precious things

by thehandsingsweapon

Summary

"When I get away from skating, two L words come to mind, Life and Love. I've been neglecting both for over twenty years." - Victor Nikiforov

Victor makes friends with depression before he knows its name, grows up with the ghost of it in his bones, gets acclimated to the chill. He's a changeling's child, a chameleon; he makes himself into all the things people want. He's acclimated to his winter life, cold and stark and glittering success.

He has everything a person could possibly want. There's no reason for discontent.

That is, there's no reason for disconent until Katsuki Yuuri tumbles into his arms in Sochi. Suddenly the lies Victor has told himself about his own happiness for years are pouring through his fingers like sand and the things he doesn't have at all are thrown in stark relief: he has a career and no life; he has a passion and no love.

Or: a retelling of those twenty years of neglect, that one night in Sochi, and why the season that gave both of those things back to Victor Nikiforov was the one he spent being Katsuki Yuuri's coach.
Sergei Nikiforov is an idealistic young cellist when he meets Mariya Vasileva. He’s *prodigiously talented* according to his teacher, Yury Sokolov, who is one of the Soviet Union’s most famous cellists, and who is also down with a terrible case of pneumonia. This is how Sergei finds himself in the orchestra for the production of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, subbing for his mentor on tremendously short notice, agonizing over every note. He’s a tall, skinny lad, and he stands out amidst the rest of the orchestra: they’re all old men, dark-haired and stout, hunched over their instruments as though they’ve been formed by them, and he’s fair and lean, sandy-headed with a beachy smile. He’s exactly the sort of person Mariya Vasileva shouldn’t be paying attention to, because Mariya Vasileva is a graduate of the Vaganova Academy and currently a First Soloist with the Mariinsky. There are party officials tripping over their feet for an opportunity to woo her over dinner, to receive the graceful smiles of the Mariinsky’s prettiest waif, and all of them will make her prospects better than this hunger-frame boy. Except none of them have the brilliance of Sergei’s sparkling blue eyes, and their mouths don’t make a heart shape when they smile.

They always look at her like they’re hungry. Sergei looks at her like he’s at church, like it’s Easter, and she’s the miracle, she’s the holy one, *sacred*.

His family is adamant that she’s trouble, this dancer who has bewitched him, body and soul, and oh, are they right: Sergei spends entirely too much money getting Mariya gifts, goes hungrier arranging for their dates and trying to pick up on a few Western fashions so he’ll look a little less plain when they see each other. Mariya is striking, pale and otherworldly, with eyes that are icier than his are. Those eyes, glacier cold, are fixed on the Principal title, and the stage of the Mariinsky isn’t big enough for her. Mariya has decided that someday she’s going to make history, that the whole world’s eyes will be on her. She’s got a reputation, too: she’s a beautiful dancer, but she’s vicious to her rivals, with a mood that can turn on you faster than a winter blizzard. She’s the sort of person who controls the weather, even for bright-eyed Sergei: when she smiles he notices the sunshine more; when she’s not smiling, it doesn’t matter how nice the day is, Mariya can make it rain and clouds. He’s kinder than she is, gentle, puppy-ish. Forgetful, too, and a little absent-minded: maybe one of the reasons that Sergei adapts to the way Mariya’s weather patterns work is because his head was in the clouds to begin with.
She makes him think of every Russian fairy tale. Otherworldly magic is the only reason someone like Mariya exists, and maybe it’s why sometimes she’s not very happy, like a changeling, not entirely made for the life she has to lead in Leningrad. She’s always sneaking details about the West; reads about Paris, Berlin, New York. She pushes him to establish himself, to make himself into something more than what he is so that he’ll be worthy of her favor, worth the sacrifice she’s making by choosing him. He’s brilliant on the cello but what he really wants to do is conduct, and when Mariya figures this out, to her credit, she’s the one who makes sure he’s always racing in pursuit of that goal. Conductors make a lot more money than cellists do. Especially the best ones.

They’re really bound together by their art: it’s hard to see the way their personalities fit until Sergei is bent over a cello or a score, and Mariya is flitting across the stage, and then and only then do the ways in which they’re made for each other crystalize. He plays music like he’s an empath, wrestles every possible feeling out of his old, used cello; and when she dances, her body is the satisfaction of a perfect meal: she is technically flawless, perfectly composed, *delectable*.

