he is all the way in- buried as deep as he can be in that heat, he looks at Tine's face- scrunched up, in a little bit of pain, eyes closed- the corner of them shiny and wet and Sarawat has to take a deep breath, remind himself of control- *not yet*.

He kisses bitten, swollen, plush lips- Tine tastes like the mango sticky rice, they had for dessert, moves the hand gripping Tine's thigh, hard enough to leave hand shaped bruises tomorrow, to Tine's warm cheek and when he pulls away from that mouth, Tine's eyes are wide open.

He places tiny closed mouth kisses all over Tine's jaw, the apples of his cheeks, that space above the bridge of tine's nose, in between his eyebrows, until Tine's face smooths out and he starts to giggle- *there*, there is his Tine, beautiful and open and sweet and so trusting and *his*.

He pulls out just as slow- till only the tip is inside, sinks back in, so slowly that he sees every emotion flickering on Tine's face, commits the sight of lust blown eyes, silly mouth falling open, to memory.

When Tine comes, it is to Sarawat whispering "*I love you*" "*I love you*" "*So good to me*" "*Mine*" in between shaky thrusts, hands held tight.

Summer is all sticky sweltering heat and lust- a mess of hands and lips and bodies and they can't get enough of each other.

And as he watches Tine's pale moonlit body shake with exertion, as he sits down slow on Sarawat's lap, Sarawat learns he can be greedy and he takes and takes all that Tine can give him.

The soul marks ought to be a phenomenon wildly sensationalized but it isn't. It is not a common theme in romance novels or other forms of media. As only a small portion of the general population have the marks, there is not much that is known about it and there are no scholars in a hurry to conduct studies on the matter. However, there exists a substantial amount of respect for the marks much like the respect afforded to an old, almost forgotten, religion.

Man meets his soulmate during Tine's birthday party. Him and Man had gotten substantially closer throughout the years (a consequence of being forced into proximity and bonding by Sarawat) but, that does not mean, he is particularly happy- to learn that Man's soulmate is his older brother.

But while everybody watches P'Type press his thumb to the mark on Man's hip to complete their bond, watches as bright light suffuses them both and leave behind only two boys smiling at each other and a pair of thumbmarks the color of sunflowers, he watches the way Sarawat's eyes go misty with longing.

See, the thing is:

They'd assumed it wouldn't happen- not to them. Because, for this one thing and for the first time- they are entirely too old.

They were wrong.

Sarawat's mark appears when he is seventeen- no rhyme or reason, no explanation as to *why now? after all these years?*

He wakes up to a searing heat in between his shoulder blades, a mark- he knows from all the old stories, from his parents, from Earn and Pear and Man, etching itself into existence over otherwise blank skin.

And it hurts, it hurts- no one ever told him that it would.

But it's okay, he remembers- remembers his parents and their mark- deep bright blue, the color of the ocean, that guides his father *home* - pulls him away from his busy schedule, from work and responsibilities, from the whole wide world with all its distractions and mysteries, the mark a siren song that calls wayward sailors to the sea.

Remembers the look on Pear's face when Earn had touched her cheek to complete their bond- all awe and gratefulness for a soulmate, for someone who belongs to her- no conditions, no explanations, no judgement, just *hers*.

And remembers, the way Man went from being untethered- another boy experimenting and trying things with different people, always secretly searching for the person who carries his mark, to being- settled, with a soulmate who will learn to love him and be with him- forever.

And though it takes him a week to recover from the fever that overtakes him (something about his body being late- resisting the change), he is excited, because he knows, without a doubt, who his mark belongs to- knows, without a doubt, who his soul is reaching out for.

Twenty-four, Tine's designated dressing room, 4:16 pm

Tine is pacing back and forth- the length of the tiny room making it impossible to go any distance without having to turn back around and start all over again. He must have gone a full ten laps or so already, wearing away the soles of his fanciest leather shoes and scuffing up the carpet with how much he's walking, before he hears another set of knocks on the door.

His mother has already been by to check in on him and he'd told her he was having stomach problems. She'd reminded him his meds were in one of the cabinets. *Take two. It's just nerves. You'll be fine.*

That was five minutes ago. He had predicted that five minutes after his mother, P'Type would be barging in- that must be him now. He hears a couple more knocks- increasing in urgency but he hesitates in front of the door.

He doesn't want to open it and have his brother see him like this but it's impossible not to. P'Type would know something was seriously wrong and then he'd tell-

And then the wedding would be cancelled and Tine would have to explain to his fiancé and to his family. They'd have to send home all of their guests and deal with their whispered condemnations. They'd go bankrupt because no one is going to give them any refunds for a lavish wedding all paid for. They'd have to return all the gifts, cancel the plane tickets and hotel reservation.

And, Tine would *break* his heart and they'd never ever forgive him and Tine is going to have a panic attack and probably die alone and miserable.

No, he can't not open it. He can't hide here forever. So, he gathers what little courage he has left, plasters on a smile that doesn't reach his eyes and opens the door- to see two women standing there.

"Pear? Earn? Who sent you?" Tine asks while he ushers them inside.

They are beautiful together. Pear in her flowery pale pink gown, long brown hair braided with tiny white flowers like a fairy stepping out of the forest to grace them with her presence. Earn in a dark blue suit, dangerous looking high heels, long straight black hair swept to one side. The two of them are the exact opposites of each other- the moon and the sun and yet so complimentary- one cannot exist without the other.

"Who else? You're late. To your own wedding, no less." Pear is no longer the quiet, shy girl she used to be- years of conditioning from her soulmate has beaten it out of her. She's still sweet but she's learnt to speak her mind.

"Yeah. Shit. I just..." Tine takes a seat on the couch that facilities had miraculously squeezed into the room. His hands twitch and he'd run it through his hair- except his hair had been immaculately styled today and it would be a waste.

"You having second thoughts there, champ? Cause you know it's not too late." Earn breezes right through, parks herself on the vanity table's accompanying chair. (He'd gotten the Bride's room and hadn't complained. He needed the space for all of his creams and the light makeup he's wearing on his special day, so sue him.)

"Too late for?"

"Too late to call it off, dum dum. We aren't stupid, you have that look in your eyes." And bless Earn for always being there and knowing all of his looks.

"I don't know if-" *if that's what I want to do* goes unspoken.

"It would be the mature thing to do. If you were having second thoughts. Or if you want. There is the other route. It's not too late to get on a plane and escape to the Maldives. I can book you a ticket on my phone with my credit card." She brandishes the plastic in her hands and the preparation scares Tine just a little- as if she knew that Tine would have doubts, before he even knew himself.

"Just don't forget to pay me. We'll stall. You creep out the window and we can meet up at the airport in like thirty minutes."

It's not a bad plan but he *can't*.

"I can't tell if you're being a good friend or a bad friend right now." Tine says as he contemplates the plastic in her hands.

"You should be leaning towards good friend. I'm giving you options here."

“I don’t think you’re helping, Earn.” Pear addresses her soulmate and they speak with their eyes- eyebrows twitching- communicating and for a minute Tine aches, remembers having the same familiarity with someone that sometimes no words need speaking.

“Nope, I am. I’ve got a plan.” Earns turns back to him. Their silent conversation over.

“Shit. This was supposed to be easy.”

“When is it ever?”

And they’re right, of course they are. Nothing worth it ever comes easy. (Least of all love- the forever kind)

“Tine, you know it's gonna be okay. Right? Whatever happens. Whatever you choose. You’re gonna be just fine.”

He can’t help but think that Pear doesn’t understand. She can’t. She’s got her soul mate, the love of her life, guaranteed forever- written in the stars.

“How? How is it going to be fine?”

“Because you’re you and you’ll make it work, no matter what it takes.”

She still doesn’t understand but Tine knows she’s right.

Tine takes a deep breath, looks to the mirror one last time, fixes his bangs and straightens out his white suit jacket and black bow tie. He gives the little flower ring (he’s had since he was twelve years old- a promise of forever) a final pat goodbye, whispers a silent prayer to the universe- that his decision holds true and walks with Pear and Earn out the door.

Eighteen

Tine’s mark appears the summer the year they turn eighteen- already too in love with each other for it to matter, but Tine is excited anyway and Sarawat can’t blame him. Tine would argue that they never really needed it, but it would be nice for the universe to confirm what they’ve always secretly known- that they belong together.

Only it doesn’t.

That night, in Sarawat’s bedroom, cuddled together closer than they’d ever been before, they simultaneously press their thumbs to both marks and wait for the light, only it doesn’t come.

And Sarawat will swear on his life that he'd never seen a more heartbreaking sight than when Tine's face had crumpled and he'd started to cry.

According to an old, almost forgotten, legend (probably written in a book gathering dust in one of Thailand's oldest libraries), the marks are a gift to humanity, handed by an unnamed goddess to two star crossed lovers- a promise in the next life and the next one after.

For a long while, the marks both does and doesn't matter. They are still there. They still love each other deeply. They still date, watch movies together, play video games, sleepover at each other's houses, still share kisses in between, hold hands when they walk together after classes, and claim to anyone who is listening that they are together.

But as Tine presses his thumb to the mark on his right bicep, dreams of meeting someone who is irrevocably his as he looks to the only soulmate he's ever wanted and sees him slipping- slipping slowly away, he cannot help but wonder how long this will last.

And as he looks at the way Sarawat reaches to scratch his back- in between his shoulder blades, at a black thumb mark on otherwise unblemished skin, eyes misty with longing when he thinks Tine isn't looking, Tine wonders if Sarawat is thinking the same thing.

There are cracks in their foundation and Tine doesn't know how to fix it.

They fight. They can't help it. It's not always rainbows and sunshine and constant liking.

(Of course, there are little fights here and there- fights about who gets the last slice of pizza, fights about who's better Iron Man or Captain America. (Sarawat is a rare breed in that he likes Captain America- something about his heart being in the right place, most of the time, and also, *he has powers, Tine!*) fights about who's turn it is to do the dishes or pick the movie.)

But the first really big fight they have, their first real hurdle is because of college admissions.

See, they had a plan:

Go to the same university, Tine would get into the law program and Wat would get into political science and they'd live together in a dorm near campus and they'd spend breaks

together and walk home together after classes, etc. Etcetera. Nothing would have to change- they'd be together just like always.

And sure, they've been inseparable since they were nine and it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to go to different universities but there's a plan- a plan years in the making. A plan to stay together, soulmates and fate be damned.

But the thing is:

The plan doesn't include a safety net and it should because they're both aiming for one of the top universities in Thailand and it's not easy. (Not like it used to be. Staying together isn't always easy.)

So, he sends applications to three other universities without telling Sarawat. Sarawat is furious.

Tine is waiting nervously in his room for Sarawat to come over. It's his turn to host movie night this week and he's gotten everything ready- the movie downloaded, the snacks in bowls- Sarawat's favorite chips and soda, the pillows and blanket Sarawat uses when he sleeps over- fluffed up and waiting for its owner. He surveys the room critically- nothing out of place and everything just perfect.

His parents are away for the weekend for their anniversary. P'Type is in his dorm at college and they have the house all to themselves and it can only help- maybe he'll be able to distract Sarawat with promises to make it up to him.

His speech is ready, the acceptance letter he's been hiding from Sarawat for weeks is in his drawer. He'll tell Sarawat after dinner and the movie and it'll be fine, Tine thinks.

Tine's phone buzzes with a text and he checks to see that yes, it's from Sarawat.

Pervert Boyfriend:

am outside. Opem door noe. Need to talk.