There’s a day where he massages her battered ballerina feet so tenderly that there’s no going back. Mariya has slept with other men but Sergei is the first person she makes love to, and after that she can’t entirely go back to how things were before, and there’s a little piece of her that will always resent him for it. Love makes a person mortal, makes them real. Sergei brings her back down to earth. They get married with a promise not to disturb her career, even though he dreams of children who have her silky, blonde hair; so pale it might as well be starlight in his fingers. Sergei knows what their children will be like: beautiful little artists with dreamer souls, but he sets the dream aside; Mariya is a dancer after all and he’s her second husband, really. The Mariinsky comes first.

On Mariya’s kinder days, the days when she’s gentle, she thinks that it wouldn’t be so bad to have a son with Sergei’s smile, because even though her husband’s an idiot and nowhere near as rich or as recognized as he should be, his grin is charming and his eyes sparkle more than hers. She can’t always trust her own happiness but his never seems content to honor the boundaries of his own skin, and it must be nice to live life that way, instead of as a series of leaps and falls.

Maybe that’s why when it happens she doesn’t go see one of those back alley women about the problem and takes a season off instead. In all the old wives’ tales, the woman is the one who’s supposed to be basking in her goddess body, but it’s Sergei who glows, Sergei who pampers his pretty wife, who keeps finding flowers to bring to the nursery they’re making in their small Leningrad flat.

It’s not an easy pregnancy. They say that’s common, for dancers. Afterwards she hardly recognizes what’s happened to her body. Maybe that’s why the depression hits. It’s a good thing they’d chosen names beforehand; Виктор, after Sergei’s father. Birth doesn’t feel like a victory for Mariya. It feels like a death. When the depression hits afterwards, it’s Sergei who changes diapers; Sergei who deals with the way Mariya struggles to breastfeed; Sergei who keeps their life going when the clouds stay over her for months because she’d rather be dancing than listen to this invader of their household scream and wail.

*I’m terrible,* she says, through tears she doesn’t understand, and Sergei sweeps aside the curtain of her platinum-blonde hair and smiles that gentle smile of his, the one she wants to rip apart sometimes because she’s not a very nice person.

He doesn’t lie about who she is; he knows who he married. He doesn’t promise her that it will get better.

Instead: *I love you,* he says.
When Mariya makes it back to the Mariinsky she doesn’t make Principal. Sergei lands an associate conductor gig at the state university, which would almost be tolerable if it weren’t for the whispers of envy: this idea that maybe someday this man will be more famous than her, and only because his body was never the factory for another human life. That life is cruel is something Russian women have always known; she had simply almost believed the fairytales, certain that she’d be beautiful enough to escape the hard hand of fate.

The depression passes, though, and by the time baby Vitya is two years old she’s fond of him. Their son has his father’s eyes and his father’s smile, his mother’s nose and cheekbones, the dandelion fluff of her hair. He’s the best of both of them. Such a precocious child: he gets into everything, always wants to touch his father’s cello or their beat-up piano, tries to bend his body into the shapes she makes with hers. By the time he’s a toddler they’ve got him enrolled in dance classes, in piano lessons. Mariya and Sergei know the right people; he’s got excellent tutors.

It’s Perestroika, it’s Glasnost, and the world is getting a little bit wider every day. Doors that were previously closed are knocked open by Prague Spring.

Mariya doesn’t know it, nobody ever does, but she is dancing into the end of the Soviet Union. They perish together: the Soviet Union slowly, and more softly than anyone would’ve expected, with a falling wall in Berlin. It’s the kind of season that suits Sergei: blind, bright optimism. Suddenly the world is fashioning countries again.

Leningrad becomes St. Petersburg. Depending on your perspective that just underscores her point: to Sergei it’s a just, lovely thing; to Mariya, a sharp reminder of the way things get discarded.
Her career ends with a hip injury that just won’t go away, and it’s summer everywhere except for Mariya’s heart, and the little malevolent parts of her wonder whether or not things would be different without their son in the picture. It doesn’t matter, really, other than the wistfulness she gets now that she’s teaching dancers and choreographing programs instead of performing: after all, their boy is the child she sometimes allowed herself to see in dreams, and maybe someday he’ll be the one who lands among the stars.

It’s the grandparents who treat the him to ice skating, one day, and when a five year old Vitenka babbles on endlessly about how much fun he had today, his blue eyes lit up with Sergei’s joy, Mariya understands her husband a little bit more.

She is not a kind woman but she will give Viktor this, will go to great lengths to preserve Sergei’s light and trample her own dark.