Tine rushes downstairs and opens the gate to see his boyfriend- red faced and swaying. Sarawat smells like cigarettes and alcohol and Tine doesn't understand why.

"Jesus, Wat. Have you been drinking?"

Sarawat, squints up at him, points a finger at Tine's face and instead of replying shouts. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Tine tries to grab Sarawat's forearm to pull him inside. The street is empty and dark but he wouldn't put it past his nosy neighbors to report them for public disturbance.

Sarawat slaps Tine's hand off and it stings a little and continues "Why didn't you tell me you're going to a different university?"

Tine feels the air rush out of his lungs and his stomach drop. "Who told you?"

"So, you aren't denying it? Fuck, Tine. What the fuck? We had a plan."

"Look, I'll explain inside. Please." He tries to grab for Sarawat again but Sarawat pushes him. And this is the Sarawat he doesn't like, the Sarawat who forgets to be gentle.

"I had to find out from my mom, Tine. The fuck is that? Your mom called my mom, this morning, told her how you got your first acceptance letter. She probably sounded so proud. Her son getting into one of the best universities for law. But here's the rub, it's in fucking Chiang Mai. You got into fucking Chiang Mai University."

"Wat. Please. I was going to tell you." And Tine tries and tries but Sarawat isn't having it- won't let Tine touch him.

"It's eleven fucking hours away, Tine. How are we-? How is that going to work?" Tine can't look at him anymore, just the tone of Sarawat's voice is breaking his heart.

He should have known Sarawat would react like this. But he had been hopeful. If anyone could have made it work it would have been the two of them.

It would have been so simple- technology would have made it simple. They could face time. They could chat. They'd see each other during breaks- spend time in Sarawat's family villa and sure, it would be difficult. They've been inseparable since they were nine and he'd miss Sarawat terribly but Tine was hopeful they'd get through it.

It was just four years. Sure, it would be four years of going back and forth, four years of sending letters and only seeing each other through glass, four years of not being able to touch each other, hold or kiss- skin to skin in the dark. But what's four years to the nine years they've been together? What's four years to the rest of their lives?

In four years, they could be together again, live together in a tiny apartment- just the two of them- just like they had always planned.

But as he looks back at Sarawat's face, takes in the angry expression- the closed off, hard eyes, the tiny hope in him dies. He doesn't offer up his excuses or plans.

"You're so fucking selfish, Tine. I can't look at you right now."

Sarawat leaves in his car, Man in the driving seat, expressionless- doesn't greet or make eye contact with Tine as he drives off with the love of Tine's life.

Tine cries into Sarawat's pillow- lingering scent of him reminding Tine of thunderstorms, alone in his room, Sarawat's favorite chips and soda untouched.

And Tine knows, Sarawat will be back, tomorrow or the next day or the day after, all apologies for blowing up at Tine, and they'll get back to planning- moving pieces around the board so that they can make it work, and they'll kiss and makeup because this isn't their first fight- not by a long shot and Tine is all constant, unwavering devotion and he'll never give Wat up, not if he can help it. And Wat, he likes to think, can't live without him either. But as he presses his finger tips to the bruise on his shoulder from where Wat had pushed him- not at all gentle, he'll remember that Sarawat sometimes has darkness in him too.

And he'll never forget it.

"Sometimes I really hate you, Wat."

There are no marks- a siren song that calls wayward lovers back home.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was difficult to write- there's very little fluff in it.

If you read the smut, please let me know what you think.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nineteen

"Let's break up." Tine says, tear streaked face looking tired and resigned.

And *Oh*. That's what that feels like, Sarawat thinks to himself, while something deep in his chest hurts with a pain he's never felt before. It doesn't hurt like the raw burn of a soul mark etching itself onto his skin, hurt like the sting of scrapped palms on concrete or the sharp heat of a punch to the face, but it does hurt in a physical way. It hurts like someone had taken a saw to his rib cage, cracked open his chest to see his insides, poked at all the squishy bits and settled on cutting out his still beating heart.

"Let's break up." Tine repeats stronger and louder this time- like Sarawat hadn't heard him that first time.

He says nothing- no words that matter come out of his lips- not *Stay, don't leave me* or *I love you, don't go*. He doesn't drop to his knees and beg, doesn't grab Tine tightly. He doesn't cry.

Instead, he watches silently and completely frozen as Tine moves closer, presses a teary wet kiss to his cheek while he says in a shaky voice "I'm sorry", watches while Tine gathers what little luggage he came with that week (already placed neatly next to the door for easy access, easy escape), and watches while Tine walks out of his dorm (his *life*)- an unspoken *goodbye* hanging in the air between them.

Sarawat lets him go.

Sometime later, he collapses onto his bed, a bed that still carries Tine's lingering smell- vanilla sweet, reminding Sarawat of childhood memories, comfort and *home*. The tears come then, angry, fat and continuous like a dam breaking, flooding an entire town and leaving destruction in its wake. He cries and cries, curled up into a ball and clutching at the pillow where Tine had rested his head just hours before.

When there are no more tears left and the view from his window of the sky turns from pitch black to inky blue, he shuts his eyes and lets sleep finally blessedly take him. He doesn't dream of anything- not of Tine's tear streaked, tired and resigned face or "Let's break up" and "I'm sorry" on eternal loop or the sound of the door closing behind the love of his life.

It would be so easy. If only they were meant to be.

A year ago

"Wat, stay a little longer, please."

The two of them are lying on Tine's bed. Sarawat stares at the ceiling of the room where they've made so many memories throughout the years while Tine clings to his side, long limbs wrapped around him like Tine never wants to let go. The white paint on the ceiling directly above Tine's bed is cracked, he notes. It needs a fresh coat of paint, maybe? He'll ask auntie later after Tine leaves.

Tine's bed is soft and inviting. It smells like the two of them, a mix of Tine's vanilla cologne and the grassy, clean scent that Sarawat prefers to use. Sarawat would roll in it if he could move but Tine's grip is surprisingly strong. Tine is a furnace next to him and in the sweltering heat of Bangkok's summer Sarawat should be uncomfortable but he isn't. He's perfect where he is- in Tine's bed, sweat dripping down his temples, bed sheet sticking to his back and well, Sarawat is *weak*. A weak, weak-willed boy, too in love to resist (self-preservation goes out the window when it comes to Tine).

Who could blame him? 'Stay here, don't leave' Tine's bed begs and Sarawat listens. He sinks in further into its embrace- hot but comfortable, sticky but safe and struggles to keep his eyes open as he's gently lulled into the land of sleep.

Before he drifts off completely, he spares a thought for tomorrow. He really should go home. It's late and tomorrow Tine has an early day of packing. There are still things to do, people to say goodbye to, a family to bond with before they all see Tine off on his new adventure. Tine will be busy with last minute arrangements and he'll be busy trying to pretend he's going to be just fine. Maybe, he could call Man and Boss? They haven't played soccer in a while. Best start getting used to being just the three of them.

In four days, Tine will be on a train- his bags packed, his things in boxes clearly labelled for shipping later. In four days, Tine will be six hundred and eighty kilometers away in a strange city all by his lonesome. Beautiful, bright, innocent, needy Tine, who he never wanted to let go of ever, is traveling where Sarawat can't reach- not too easily, not at a drop of a hat nor a panicked phone call and a thirty-minute car drive away. As melodramatic as it sounds, he has no idea how either of them are going to survive.

He wraps his own arms around Tine tighter and sends a tiny prayer to whichever Gods are listening (not fate or the universe because they are cruel and twisted, not kind, they don't care about Sarawat- otherwise, otherwise Tine would be-).

'Take care of him for me, please' he prays silently.

"Okay." he says out loud.

He places a kiss on top of Tine's messy black hair, tucked close underneath his chin, closes his eyes and stays.

Tine leaves for Chiang Mai after summer ends. Days turn into weeks, turn into months- a long stretch, a blur. Before Sarawat notices it, seasons come and go and it's chillier now. He burrows further into the tan jacket he's wrapped around himself and texts Tine a reminder to always bring a sweater. Tine has always run colder than most, leeching off warmth from unsuspecting friends who sit too close for Sarawat's comfort. The reminder is as much for Tine's health as it is for Sarawat's continued sanity.

Tine settles into his new life in Chiang Mai in a way that Sarawat envies. For his first term in his first year of University, Tine is remarkably enthusiastic. He thrives in his classes, studies diligently and is liked by his professors. He joins the debate club which Sarawat hadn't even known Tine was interested in (Tine tells him it's good practice for when he becomes a lawyer and Sarawat can only stare helplessly and with longing at pictures of Tine in a suit). Girls and boys flock to him in droves like they can't help but be drawn to Tine's kind smile, brightness and cheer and Tine makes friends easily. His social media is filled with pictures of him with people whose names Sarawat can't remember.

Some days, the envy drives him a little mad (*a lot mad*, if he's being honest). If he were a better boyfriend, he'd be proud of Tine. But some days, when there is nothing else to occupy his time, he has no choice but to sit and evaluate the course of his life. And it makes him a little bitter, a lot mean. None of it comes easy to him- not classes or extracurriculars or making any new friends.

He'd argue that he doesn't need them and tell people this works for him. *This doesn't*. Stagnation is an old friend of his that Tine had valiantly kept away. Without Tine, he sinks further into the quick sand. But he can lie. He lies to himself that he's settling into life in Bangkok away from Tine, being independent for the first time and coping well enough. And he can pretend. He pretends he doesn't feel the itching, desperate need to get on a train, and the voice in his head that tells him everything would be fine if only Tine were beside him.

If only Man and Boss were willing to pretend with him. But they aren't.

He's sitting at the cafeteria, tan jacket affording him protection from the chilly, rainy weather, when Man and Boss stop skirting around the issue.

"Wat, my friend. You need a life outside of your phone." Sarawat is staring at the little piece of glass in his hands. There's a picture of Tine with a chubby black and white stray from this morning.

"Sorry Man. What?" he answers but doesn't look up to address Man.

"Case in point. Give me that" he sees a hand trying to reach for his phone but dodges. Man, not the type to deter easy, follows.

"No." he shouts as he raises the hand clutching the device above his head.

His phone is his lifeline, his connection to the world. And though the pictures on it are a double-edged sword bringing him both happiness and misery in equal measures, he refuses to give Man the satisfaction. Man stands and leans over the table to try and reach for it but Sarawat leans back. He bares his teeth like a pissed off dog threatening to bite and Man stops trying to reach for the phone. People watch the exchange in interest but Sarawat doesn't care.

"Crazy bastard. Look, we're just worried about you." Man says as he settles back onto his seat embarrassed.

"This isn't- this isn't healthy. You're obsessing." Boss makes an agreeing noise on the side but doesn't comment.

"I'm fine." He replies sharply. It's a lie, they all know it, but Sarawat will keep on repeating it until it feels like the truth or until he gets better at lying that none of them can tell, whichever comes first.

"Yeah. You look *fine*." *Rude*. The sarcasm from Man is rude but Man is looking at him pointedly now and he knows how he looks, *okay*. He can always lie but his appearance is a traitor- bags underneath his eyes, paler skin, skinnier than usual frame betraying him.

If he were being honest, which he actively avoids being, it isn't even just the envy, that is bothering him. There are lots of things- uglier things he doesn't want to give voice to. Other more insidious thoughts that knock on his door in the early mornings just before the dawn. Insecurities that keep him from dreamless sleep. A black thumb mark on his skin and all the implications that come with it, that he refuses to acknowledge but which reminds him of its presence when its least expected and welcomed.

He tries to shove them into a little box in a corner in his mind, tries to go on as best as he can. *Everything is just fine*. He lies again and again.

He doesn't bother with a reply- knows that its futile and lets Man continue.

"Tell you what." Man says after some contemplation. "Tonight, we'll go out and hit the bars just like old times. It'll be good for you." He doesn't see how. "You can forget about your boyfriend for a little bit." He hasn't forgotten Tine for a minute since Tine left for Chiang Mai. "Get shit faced" Alcohol is a bad idea. "Maybe make some new friends." Man raises his eyebrows exaggeratedly and *no- just, no*. He doesn't need any new friends or whatever it is that Man is suggesting. Man should know better after that one Friday he'd tried to set Sarawat up with someone and had gotten a punch to the face.

He can say no. He should say no.

At the end of the day, it's not what he needs- far from it. A night out and stupid amounts of alcohol, historically, has only served to make him forget but momentarily. In the mornings, it all comes crashing down to further aggravate the headache of a spectacular hangover. What he really needs is six hundred and eighty kilometers away. What he really needs is Tine beside him.

But Tine is busy settling into his new life- the one without Sarawat constantly beside him. And, he's tired of looking at his phone all day, checking for updates while simultaneously feeling bitter at Tine's smiles. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to go out and get shit faced, maybe make some new friends, tick off that one box, keep himself from feeling like he's losing to a game Tine doesn't know he's playing.

If not for that, then at the very least, it would help him keep up pretenses.

"Okay, fine. But you're driving."

He forgets his phone on the nightstand on the way out. In the morning, there are three missed calls and more than half a dozen messages from Tine. It gives him a sick kind of satisfaction that curls itself deep in his belly and he smiles.

When it comes to jealousy, once upon a time, Sarawat and Tine were near equals- both too quick to become suspicious of other people and their motivations and both prone to become angry and throw tantrums. But growing up has mellowed Tine, who now insists on honest conversation before reacting unnecessarily. Whereas Sarawat, stewes in his jealousy, feeds it and grows it in secret like a pet plant. He stokes it until it becomes an uncontrollable thing and explodes.

He's sitting on his sofa, in his dorm, when he sees a picture of a boy he doesn't know on Tine's IG.

The picture is innocent enough- set in, what Sarawat assumes is a library. There are books scattered around the table in front of the boy and half empty snacks littered in between the thick tomes. The caption reads: *Study buddy, don't give up on us yet.*

Innocent. Not enough to cause any worry. Tine has tons of friends.

But then, he scrolls down to read the comments and right there- the first comment to the post, has him seeing red.

iamfong:

My boy, I gotchu :)

He calls Tine five minutes after the post is uploaded and shouts "Who the fuck is that and why is he calling you my boy?" into the phone in place of a greeting.

There is silence on the other end of the line. He waits to hear Tine's voice, his reassurances- anything, but Tine says nothing. He takes it as confirmation of his worst fears even when a lone rational voice in his head tells him not to. The green-eyed monster drowns it anyway.

He drops the call and ignores all the panicked messages and calls from Tine after.

If he was a better man, if everything was just fine, if he was coping better with the distance and *sleeping*, if Tine was his in all the ways that mattered (like matching colored thumb marks on unblemished skin), he imagines he wouldn't have overreacted.

When he looks back at this moment later, he would blame it all on soulmates and the disappointing black thumb marks that refuse to change.

But that isn't exactly fair, there's soulmates and there's this: Sarawat has always fed his monsters and has always let them win.

They are two sides of the same coin. But he doesn't know that yet.

Later, he learns who the boy is.

Later, after the week they don't speak, after Sarawat had gotten over his overreaction and finally listened to Tine's voicemails and explanations, after they'd made up and Sarawat had apologized to Tine for his misunderstanding, they'd go back to where they were before- not in perfect harmony because they've always fought (it's not always rainbows and sunshine) but still together. The only difference is that now Tine talks about Fong all the time.

"Wat. You should have seen Fong in debate. He schooled this one second year. Swear, I thought the guy would cry."

It's not that Sarawat hates it. He appreciates the normalcy of the two of them speaking again, appreciates how quickly Tine forgives, appreciates how Tine has never given up on him- even when he had reason to, even when Sarawat is being a jealous asshole. He doesn't even necessarily *hate* Fong, doesn't know him enough to have reason to, doesn't know him personally past the polite exterior, that the other boy shows whenever Tine drags him into a call between the two of them insisting his favorite people bond, or beyond Tine many stories.

But still, he can't help but feed his monster and it grows to whisper terrible, terrible things in his ears.

"Wat. Give him a chance. I think you'll like him."

I won't.

Tine comes home to Bangkok for semester break. Their reunion is both teary eyed and embarrassing- a fair trade for all of the relief that it brings to Sarawat, the sense of home and peace, the quieting of his monsters.

Tine runs to him on the platform, jumps and wraps all of his long limbs around Sarawat and kisses his face all over in public. He's almost knocked over from Tine's weight but he doesn't comment lest Tine get angry. Tine's grown at least two inches since Sarawat had seen him last- any more and he'd be a giant. He breathes in Tine's familiar scent, takes note of his happy, glowing face (so much prettier, in person, he'd almost forgotten) and feels the darkness lift, color come flooding back, finally.

You're here and I missed you get stuck in his throat momentarily but it doesn't matter. They have time.

When they get to his new dorm, Sarawat whispers "I love you", "I love you" and "God, I missed you" in between heated kisses before they've even completely closed the door. Later, much later, Tine whimpers the exact same words back as he trembles and comes all over his stomach while Sarawat thrusts in and out of his body in a familiar rhythm.

They spend the day of Tine's return in bed relearning the very basics of each other. The next morning, they go on dates around the city like two honeymooners, embarrassingly in love and the week passes by quickly like a very, very lovely dream.

But dreams never last, do they?

When Tine leaves, he takes the color back with him and Sarawat is left in darkness all over again.

See, the truth is- the absolute root of the matter, is this:

There's a part of him that believes in soulmates- a tiny idiotic, self-preserving part that buys into the soulmate equation. A part that believes in the predestined- guaranteed forever written in the stars, written in indelible ink onto the skin, etched onto the soul. He believes in the power of the marks to stitch two souls together for the next life and the next one after. He believes in them because it's easy- because there is no such thing as fear, no such thing as jealousy or doubt and, most of all, there is no such thing as the *end* with your soulmate.

And that is all he's ever really wanted- for him and Tine never to end.

Except, his life isn't a fairytale and him and Tine are not meant to be.

He used to pretend that little fact didn't matter. He used to pretend that everything would be just fine and that the promises that they'd made when they were twelve years old (too young to understand the heavy burden of forever) would hold against all odds. He used to pretend it

wasn't caustic, that it didn't burn- the thought that after all of these years of loving Tine, of pining, hoping and eventually having, that he might not be able to keep Tine.

But he couldn't keep pretending forever and he couldn't keep his monsters at bay.

So, it was always just a matter of time.

The black soul mark in the middle of his back, in between his shoulder blades and hidden from the world, burns. He lets it. If he could reach that far, he'd scorch it off with an iron.

Near the end, it's a video of a game played between the members of the cheer club that remind him.

Man sends him a video apropos of nothing just- *Wat, you gotta see this.*

Tine is wearing a fluffy pink and black striped sweater and jeans in the video. It's the same sweater Sarawat bought him recently when he'd visited during the break. He's sitting on the floor, in a circle with all of his friends, in between a plain looking girl with long brown hair and another boy with small sharp eyes. Sarawat recognizes the boy next to him but struggles to remember the name- something like Gene? Tine and the boy are speaking but their voices are drowned by the noise of simultaneous conversations and a loud pop song playing in the background.

The video pans out and Sarawat spots Fong, also in the circle, sat opposite Tine. Sarawat fumes at the idea that Tine had invited Fong to one of their cheer events. The lone rational voice in his head reminds him *he's just a friend* but Sarawat ignores it.

It moves onto a bottle in the middle of the circle just as it lands on Tine. He looks surprised for a moment and suddenly loud noises erupt from everyone. They chant "Truth or Dare" as they all turn to him.

Tine looks contemplative before he answers finally. "Truth"

Someone in the room boos. "Not fair. You've picked truth thrice now. You gotta pick dare."

"Wait! that isn't in the rules." Tine shouts back as he looks to both his sides for someone to confirm.

"It is. Weren't you listening to P'Fang?"

"P'Fang?" Tine turns to look at the person behind the camera that Sarawat assumes is the senior cheerleader.

"It is. I explained this in the beginning. It's your turn to do a dare."

Tine's face does something complicated as if he's weighing his options- to accept the fate imposed on him by his seniors or bow out of the game. Sarawat hopes Tine has enough sense to quit but he knows Tine, knows him like the back of his hand by now, knows Tine can't back out- not with so many eyes on him.

"Fine."

The video pans then to the opposite end of the room where a boy with thick eyebrows looks to the people in the circle and asks. "Hmmm.. what should we make Tine do?"

A girl pipes up from the boy's side. "Wait, I know." She whispers something to the other boy and Sarawat finds himself holding his breath along with the entire room.

The boy smiles when she finishes and Sarawat isn't mistaken to think he looks smug. He looks at Tine interestedly and if Sarawat was only there, in that room, he imagines he would have bristled at someone looking at his boyfriend like a ten-course meal right in front of him. But he isn't, he can't do anything through the little piece of glass in his hands, can only watch and wait.

Jealousy claws at his throat.

"I dare you to touch someone's black soul mark. It can be anyone's here. Your choice."

Sarawat had been expecting something else- anything else. He'd expected the boy to dare Tine to kiss him, maybe to dare Tine to dance sexily in the middle of the room- something embarrassing that would still make Sarawat jealous but ultimately would have been better than this.

No. Please. Anything but that.

Sarawat had dreaded this moment since he'd placed his thumb over Tine's mark and realized that they were wrong- that they weren't meant to be.

Tine looks as shocked as Sarawat feels and replies to the dare with "I *can't*. P'Fang?"

"Sorry, Tine. A dare is a dare."

"Pick something else, please." Tine pleads.

Sarawat pauses the video then. He can't breathe, his heart pounding quick and loud, his stomach starting to cramp from the stress. He thinks he's going to be sick.

But like watching a car crash he can't help but un-pause the video.

"Come on Tine. It'll be fine. What are the chances its someone here? Right?" P'Fang laughs awkwardly to defuse the tension that even the lens of the camera picks up and Sarawat decides then and there that he hates her.

From his perch on the floor, Fong says. "Phi, I don't think this is a good idea. He's taken. He has someone in Bangkok."

Sarawat spares a thought to apologize to Fong for how wrong he's been about him and how poorly Sarawat has treated him out of jealousy. But his relief at someone stopping this farce is short lived.

"That person isn't his soulmate right?" The boy with the eyebrows dares to ask.

"I mean, otherwise, N'Tine's mark wouldn't be black. Way I see it, it won't hurt to know who it is but it's still up to you. You can pick anyone."

The boy tries for an encouraging smile but it comes off as snake-like. He can't fool Sarawat. The Sarawat, whose loved Tine for years and wanted to keep him all to himself, knows all too well that look in the other boy's eyes, knows the desire for Tine written there, as surely as it's written on his.

Tine turns to Fong but Fong gives him a shake of the head. *Oh.*

Only twenty percent of Thailand's population has a soul mark- a mere two out of ten and in this room of people the one in two is already Tine. There's also the chance that the other people with marks could have soulmates already. The chances Tine's soulmate is in the room is slim but that doesn't explain why the other boy would be so adamant that Tine do this unless-

"I.. I'd pick Fong but he doesn't have a mark. I don't know who else..." Tine trails off still looking unsure. There's a hint of fear in his voice that Sarawat isn't sure he isn't just projecting.

"Okay. Let's get this over with. Guys, show of hands. Who has a black mark?"

Sarawat prays that no one raises their hands but he's never been that lucky.

The one person Sarawat had hoped wouldn't raise his hands, raises his hands and no one else. *Fucking little shit.*

Tine makes a noise of complaint but doesn't say anything else. It's a rigged game neither Sarawat nor Tine are intended to win but he doesn't try to quit, doesn't try to refuse one more time. Instead, he sits perfectly still like a deer caught in headlights or better yet like prey frozen in front of a predator.

Say something! Get out of there. Please.

The other guy crosses the circle to get to Tine. When he gets close enough, he takes off his shirt unnecessarily. He's blocking Tine from the camera and Sarawat can't see what is happening.

It doesn't matter anyway. He can't remember a time when he wasn't afraid this would happen. That, one day, Tine would come to him, face happy but apologetic. That, one day, Tine would meet his soulmate and he'd say "Lets break up" and "I'm sorry."

Sarawat doesn't keep watching till the end. He turns off his phone, crawls into bed and prays he doesn't dream of anything.

He wakes up to loud knocking on his door hours later. It's three in the morning and he has classes at nine. He contemplates not answering, can't imagine who is looking for him that late but he can't not answer, can't be bothered with a noise complaint from his neighbors. He opens the door and startles at seeing Tine standing there. There are bags under his eyes and its red like he's been crying as if he's the one that ought to cry.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tine? Do you know what time it is?"

"You weren't answering your phone, again. Why didn't you answer? I kept calling and it kept going to voicemail. I asked Man and Boss and they hadn't heard from you and I was going to try again tomorrow but I was worried something bad happened."

"It's nothing. I'm fine. Shit, come inside." he says while ushering Tine in.

Tine comes inside but doesn't take a seat. He looks around the room while Sarawat locks the door.

"Did I do something?" Tine turns to him to ask.

"I don't know. Did you?" He isn't going to make it easy for Tine. He's still not over the hurt.

"You saw the video. Didn't you?" Tine doesn't bother to ask how, knowing better than to dwell on the inconsequential details.

"I did. Is that why you're here? To explain? What is there left to explain, Tine?"

"It was just a game. I didn't think they'd go that far."

"Just a game? Some random dude took his fucking shirt off. Tine. Just for you." *That wasn't just a game.* He thinks incensed. It isn't just a game to gamble your whole future away, not to him.

"Who was that even? Did you know him?" he asks barely able to keep his voice from rising.

"He's just some senior- a friend of a friend. I don't..."

"It sure looked like he knew you."

"What are you implying, Wat? That I planned this?" Tine's voice starts wavering the way it does when he's frustrated and about to start crying. But Sarawat doesn't feel any remorse.

"How could you think that?" Tine continues.

"He dared you to touch his mark and you didn't quit. What else am I supposed to think? Were you that desperate to find out, if he was or wasn't yours? That desperate to let someone else, have you?"

"Stop it. Wat." Tine starts crying then- too easy, always too easy. "It wasn't like that and you know it."

"What was it like? Tell me. Did you want to find out who it was? Be honest. Do you want to know who your soulmate is? Is that what that was?"

"I'm not the one who's obsessed with soulmates." Tine replies. He shakes his head and wipes his eyes with his hands. He isn't looking at Sarawat anymore like he doesn't want to confirm the truth of it all. Not when neither of them can take it back.

Sarawat pauses and wonders when it all became so twisted.

There was a time when the marks didn't matter. When they were still just them. When all they had to hold on to was a little flower ring and a promise of forever.

He wonders when that started to change for him. When it started no longer being enough.

He deflates, explosive anger simmering. He shakes his head and grabs onto his hair with both hands, now confused at his own anger and afraid to face it for what it is.

"Maybe he was right. I'm not your soulmate, Tine." he says voice breaking, admission burning his insides. "I have no right to keep you from finding out who it is."

I have no right to keep you at all.

"I'm not trying to find out who it is. I don't fucking care. Wat. I didn't touch his mark." Tine says looking him in the eyes now with conviction, all devotion till the end.

It should bring him relief but it doesn't. He's frustrated, tired and angry- not at Tine, maybe not even from the beginning, he's angry at an unstoppable force and he's taking it out on the person who least deserves it.

"You aren't mine. Tine." he says voice raw and on the verge of tears.

"You're wrong." says Tine, stepping closer to bridge the gap between them.

"I think we should stop." he'd step back if there was any room to go. "One day you'll meet your soulmate and I'll meet mines and this will all just be a memory."

"You don't mean that. You don't." As it is, Tine closes in till they're face to face.

"Maybe if we stop now, it won't hurt so much." It's a lie and they both know it. It already hurts, so fucking much, all of the god damned time.

"Shut the fuck up." Tine moves to grab his face in both hands and kisses him hard. Their teeth clash and it hurts. Tine kisses with so much desperation that Sarawat's lips bruise- trying to convince him this isn't the end, arguing *I love you* the best way he knows how.

It's not enough but maybe they could both pretend for just a little longer.

It doesn't end with a bang.

In the end, he was just tired- so fucking tired that all the fight leaves him and he's empty and spent. He's never needed to know how to give Tine up but he isn't constant, isn't all unwavering devotion like Tine is and before the marks, in a time that was simpler and kinder and without the pull of fate and the universe, it had been easy.

Now is far from easy.

They break up in the summer before their second year of university, a month after their last fight. Sarawat doesn't end it but he didn't need to- not with words anyway. He'd given up and he'd stopped pretending and Tine had understood.

Still, even if he could see it coming from a mile away, in the end, it still hurt like nothing he'd ever felt before and like nothing he knows how to recover from.

Recovery is slow going, not easily rushed. It takes him a semester after their breakup to get his life back into some semblance of order. Man and Boss help, loyal to the end, regardless that proximity to Sarawat has caused P'Type to send Man to the dog house indefinitely. Alcohol also helps, numbs all the pieces of him that are still hurting while he waits for it to scab over.

He fills up all the spaces he hadn't bothered with before. He takes classes seriously, does his homework and projects on time and sits in at music club as a substitute player. He'd missed the deadline of applications for full membership and has to wait for a couple of months but he doesn't mind. Man and Boss introduce him to the soccer team and they play friendly matches after class and sometimes during the weekends. Though prickly and obviously still hurting, he makes a handful of tentative new friends- P'Dim and P'Ball from music club, P'Off from soccer, and reconnects with some old ones like Earn, who he has no trouble getting used to again and who knows better than to bring Pear- who's always been more Tine's than his.

He tries not to think of Tine but inevitable there are days when he can't help it, can think of nothing else but pale skin, a lovely face, long limbs and vanilla. No one ever said it would be easy to untangle a life together, some ten years of love and dependency. But he tries anyway. He avoids all of the places that has memories of Tine, even his room in his family's house, opting to sleep in Phukong's during breaks. And, though his brother complains, he doesn't throw Sarawat out. He moves to a new dorm closer to the campus. It's a little more on the expensive side but his parents tell him it's okay. They all treat him with kid gloves, never mentioning the elephant in the room and giving him enough space when he needs it, and he's

grateful. He packs up all of Tine's things into a box and sends it to Tine's mother, not in person, just because he couldn't bear to see her disappointment or anger.

But it's the unexpected reminders that are harder to control, that brings tears to his eyes, that breaks him just a little, just when he starts to think he'll be alright. General things that he's associated with Tine. Like, Scrubb songs playing in the nearest convenience store or like vanilla scented anything or like cheerleaders passing by their department in uniform.

Truth is: there's not a day that goes by where he doesn't think of Tine, doesn't wonder if he's made the right choice or if he was a foolish, foolish weak-willed boy.

Half a semester after their breakup, he starts seeing other people. They all tell him it's too soon, that he needs to wait a little longer, lest he get attached to a rebound or something like that. He doesn't really understand. He's never had an ex before, never had an after Tine, experience or a backup plan for the one relationship he though would last a lifetime.

He's not as much of a romantic now.

He fucks the man from behind. He doesn't look at the man's face as he pushes in- quick, too quick and not at all gentle. He's all prickly impenetrable hardened shell now- the soft underbelly of him protected.

The man doesn't linger long afterwards. He's got a black thumb mark on the inside of his right thigh that Sarawat only notices as the guy gets dressed. The guy sees him looking, asks with his eyes if he'd like to place his thumb right there and see if-

Sarawat turns away- refusal radiating off his entire being and the guy doesn't say anything as he quickly gets out the door.

Sarawat thinks that one day, inevitably, since he's been making his rounds through the population of Bangkok, one day he might be careless enough, drunk on too much alcohol and grief that his hand will slip and he'll press his thumb to one of those marks, or one of his one-night stands will get too cocky with an urge to claim, doesn't read the *no* that radiates off his entire being.

One day, if they are all terribly unlucky, the light will come and he'd be irrevocably bound to some poor asshole who didn't ask for a soulmate who was still hopelessly in love with someone else.

The thought makes him sick enough to run to the toilet to puke.

As he kneels over the bowl and empties his stomach of booze, his mouth tasting of something awful and bitter he thinks to himself *only fate would be so cruel*.

He laughs and laughs. It's not funny at all.

Sarawat has a day dream of a tiny apartment somewhere in the city with all of Tine's things and more- a pair of toothbrushes- one green and one blue, Tine's ever-growing collection of skincare products mingled in with his very basic ones, Tine's favorite vanilla scented shampoo in a cubby looking cozy next to his, mugs with their names, matching slippers- everything a pair. Their own little cozy love lair just the two of them. *Home*.

In the day dream, he enters the bedroom. Tine is sleeping comfortably, afternoon light warm, casting shadows on that lax, innocent face. Sarawat slips in under the covers, spoons Tine from behind and Tine makes a little noise of complaint- soft before his breathing returns to its resting state and he settles back in peacefully.

In the day dream, Tine is shirtless- thumb mark on his right bicep a brilliant yellow green- the color of spring leaves that matches the one in between Sarawat's shoulder blades.

It's a pretty day dream but nothing else.

In reality, he meets Pam at age twenty at a coffee shop, one morning, a year after him and Tine break up.

He thinks it's her. She's the one- the soulmate that the universe had decided to gift him. He can see it in the way the two of them are so compatible- same tastes, same values at the core. It's easy with her. She slots into his life like she's always belonged there and fills up the empty space in him, the black hole that tries to swallow him whole some days.

In another life, he thinks he could be in love with her and it would be perfect.

But in this life- in this life, he loves Tine, still (maybe always). He's loved Tine at twelve- a child who didn't understand what love was, he's loved Tine at fifteen- ready to get his heart broken and risking it all, he's loved Tine at nineteen- getting his heart broken for the first time and he thinks that through it all, in spite of the marks and the pull of fate and the universe, in spite of the fear, the longing and his monsters, he'll love Tine till he's a hundred.

He doesn't touch her mark.

Somewhere, in the middle of the sea, thunderstorms gather, drowns out all sound and a sailor is lost.

God, help him find his way back home.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. I got a little sick in January then I got a little busy with work. Also, I rewrote this so many times. I kind of bit off more than I could chew with the alternating POV and multiple timelines. Anyway, after the nth edit I decided to have this chapter purely in Sarawat's POV.

The next chapter will be from Tine's POV and it should be the last, I think?

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Twenty-two

"So, you excited to be back in Bangkok?" Fong asks from a few thousand kilometers away, his voice coming in loud and clear from the phone currently balanced between Tine's ear and shoulder.

Tine is contemplating putting the other man on loud speaker as he unpacks his belongings but the speaker on his phone isn't great. He really should buy a new one since he's had the same phone for four years but he's currently broke- broker than when he was a student even. The deposit on his tiny new apartment alone had significantly dented his savings.

"Yeah, I guess." is his non-committal answer as he moves the picture frame on top of his work desk an inch to the right.

The picture is of him and P'Type taken a month ago in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. In it, Tine looks happy with Type's arm wrapped around his shoulder, flowers, in full view, right behind them and sun shining on their grinning, bright faces. He had been genuinely *happy* there, in that moment- more carefree than he had been in the longest time.

(Beautiful Singapore with its calm gardens and glimmering beaches was his Paris, his sanctuary.)

He moves the picture another inch. The placement still isn't right. He crosses the room to the small side table next to his couch and places the picture on it instead. *There, better.*

"Uhuh. Miss me already, don't you?" Fong asks as Tine is making his way back to the box that he's currently unpacking.

"Ew. No. I miss Singapore, *kaya toast* and so many other things. Your stupid face? Not so much." he answers derisively- trying to mask the truth with his tone.

In all honesty though, he does miss Fong and his stupid, annoying face already, but that admission would do neither of them good. Fong worries enough as it is.

"Rude. Your face is rude." the voice on the other end of the line snarks back.

"That doesn't make any sense. Besides, you'll be back in Thailand in December and you'll be bothering me with your stupid face again, in person, in no time."

"Mean. When did you get so mean?" Fong whines. "But, fair enough. You sure you'll be fine without me though?"

Tine grabs and inspects another bubble wrapped item from his box as he contemplates his answer. He overwrapped whatever it was till it was unrecognizable, like he does for all important and fragile things.

(There was a time, not too long ago, when he was too hurt, angry and heartbroken to ever think he could be fine. And a time after, when was just as fragile, just as easy to shatter that he had wrapped himself in denial and distractions- bubble wrapped to the gills, that looking back from the mirror was a stranger.)

He sets aside the unknown item for unwrapping later. At this rate, he'll finish unpacking next year. But, *oh well*, it's not like he has any other plans at the moment.

The long pause before his answer would have annoyed anyone else but Fong has always been a good friend- always patiently waiting for Tine to figure it out.

By now, Fong knows him enough to worry- has gotten pretty good at reading Tine's intentions and predicting Tine's actions before Tine can even execute his plans to completion, knows Tine's fears and triggers and all about his running. Tine's done it enough times now to make himself awfully predictable.

(Singapore was his sanctuary- his escape. He could have stayed.)

But perhaps, he still has it in him to surprise. He chose to come back after all.

And, while the choice wasn't easy and there's still a tiny tinge of longing for a place he could have easily fallen in love with and stayed, as he looks around his tiny new apartment and his gaze once again lands on the photo, on the small side table next to his couch, he's reminded why he returned in the first place.

There are people here to come home to.

For them, he ought to be brave.

(But Bangkok, Bangkok is home.)

He's done running.

"I'll be fine." He answers.

In their final year of university, him and Fong were lucky enough to be accepted into the internship program of one of the best law firms in Southeast Asia. Singapore was a dream, a new adventure, an escape from all he had lost. And Tine, well Tine was only human. A human with a heart that was still aching and eager to go someplace else, anywhere else but *here* in Bangkok.

(In Bangkok, lay the ghosts of a pair of boys at the playground and a promise of forever.)

Eventually though, he missed home.

Of the many things Tine missed about Bangkok- the chaos, the smells of skewered meat grilled by street vendors, the people with their nice, smiley and welcoming faces and the family and friends he dodged for the better part of almost three years- it's the traffic, mind numbingly slow on a weekday, that he missed the least. And so, for his first day at the new office, he gets up earlier than usual to avoid the morning rush and gaining a reputation for being one of *those* people- the ones who are embarrassingly late on the very first day. He isn't an Aekaranwong if he isn't on time or ridiculously early.

The office on the ninth floor is eerily silent when he arrives. With only a handful of sleepy-eyed officemates scattered around the room and the lights not fully turned on, the office is creepy, cold and unwelcoming.

Tine sets up his desk quickly, grabs his phone and wallet and decides to leave his tiny cubicle in search of coffee. It'll be his second cup of the day already but there's no one around to lecture him on the dangers of heart palpitations and hyperacidity with his brother on a business trip in Phuket and Fong still in Singapore.

(Once upon a time, there would have been someone else to remind him but that person isn't here- is still lost to him somewhere at sea.

Tine tries not to think of him too much.)

The walk to the little café across the street, he spotted on the drive over, is short and as he enters through the door, the wonderful aroma of coffee and pastries bombard him immediately. The place is homey with mismatched chairs and tables and comfortable looking couches and he likes it immediately- can already imagine spending his breaks on one of those couches, listening to soothing music and eating cake.

He takes out his phone and starts going through his work emails while he's waiting in line to make his order. The place is full of other sleepy-eyed strangers who are no doubt dreading the start of the work week and sluggishly going through monotonous days in corporate or government. He'll be one of them soon- less shiny, new and enthusiastic, more bone deep tired and world weary. He dreads the thought but accepts it. *Such is life- death, taxes and etc.*

He's reading a couple of welcome emails from the company when, out of nowhere, a loud argument breaks out from the beginning of the line. A middle-aged man in a cheap looking suit is arguing with a young barista. He can't hear the details of the argument from where he is standing but he can clearly see the man gesturing wildly to the cup in his hands. *Entitled assholes are everywhere*, he thinks. The asshole is holding up the line, voice getting louder and Tine catches: *Not my order, Unacceptable, Manager*. The barista timidly starts looking around, checking order slips and showing it to the angry customer but the other man doesn't

stop complaining. The argument goes on for another couple of minutes and the other people in line are getting impatient.

Tine contemplates just looking for another place to get coffee but he's already wasted twenty minutes and if only the entitled, selfish prick could leave, they could all just get on with their day.

Just then, as if in answer to all of their collective prayers, the customer standing behind the asshole taps the man on the shoulder. The man in the cheap suit turns around to face the brave customer and Tine watches the exchange with trepidation. He can't hear what the other guy is saying but there's something oddly familiar about him that raises the hairs on Tine's back. (He'll recognize it, as his sense of self-preservation, later.)

They exchange a few words. The angry customer leaves with a bright red face that Tine hopes is in shame. The other customers in line cheers for their savior. Tine, himself, claps quietly with the rest of the customers. *Thank you, God, for whoever that is.*

Momentary drama over, they would have all gotten on with the rest of their day unencumbered- the exchange forgotten and drowned with spreadsheets and document reviews and more work. Tine would have gotten coffee, gone back to his eerily silent office, gone through orientation and the motions of his first day on the job without remembering or giving another thought to the encounter.

But he's never been that lucky.

Their brave customer, their savior, seemingly surprised by his grateful audience, turns around quickly to acknowledge their cheering. He gives them all a little self-satisfied smirk and one dorky thumbs up before he turns back to the barista waiting for his order and Tine (never lucky) feels his stomach drop and his breath catch in his throat in horror.

The man had turned for barely a minute but Tine would recognize that smirk on that annoyingly beautiful face anywhere- even from the back of the line, about ten other odd strangers between them.

(Even, across the sea.)

Right there, standing next to the counter, now familiar back turned to Tine, and giving the smiling, grateful barista his order, is the man Tine tries not to think of too much.

Tine is out the door before Sarawat can even pay for his order.

When he's safely on the elevator of his building, empty carriage affording him privacy, he allows himself the freak out he didn't have publicly in the middle of the tiny coffee shop. He asks the invisible and immovable forces that be- *how* and *why* and prays loudly to all of the other gods and his ancestors that Sarawat hadn't see him. If the security officer in charge of

watching the camera in the elevator sees a mad man talking to himself, well Tine is sure he's seen worse and weirder.

He barely gets anything done for the rest of the day. His supervisors chalk it up to first day jitters.

(He blames the distraction on the confusing whims of fate and the universe. And, *of course*, Sarawat.)

He doesn't let himself dwell for too long on the one-sided encounter.

He's busy, anyway. There are new hire orientations, basic training, getting-to-know-you activities with the rest of the staff to attend, paperwork upon paperwork to accomplish and submit, research to do on the firm's ongoing cases, and a handful of people to inform of his return. He doesn't have time to think about Sarawat (not that he let's himself. Three years is enough time already).

Outside of work, he busies himself with his new apartment and unpacking.

His tiny new apartment, with one bedroom but without a washing machine, is bareboned with white walls and a patch of yellow water-stained ceiling right above the even tinier kitchen. Cheaper and smaller compared to his place in Singapore but with massive windows that look out onto the city, it's adequate. It's *his*. With some decorating, he could learn to love it.

He's unpacking another set of never-ending boxes when he sees it.

Tucked under a pile of junk, in a box labelled miscellaneous, is a velvet pouch- inside it is a plastic flower ring he'd thought was long lost (forgotten and yet waiting to be unearthed).

He knows he shouldn't. But he can't help it.

He wonders what would have happened if Sarawat had seen him. If Sarawat had recognized him, standing near the door, in his blue suit. Would Sarawat have left that counter to say hello? Would he have said something like: *Tine, what are you doing here? When did you get back? You look good. It's nice to see you.*

He wonders what would have happened if he hadn't run out so quickly. If he'd waited till after Sarawat had finished getting coffee and sat down. If Tine had braved coming up to him instead and said: *Sarawat, what are you doing here? What are the chances? You look good. We should catch up, sometime.*

And, he wonders what would have happened after. If a hello could lead to something more-to, arguably, something better. If a hello could somehow turn back time.

Stuck as he is looking at a remnant of a time that was simpler and kinder- alone (in an apartment he'd once dreamed of sharing with no one else but Sarawat), it doesn't seem to

matter.

In the end, he's always come up short- too scared, still.

If for the rest of the week, he avoids getting coffee at the shop across the street- his sugary, indulgent and fancy coffees replaced with the awful sludge in his office's pantry, and he spends his breaks holed up in his cubicle, it's fine. He's fine. *Really*. Why wouldn't he be?

He's not. But there's no one here to tell him.

On Saturday, his parents visit him at the new apartment. It's not unwelcome, per se. But it definitely feels like an ambush.

They show up at his door at ten in the morning- all smiles, hugging, *we missed you*, gifts of groceries and guilting. Tine cooks while his parents judge his apartment silently. If they think anything bad of it, they say nothing. They also don't say anything about the mounds of boxes still left unpacked. He'd gotten derailed the night before and well, he owns a lot of things (more than can probably fit into a one bedroom. But he'll worry about that later).

Instead, they say they are proud of him and he feels lighter, happier. He'd almost forgotten why he'd worried about seeing them in the first place.

But then, inevitably, they remind him.

"So, have you talked with Sarawat yet?" his mother asks while twirling her pasta around a fork.

Tine chokes on his mouthful of pasta, taken aback even when he shouldn't be. He pounds at his chest with a shaky fist and takes a sip of water to clear his throat. It doesn't quite work. It feels as though something heavy is blocking his airway and preventing him from speaking. He coughs to dislodge it.

"Umm... No. I haven't." he answers, finally. His mother levels him with a look- *I can see right through you*- with one raised eyebrow. He can feel his face heating up in embarrassment. He feels all of twelve again.

Once, when he was twelve, she'd caught him trying to sneak outside through his window. Sarawat was sick with the flu and their parents had collectively forbidden Tine from coming over, lest he get sick. When she asked him where he was going, he'd told her he wanted to sleep outside, under the stars. She'd given him the same look and the following day she'd driven him, red faced and still suffering from embarrassment, to Sarawat's house.

He never could hide anything from her. Never mind that he's telling the truth. He hasn't spoken to Sarawat but he has *seen* him. *Sorta*. She doesn't need to know that, though.

"Oh. I thought you might have..." she smiles pleasantly, deviously up to no good.

"Anyway. He's doing great, in case you were wondering."

He isn't. *He is*. Which is why he says nothing- letting his silence prompt her into continuing.

"You know he's working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs now? He's an analyst but his mother's been trying to convince him to take the foreign service exam in a couple of months."

"I heard, he wants to quit and work for an NGO instead." his father chirps in. Tine turns to him but his father isn't looking back-suspiciously intent on his plate of pasta.

Sometimes, he forgets that his parents aren't soulmates. That once upon a time, his father had loved and lost someone else, that he'd mourned his brilliant violet thumb mark turning white. But then, there are moments when they are so in sync, moments where they align and conspire against him that it feels as if they were the same person.

"Yes... well. His mom isn't too happy about that but she says if that's what he really wants to do then they'll support him." she says, now looking down at her plate too.

They speak about Sarawat as if Sarawat was only a childhood friend he hadn't kept in touch with. As if Sarawat wasn't more (more than a friend but less than a soulmate), as if Sarawat hadn't broken his heart (and Tine hadn't run away to a different country to forget him).

"You haven't run into him. Have you? The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' office is in the building across from you." his father says not at all subtle.

Of course, it is. The universe is funny like that. *It isn't*.

"Oh, and by the way, he's still single."

And there it is.

No, his parents aren't soulmates. But they'd met and like a fairytale straight out of a book, they'd fallen in love- regardless that they weren't meant to be. They had their happy ever after- a nice wedding with white lilies, two sons and a house with a garden.

(Soulmates don't always equate to love or happiness. Tine.)

In those strange, trying times after the breakup, he could see the guilt in their eyes. As if, it was all their fault that he dared love someone who wasn't his. It wasn't entirely. He was just as stubborn as they are.

But, he supposes, that was three years ago. Three years of running from Sarawat and Bangkok and then and they're back to this: to clinging to the idea of him and Sarawat, to daring Tine to keep hurting and loving and fighting.

He doesn't bother saying anything else, just shovels more pasta into his mouth and they sit in pregnant silence for the rest of lunch.

It takes Tine another week before he realizes he's being ridiculous avoiding the café and holing up in his cubicle during lunch. Monday, he enters the tiny, homey, shop with mismatched chairs, in the hopes of fulfilling his craving for a sugary, indulgent and fancy treat.

He hopes against all hopes, he doesn't run into Sarawat again.

But he's still not lucky.

He's turned away from the counter, cup of steaming, hot coffee in hand, trying to find a place to sit when he spots a familiar face in a corner and startles so bad, he almost drops his coffee.

Sitting a couple dozen feet from Tine and busily typing away at a laptop, is Sarawat. He's wearing a dark green button down with a tie, black suit jacket hung on the back of the seat in front of him, light brown hair still fluffy but slightly longer now than Tine remembers, face scrunched in concentration as he stares at his screen and he looks almost the same as he did three years ago and yet not. His skin had cleared up, baby fat on his cheeks gone and previously skinny frame replaced with some bulk. He looks older, just a little bit more mature, but still so handsome- *it isn't fair*.

Before he knows it, his feet are moving in Sarawat's direction without his permission. He makes it three steps forward before his brain reboots and he decides. *I'm not ready*. He retakes the three steps backwards slowly- hoping, praying to the gods and his ancestors that Sarawat would continue to be preoccupied and oblivious to his presence. He angles himself towards the doors and coffee still fortunately in hand, shuffles, *runs* out of the shop.

He hadn't really meant to do it. He hadn't meant to run, but he's finding that with Sarawat old habits really do die hard.

So, you talk to Sarawat, yet?

Oh god, why is everyone asking that? No. I haven't. I've been busy.

Uh-huh. You haven't run into him, by any chance?

...

Your mom says he's working in the building next to ours.

The hell? Why are you and my mom talking? Are you a spy?

...

Fong? Are you spying on me for my mom?

Don't forget the party on Friday. Pear would like me to remind you that she may be tiny but she can still take you.

What the hell? You and Pear too?

There's a group chat. Don't worry about it.

The rooftop bar, they all decide to meet at, is loud and packed with wild, already drunk, young adults, celebrating the end of a work week, but Tine spots his crowd almost immediately. He spies Man dancing awkwardly with an amused looking Earn on one side and Tine's brother watching them impassively on another. He catches Ohm and Phuak trying to chat up a group of girls, who are way out of their league, a few feet away. He sees P'Fang, Green and some cheerleaders in a cluster in the middle, playing a drinking game that will undoubtedly, eventually doom them all. Pear, who's probably been watching the entrance to the bar since they all got there, waves to him excitedly as he approaches. He gives her a shy smile, in return.

One by one, they spot him and cheer.

(There's a noticeable absence, somewhere in the middle. But for now, he's grateful.)

These are the people he's avoided for the better part of three years- all because they were privy to a life he'd once shared with Sarawat. All helplessly tangled up in their strings, it was impossible and unbearable to separate one fate from another. They were never just *his* people.

But as they welcome him, as if nothing had changed, as if time had stopped when he'd left and he'd returned to everything just the same- a picture frozen in time, every piece in the same place he'd abandoned, no anger on their faces, as if they'd understood and forgiven him already, he stops feeling the guilt he's been carrying for a while.

(He wonders if it'll be the same when him and Sarawat finally meet again. He hopes so.)

"There you are. We were starting to think you wouldn't come." Pear says when he gets close enough and she reaches for him, tiny arms wrapping around his torso, her head tucking itself to his chest.

If, at the end of the night, after they've all caught up and drank their fair share of the bar's booze, Man comes up to him to hug him goodbye and secretly slips a little piece of paper into his pocket, that he only finds much later, when he's home and about to put his clothes in the hamper, and the note brings tears to his eyes, well he can't really blame them.

The note contains no name, just a number and the instructions:

Call him, please. He's waiting.

He can't fault them for trying.

The way fate and the universe works is this: they place soulmates in each other's paths.

The way soul marks work is this: the marks pull and pull at two or more people till the distance between them closes.

The way humans work, sometimes, is this: they fight and conspire against fate, the universe and soul marks.

Tine musters up the courage to text Sarawat a month after he'd returned, a handful of one-sided run-ins with Sarawat at the café later.

(There were exactly three other run-ins. All three times, Tine had snuck away unnoticed. At least, that's what he hopes.)

He carefully composes the message, contemplates deleting it more times than he would admit, reads it back to himself, reads it to Fong, makes sure there's nothing in the message to read into and after several hours of feeling pathetic, he hits send.

Barely a minute after, he gets a response.

There's this tiny, kitschy café near my office- you'll like it. Wednesday at five?

He suspiciously feels like someone is playing with him. He tries not to dwell on it for too long.

The café is luckily or unluckily, depending on how their meeting goes, not full of people. There is no line at the counter and there are several unoccupied seats and couches that there is

nowhere for Tine to hide should he need the camouflage of a crowd to make an unnoticed escape.

Sarawat spots him immediately as he enters the café.

"Tine!" he calls out, a touch too loud, and with a raised hand, unmindful of disturbing the peace inside the café and strangers looking at him in annoyance. Years later and Sarawat still has no idea that he's never needed to do much of anything to be noticed.

(Sarawat still has no idea that Tine would search for him in any room that he enters- halfway hopeful, halfway scared.)

Sarawat smiles at him, small and encouraging and Tine tries to remember how to breathe. He gathers what little courage he left his apartment with that morning and makes his way to Sarawat's table.

"Hi, Wat." The nickname slips out before Tine can stop it. "Um... it's been a while." he continues as he pulls back the chair in front of Sarawat and takes a seat.

Sarawat just looks at him for a minute without saying anything and Tine resists the urge to fidget under that considering gaze.

After a minute, Sarawat seems to snap out of whatever thought he'd gotten lost in and replies. "Yeah, it has. You look good."

"Thank you. You look good too..." Tine returns, trying to maintain eye contact, trying to sound light and breezy and not nervous, "How are you doing?"

"Um... wait. Sorry. Here, I got you a drink." Sarawat pushes a cup of something to Tine and Tine stifles a hysteric laugh at not having noticed the two drinks before. "Hope you don't mind. I got you some iced chocolate,"

He doesn't mind. He doesn't need any more caffeine with his nerves already shot to hell. Tine takes a sip from the straw and lets the sweet drink calm him a little. This is still the same Sarawat he's always known and he shouldn't be so nervous.

This is just coffee. This could mean whatever you want it to. He thinks with a voice that sounds suspiciously like Fong.

"To your question, I'm good. Work is good. I'm working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs just across the street. You?" Sarawat asks.

"Oh cool. Cool. Wow. That's... great. I'm good too. I'm with a law firm and its also just... across the street. Happy coincidence, isn't it?" he stutters out sounding awkward to his own ears and hoping Sarawat doesn't notice.

"Uh-huh." Sarawat replies smiling.

Any other time and Tine would wonder, would hope. But, for now, he doesn't let himself- it's early days yet. He looks down at the drink in his hand and stirs it around with the straw.

"Do you enjoy working in government?"

"Some days. It's not exactly what I imagined I'd be doing but it's something, at least. How's working for a law firm? "

"Not too bad. Busy. Chaotic. But I love it."

"Of course. You're living your dream, Lawyer Tine. Next stop, Judge Tine." Sarawat says with a laugh- not unkind, not mocking in any way, just delighted, honestly happy for Tine.

It fills Tine with a twinge of something- melancholy, maybe? They'd shared their hopes and dreams with each other, once. They'd pushed each other's ambitions and planned their lives around each other, once.

Tine shoves the feeling back into the box, at the back of his mind, where he tries to keep a lid on all thoughts that lead nowhere.

"Aside from work. What have you been up to?" Tine fills the silence.

"Oh... nothing much. Eat. Work. Sleep. Repeat. Boring stuff. Some weekends, I play football with the guys. Man and Boss are still terrible at it. Better than they used to be, but still terrible."

"You still play guitar?"

"Occasionally. Not as much as I used to. There's this bar, near my apartment, I play there sometimes when I feel like it."

They make small talk, filling up spaces in between sentences and awkward silences and sips of cold drinks- coffee and chocolate, and it's a struggle. There are things Tine already knew about Sarawat, updates to his life that friends already let slip at one point or another, things that Tine already knew before their friends and family had to tell him. Their friends and family aren't exactly subtle with their meddling. Tine isn't exactly succeeding at not thinking about and not, ever so slightly stalking Sarawat on social media. But they keep at it, going through the motions, making conversation, pretending this is something it isn't. From the outside looking in, they were just a pair of old friends- catching up after a long-time apart, life having simply gotten in the way.

But they aren't- not ever just a pair of friends, not even when they were little (there's a little plastic flower ring to prove it).

The conversation goes on for a while, they cover the pieces of each other's lives that they'd missed being a part of- three years' worth in a single afternoon and before Tine knows it, the sky outside the little coffee shop turns purple. Soon, the sky will turn pitch black. Soon, whatever this is will be over and he doesn't know where to go from here.

There's still an ocean that Tine refuses to be the first one to speak about- an ocean Tine isn't sure how to cross without feeling naked, vulnerable- insides all exposed. It festers between them- a certain heaviness that Tine refuses to touch.

(Like: the breakup that broke his heart. Like: soul marks that will never match.
Like: Sarawat's Pam- the soulmate, he's known Sarawat's always wanted and now has.)

"Why didn't you call me? Before, I mean. You've been back in Bangkok for a month." Sarawat asks and Tine doesn't bother asking how Sarawat knows. His tone is light as if he weren't asking anything important but Tine feels the pressure of expectation anyway. And he hopes, *foolishly*.

"I've just been busy. New work, new apartment. I thought about calling. It's just been ummm... you know, busy. Lots of things left to unpack."

He looks down at the drink he's been nursing like a glass of scotch for an hour and stirs the melted ice water into the remaining chocolate. He takes a small sip to avoid looking into Sarawat's eyes. The drink is almost tasteless now. He can't bring himself to care.

"I tried calling, you know. A couple of months ago. When you were still in Singapore. I heard you might be coming back soon and I just wanted to... anyway, P'Type refused to give me your new number." Sarawat says sounding tentative, looking at his own empty mug, his admission hanging in the air between them and Tine wonders what it all means.

"I wasn't sure this was a good idea." Tine looks up from his drink to say it, trying for neutral not heavy with implications, with shared history and pain but if Sarawat can be honest, so can he.

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know. I'm still not entirely sure this is a good idea."

But I missed you and I thought of you- all of the god damn time.

"Okay. That's fine." Sarawat says as if he were expecting Tine's answer, as if he'd prepared for it already. He pauses to stare at Tine and Tine is a butterfly pinned under his contemplative gaze. "Have dinner with me? Saturday night, if you're free."

As if Tine could answer anything else. "Okay."

Hey, Tine.

Hi, Sarawat.

It was good seeing you the other day.

...

Saturday still work for you? I haven't seen you at the café since Wednesday. Just worried work's gotten you busy again.

Oh... yeah. About that. I was actually going to call you to reschedule.

Ah. Can I ask why?

It's nothing much. There's just this big case and my boss needs help with the initial preparation. I'll be doing research all week. I'll need to come in for the weekends too.

Oh, well. No worries. We can go for dinner next time you're free.

Thank you. I'm sorry. This was all so last minute. I was really looking forward to dinner.

Don't worry about it. I'll see you soon. Good luck on your prep work. I'm sure you'll do great.

Tine doesn't come to the café the entire week after that either. He goes back to spending his breaks holed up in his cubicle doing research and generally being unapproachable.

It's not that he's actively avoiding Sarawat after they had coffee. It's not that he's having second thoughts about going to dinner after he'd already said yes. It just so happened that the case came out of nowhere and that their schedules misaligned.

If Tine is happy that this gives him more time to prepare himself mentally for another conversation, he isn't sure he wants to have, well that's no one's business but his.

If Sarawat still texts every day for the entire week and Tine still answers like he isn't physically avoiding Sarawat, well Sarawat appears to be none the wiser and that's fine.

Sarawat sends him coffee and cake from the café, across the street, that is quickly becoming Tine's favorite. Tine finds it on his desk along with a note: *Don't forget to eat, Nuisance!* ☺

Tine bumps into Sarawat while Sarawat is running out of the café two days later. Sarawat gives him a quick smile hello and tells him he's running late for a meeting before he's bolting out the door looking haggard and tired. Tine sends him a sandwich and an energy drink along with a note: *Worry about yourself, asshole!* ☺

And it's almost normal. Like they're friends again, like they're picking up where they left off minus the relationship and the subsequent heartbreak that they both refuse to acknowledge.

Tine thinks it's great- better than before and this is fine. Being friends again is just *fine*.

Maybe this time, they won't make the mistake of mixing together friendship and love. Maybe this time, they won't hurt each other again. Maybe this time, it'll last because they won't be

lovers, they'll just be friends (and friends lasts longer than lovers and if they're careful- really careful this time, well-).

Only, as Tine sees a lunchbox on his desk the following day, the smell of homemade chicken curry attacking his senses and he eats it and it's not horrible and it makes him wonder when Sarawat learnt to cook when before he'd managed to burn fried eggs, and he reads the note that says: *Prepared with love by Chef Sarawat. P.S. I'll always worry about you, Nuisance*, he knows it's a lost cause.

The truth is- one that's brought into startling clarity and contrast and in spite of the many people Tine has encountered throughout their three years apart: Tine's never loved anyone as much as he's loved Sarawat.

So yes, while he's scared and confused and running is an itch under the skin, a bad habit he's picked up after *Sarawat* that resurfaces when he least expects it, he's also accepted the fact that he wants Sarawat. He still loves Sarawat (maybe always).

And it hurts- the running, the hiding, the not seeing Sarawat even when he desperately wants to.

So, he tries.

They finally get to it, two weeks after *coffee*. The night of their dinner date (*It's not a date*), Tine's a mess of nerves. He's still scared but also foolishly hopeful, both unsure of where this is all going and yet knowing where he hopes it will go.

There's a life boat in the horizon. He ought to stop thinking of metaphors- there are too many to keep track of already.

Expectations and possibilities had kept him up for most of the night before, but he conceals the bags underneath his eyes with makeup, puts some product on his hair to somewhat tame his messy curls, grabs a white linen jacket from his closet and makes his way out the door into the slightly chilly Bangkok night. He'll worry about everything else later, for now, he just has to resist the urge to run away and actually show up at the restaurant.

Sarawat, in a slick black suit, is already waiting at the table when he arrives. Tine feels somewhat underdressed, in comparison, in his linen jacket, untucked light blue shirt and white pants. It does not help that the restaurant Sarawat had picked for their date is a fancy sushi place. *Is this a date?* Tine wonders, again.

"Hey" Sarawat says as he stands up to greet Tine. Sarawat smiles at him softly as he pulls back Tine's chair for him and it makes Tine blush, makes him feel off-kilter. *This feels like a date*. Tine sits and tries not to notice how good Sarawat looks in his suit underneath the warm, soft lighting.

He looks like a prince- like something straight out of a dream. Not Tine's dreams, no. In Tine's dreams, Sarawat is sometimes hazy and out of reach, sometimes harsh and unyielding as he pushes Tine away. Tine used to wake up from those crying. He doesn't dream them now as often but he still holds onto that terror like it was yesterday.

"How did you find this place?" Tine asks, shaking himself from the thought, willing those feelings to subside.

He looks away from Sarawat and looks around himself instead. The restaurant is dimly lit with wooden dividers to separate tables- it's private and intimate with soft music and not too many people. *It's romantic.* There's a sushi bar on one side with a chef entertaining some couples. Tine tries to pay them no mind. *Because, this isn't a date.*

"We brought a couple of diplomats here months ago." Sarawat hands him the menu and he is embarrassed to feel relieved even though he knows he shouldn't.

"Oh. That's nice." Tine looks down at his menu, hoping his voice doesn't give him away. He distracts himself with perusing the menu for a few minutes, settles on a plate of salmon aburi sushi and spicy tuna rolls for sharing. When he puts the menu down, Sarawat nods at a lady standing next to the sushi bar.

"How's Fong?" Sarawat asks after the attendant has gone to hand the chef their orders.

"Enjoying the night life in Singapore. It's a good thing the university let us graduate remotely last year. I swear, if his parents hadn't threatened to sell off all of his things and turn his room into a gym, he'd stay there indefinitely. He'll be back in Thailand in December."

"Is he going back to Chiang Mai?"

"No. The firm doesn't have an office there so he'll be moving to Bangkok," Tine says, reaching for the glass of cold water next to him and taking a sip. "He'll probably just go home to Chiang Mai for a few weeks to pack the rest of his things and visit family."

"Oh. That's good. I take it he's excited to be joining the law gang in Bangkok."

"I guess... well he isn't exactly too happy to be moving to Bangkok. He'd probably prefer Chiang Mai or Singapore or somewhere else but he'll go where the firm is."

"Hmmm... sounds like he really fell in love with Singapore. Is it as nice as people say it is?"

"It is. It's not too different from here but it's *nice* ... slightly less chaotic." *It's peaceful. You weren't there.* Tine doesn't say. "The food's great. You should go, sometime. You'll like it."

"Maybe... for now, I'd much rather stay here." Sarawat smiles slightly and looks at him with *something*. It makes the fluttery feelings of hope rush back a hundred-fold and Tine tries to squash it.

Thankfully dinner arrives and they tuck into their sushi and Sarawat moves on to lighter, less loaded topics. He asks things like: *how was your week?* And *what does the new apartment look like?* And Tine answers. Tine talks about the tiny apartment that he's now beginning to

love, about the work that is difficult but fulfilling and everything he's ever dreamed about. He talks about his parents' upcoming anniversary and their plans to go abroad to celebrate.

They talk and talk about nothing at all and it's familiar and normal and like old friends getting to know each other again and it's fine.

Except, it's not what he wants or needs.

"Where's Pam?" Tine asks after Sarawat has regaled him with the story of his own trip to Malaysia last year.

Sarawat doesn't flinch or fidget, like Tine thought he would, when he answers. "Still on her tour of Asia. She's soaking up culture and enjoying the cold weather in South Korea at the moment," Sarawat pauses, considers Tine and after a beat continues. "with her boyfriend."

Sarawat doesn't elaborate further, only says it so casually- without a hint of guilt, anxiety or nervousness, as if they were talking about a common friend and not his soulmate vacationing abroad with someone else.

Tine doesn't know how he's supposed to feel about that.

Of course, he'd known about her. He'd been told about her years before that it's no surprise that she exists somewhere- now no longer a faceless, nameless, distant worry.

There was a voice mail, a couple of years back, a drunken Sarawat confessing that he'd met someone he thinks might be his soulmate. There might have been something else in that call but Tine hadn't listened for the rest of it- stuck on a lonely, eternal loop of "I met someone." And "She might be mine." He'd deleted the recording from his phone without really thinking about it. He thinks about it now- what else might have been said on that message.

It doesn't mean he isn't taken aback by Sarawat's casualness, though.

"You let your soulmate ride off into the Korean sunset with another man?" Tine inquires hesitantly, more suspicious and careful now that he used to be.

"Well... yeah. She's free to do what she wants." Sarawat replies.

Is that why you're here? She didn't want you? Tine thinks miserably but not unkindly.

"She knows where my heart is," Sarawat continues. *I used to know, for sure, where it was too. But that was before.* Tine thinks. "and she doesn't mind." *For how long? She's yours and you're hers.*

Tine looks down at his plate, at the few pieces of sushi left, untouched. He pokes at one with a chopstick but doesn't pick it up to eat it.

"Just like that?" he asks disbelieving and yet so softly, Sarawat might not have heard it.

"Yeah." Sarawat answers like it's nothing, like he hadn't pushed Tine away, once, for an unnamed promise of forever with someone else, like he hadn't pushed Tine away for the

woman now vacationing with someone else.

And Tine should be mad. He should be madder at the callousness- being pushed away and now being helplessly pulled back. But, he's not. Anger at the unfairness of it all was the reason he went to Singapore. Acceptance and fragile hope, that there was something left to come home to, were the reasons he returned.

"What are we doing here, Sarawat?" he asks just to make sure.

"You know I never stopped loving you, Tine." Sarawat answers so assuredly, imploring Tine to believe there is no other truth, except: Sarawat still loves Tine.

But Tine, well he isn't as sure. It's not as simple or as easy as Sarawat wants him to believe. (They've both got soul marks and scars to prove it.)

At the end of the night, Sarawat drives him to his tiny apartment, walks him to his door and says *good night, Tine*. Sarawat lingers at the door for a moment, looking as if he'd lean in for a kiss, like he used to do when he'd taken Tine home all those years ago.

Tine says nothing except *good night, Sarawat* as he closes the door in front of the love of his life.

He doesn't see Sarawat's pained but hopeful expression as he touches the door and makes his way to his car and Sarawat doesn't see or hear Tine's crying as he leans his back to the door and sinks to the ground.

See, the thing Tine tried to forget is this:

Exactly a year after they broke up, Sarawat showed up unannounced at Tine's apartment in Chiang Mai. He'd carried nothing- not an armful of plastic flowers, chocolates or gifts, not a guitar to serenade and win Tine back with, not luggage to indicate a desire to stay for tonight, tomorrow or the next, next day.

There were no grand gestures or a desperate plea to return from a foolish, foolish, weak-willed boy.

Instead, Sarawat returned the flower ring that Tine had purposely left on Sarawat's bedside table the day he left. (There was no need for a ring for a promise they couldn't keep.)

Sarawat said without words, having pressed the flower ring to Tine's palm, that he still loved Tine. Sarawat had said he was sorry, that he made a mistake and that one day he hopes Tine forgives him. He said, with his eyes full of longing and regret, that he wanted Tine back. He

said that he would wait till Tine was good and ready, as he'd closed Tine's fist around the ring and kissed the back of Tine's knuckles.

Come back to me. Come home. When you're ready. I'll be waiting.

And Tine was weak. And Tine had missed him and Tine had wanted so badly to pull him in, kiss and makeup and forget everything bad that ever got between them. Fuck fate or soul marks or forever. So, he had, for a single night, forgotten.

Sarawat had left in the morning but not before he'd gotten Tine's answer.

And Tine, helplessly pulled back with a dangled promise to return to a time that was simpler and kinder, where being in love was all that mattered, had promised, in return, to come find Sarawat again.

A month later, Sarawat had left a voice mail that Tine had promptly deleted and Tine had changed his number.

Several months later, Tine was on a plane to Singapore, fervently wishing to forget them all.

Another year later, and Tine, still doesn't know how to stop running.

But then, he'd promised, hadn't he?

Tine, I'm sorry to call so late... um...shit. I don't know what to say. I... didn't think this would happen but I- I met someone. She might be mine- my soulmate or whatever. Fuck... I think she could be but I'm not sure. Listen, Tine, I didn't touch her mark. It doesn't matter. I meant what I said before. I still love you and I'll be waiting for you, as long as it takes. Come back to me, please.

There are plastic red roses outside his door on Sunday with a card that says:

Morning, Nuisance.

He wishes he could say that it was too little, too late. He wishes he could tell Sarawat to stop, that he'd dreamed of this, that he'd waited long enough, that Sarawat should have done this a long time ago and gone after him instead. He wishes he could tell Sarawat that he'd spent every moment in Singapore waiting for Sarawat to show up at his door. *Something. Anything.* He wishes he could tell Sarawat that he'd been devastatingly disappointed, before, and he hasn't completely forgiven him just yet.

But in reality, he can't turn back time and he can't dwell on rewriting their history and what he really wishes he could say is: don't hurt me again, this time.

The café is full of people when he sees them, sitting in a corner, Sarawat's head thrown back in laughter at something *she* says. Pam is looking at Sarawat with adoration in her eyes and she's even more beautiful in person than in all of the pictures Tine had seen of her on social media. She looks at Sarawat like Tine used to and Sarawat looks at her like he used to look at Tine and it hurts more than Tine would like to contemplate in the middle of a crowded café.

They look good together and they should. After all, they're soulmates.

The soul mark on his arm burns- just like it did that night Sarawat had pressed his thumb to it and no light or relief had come.

He runs.

Hey, I didn't see you at the café today.

...

Pam visited. She's back from her trip.

...

It would be nice for the two of you to meet.

...

What do you think, Tine?

"So... you wanna talk about it?" Fong asks not looking up from his controller.

Tine is eating cheese puffs with chocolate ice cream in Fong's living room while watching his friend blow up the enemy's base. It's oddly satisfying watching the gore, pieces of people flying everywhere after the explosion.

"Not really." he answers with a mouthful of ice cream. The ice cream has melted somewhat and he struggles to find solid pieces of it to shovel into his mouth. He looks at the tin in his

hands unhappily and it gives him no answers to his predicament- only judgement. *What are you doing here?*

"Fuck." Fong exclaims under his breath seemingly letting go of trying to make conversation in favor of paying attention to where he's shooting. The enemy has him pinned alone in some back alley and it doesn't take long till his character is dead. The screen fades to black- 'Game Over' flashing in red.

Fong exits the game and turns to face him. "You want to watch a movie?"

He doesn't want to and he doesn't really want to do anything else other than eat ice cream and watch Fong fail at his game.

"Not really." he repeats.

Fong gives him a concerned look and after a minute asks "Not that I don't appreciate you visiting. But what are you doing here, Tine?"

He's not exactly sure and that's exactly what he replies "I'm not sure."

Tine remembers seeing Sarawat and Pam at the café. Tine remembers Sarawat telling him he and Pam should meet. Tine remembers being confused and scared and not answering Sarawat's messages. Tine remembers getting on a plane the following weekend and now he's here, in Fong's apartment, in *Singapore*.

It had been a knee-jerk reaction to what would have been a tragic situation but he doesn't regret it. He hadn't run to Singapore, per se, this time. He'd run to the friend who was there for the worst of it. He'd run to a friend who understood what he'd been through with Sarawat, who'd been there to hold his hand and let him cry on his shoulder that first time. It just so happened that that person was in Singapore.

Fong gets up from his perch on the floor next to the coffee table and goes into the kitchen. He's holding two glasses of water when he returns and hands one of them over to Tine. Tine accepts it gratefully and Fong sits back down on the floor in front of him. Fong's back is turned to him and his friend grabs his phone to idly browse through social media. After a few minutes, he sighs like he's steeling himself for a difficult conversation.

Tine looks to the door and contemplates making another escape which would be difficult seeing as he's thousands of kilometers away from home.

"You know, a long time ago, I liked someone with a soul mark." says Fong, carefully. "She was the prettiest person in my class and I thought I was in love with her. Scratch that. I was, probably, in love with her. I thought one day we'd end up together and get married. I had it all planned out, in my head."

He pulls up a girl's account on IG and turns to show Tine a picture. The picture is in black and white and the girl is smiling- not directly at the camera but at the person behind it. "We were good friends but she never really saw me. When I confessed, she'd apologized... said she liked me as a friend but she was waiting for someone."

He takes a deep breath and offers Tine a small sad smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. He looks back at the phone in his hands and continues scrolling through the pictures. "I was crushed but I got over it, after a while. I figured, since I didn't have a mark and she did, that it was never going to work out anyway."

He says it so casually that anyone else would have had a hard time catching the tiny note of something painful in his voice but Tine hears it, recognizes it and aches with it.

"I never thought to try and fight for her because I wasn't strong, Tine. I wasn't brave enough to try. Not like you were. I was scared and I kept thinking... I couldn't compete. I had nothing on her soulmate."

He taps on another picture and shows it to Tine. The girl is standing next to a man and showing off a ring to the camera. The caption below says: *Yes. A thousand times. Yes.* Tine's eyes burn and water but he refuses to let the tears fall.

"She's getting married next year. That guy, she's next to," Fong points at the man. "her *fiancé*... he isn't her soulmate."

Fong closes the app, places his phone on the table and turns back to look Tine in the eyes. "They all tell us soulmates are easy- automatic forevers thrown into your path. And we get scared, insecure or whatever. And some of us don't fight. Not against it. Not in spite of it." Fong's eyes speak of regret and Tine *can't*- can't look any longer.

"It's a mistake not to..." Fong trails off, voice soft. "Because no one ever said, for sure, that soulmates meant true love."

He knows. He's always known even when Sarawat wasn't certain.

He turns back to look at Fong and Fong smiles at him, small, sad and encouraging.

Love is a choice, soulmates aren't.

"And maybe one day, you'll regret it. If you're lucky, it'll be worth it anyway."

It's the answer he's looking for. It's not a guarantee of anything, not like soul marks or a love written in the stars, but it's hope.

Fong sends him packing the day after.

In the waiting area of the airport, just before he gets on his flight, he turns his phone back on.

There are eight missed calls on his phone and more than a dozen text messages from Sarawat begging him to come home.

When he gets back to his apartment, he sends Sarawat a message:

Would you like to start over?

Sarawat replies:

Yes, please.

Without any more thought or doubt or fear:

Come by my apartment, tonight.

The knocking outside the door is loud enough to wake the dead and Tine worries about his neighbors complaining for only a minute before he goes to answer it. Tine opens the door and standing outside, looking disheveled and out of breath, like he'd ran all the way from his apartment to Tine's, is Sarawat.

Before Sarawat can say anything, Tine holds up a finger to the other man's lips and with a smile says. "Hi, I'm Tine Teepakorn Aekaranwong. I'm needy, a mess and I tend to run away. I'm not your soulmate."

He moves his finger away and Sarawat stares at him, confused. Then, abruptly, he smiles and he laughs- loud and pleased.

"Hi, I'm Sarawat Guntithanon. I'm an asshole most of the time and I'm madly in love with you."

And they kiss. And its quick- a barely there press of lips. Like a first time.

Epilogue

The bouquets of artificial white lilies litter the entire venue and Tine spares a single moment to appreciate their beauty before he spots, standing at the end of the isle, in a black suit jacket and white bow tie, the man he's about to spend his entire life- the next hundred years if his mother and the flowers are to be trusted- with.

The music starts slow and sweet as he steps onto the carpeted isle and the guests turn and watch but he doesn't notice. All he can see is that beautiful face, lovelier than their white lilies, smiling at him, in marvel, as if the man cannot believe his luck and Tine cannot help but to smile back.

There are tears in his eyes and his palms are sweaty with nerves but those warm brown eyes hold his as he marches closer and closer and nothing else matters- not fate and the universe, not their matching *black* thumb marks and not their shared painful history or their many varied monsters.

Because, in a minute, he'll reach the end. In half an hour, they'll be married and maybe it won't be for forever- not like a soulmates kind of love is, but as he walks to the love of his life and later stands, in front of the altar, next to the only soulmate that he's ever wanted, he remembers, now, that it was all worth it in the end.

"Hi, my nuisance." Sarawat whispers low next to his ear.

"Hi, asshole." Tine answers back, shoving his shoulder lightly and pouting.

The minister clears his throat loudly to catch all of their attention and continues. "We are gathered here today..."

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap, finally! I apologize for taking so long to finish this but I got distracted with work and stuff. Also, it took me a long time to figure out how to end this happily when I left them so broken in the last chapter. Oh well, we got there in the end.

I hope you like it.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!