Viktor can’t explain what he loves so much about the ice, though it never stops him from trying, all run-on sentences and bright, babbly answers about what I did today. All around Vitya other boys are playing football and ice hockey, but he doesn’t want that, doesn’t understand the glory of the brawl or even really hunger for the satisfaction of the goal. What he likes is the feeling of gliding, the way when his father laughs and gives him a little push the ice and his skates take care of themselves: like if the rink didn’t have walls, Viktor would be able to just keep going forever into the magical, fairytale land that exists in all the best stories, world without end.

So Viktor dances at his mother’s studio, and he skates at the local rink, and he appears in talent shows with a parade of other Russian prodigies: girls with blank faces sitting over pianos, twirling over stages, soaring across the ice. He wins them because he’s too bright for his own good, because he likes to show off. His attention drifts, though, and soon his father’s giving up on the piano lessons. Instead they’re playing at home, fiddling around on the old piano when Vitya feels like it: little duets when they can share the piano bench, something that feels like fun when they do it because they do it together, father and son, shoulder to shoulder, but isn’t borne of obligation.

He has elegant fingers for such a young child.

If Sergei were a little harder on him he’d probably still play.
In 1992 Germany competes as one nation in the Winter Olympics, which are in France. Midori Ito becomes the first woman to land a triple axel in Olympic competition, but Kristi Yamaguchi is the one who takes home ladies’ gold. Viktor Petrenko wins the men’s gold medal under the flag for the Unified Team, which makes a young Viktor clap and cheer whenever he’s on the broadcast: they’ve got the same name, him and this Ukrainian hero. He could be like that someday, he thinks. To a child’s mind the presence of one Viktor at the Olympics justifies the presence of another. Viktor Petrenko’s jumps are a little bit wild and unpolished, not that Viktor Nikiforov can tell (though he gasps in shock when Petrenko falls), and he is skating the same long program for the third year in the row. This is something little Vitya tells his mother he’d never do. After all, his father always has some new recording to play, and there’s so much beautiful music to choose from, all kinds of ways to dance, so many ways to do something new on the ice.

Still, the fascination lasts for a while: the next time he’s out on the rink he’s pretending that he’s at the Olympics, makes his parents laugh by bowing for them, like they’re the audience.

It’s nice when Mariya laughs. She doesn’t do it as often as Sergei, so it’s harder fought, makes Viktor feel like he’s won a gold medal when he gets the full blessing of her smile. Sergei, on the other hand: he laughs all the time, and heartily. Viktor glides around on one foot because it makes the both of them smile together and he likes them like that, his cooing parents, his first fans.

_‘I’m going to win a gold medal someday,’ he says, for the first time. He means it. ‘I’ll give it to you, mama!’_

One weekend Mariya has a surprise for him: she knows another dancer, a woman with a strong, proud face. Mariya doesn’t call Lilia Baranovskaya a friend because they were never friends, and Viktor will never know how much it hurt her pride to call on a rival to get to Yakov Feltzman, who is a former Olympian himself, a Soviet champion from another era, an up and coming coach for the newly established Russian Federation. Lilia has that coveted Principal title at the Bolshoi, far away in Moscow. To Mariya, who made it into the Mariinsky for a few glorious seasons, it’s a rival company from a lesser city. In order to make all this work, Lilia and Yakov are living apart most of the time, and they’ve never had children, so when she and Mariya look at each other, they each have what the other one wants.

Yakov is making up for it by training figure skaters, but he’s nothing like Sergei, he doesn’t coo, doesn’t laugh. Mostly he shouts and grumbles about how all these teenagers are making him lose his hair. Viktor learns his face in its hard angles and its various shades of red. Yakov trains his skaters from a rink that’s gloriously big by comparison to the one Viktor’s been using. He is magical because he lets Viktor onto that ice, holds the keys to paradise, is its gatekeeper. He is terrifying because he tells Viktor everything he’s doing wrong.

By the end of their first meeting, Viktor is in tears, and his dreams are well and thoroughly shattered, and his mother is laughing at him as they walk home together. _Silly boy_, she chides, _you’re going to see him again_. Over dinner, Mama tells him that all the best teachers are mean ones, which Viktor doesn’t understand; his father, as always, has a different perspective: all the best teachers have hearts of gold.

It will take him years to realize Yakov is both.
He’s in school getting barely passable grades in everything that isn’t an art class. Viktor’s English is pretty terrible, and he complains constantly to Sergei about how much he hates going to school. The other boys there don’t understand why he’s spending so much time at the rink, and they pull on his hair sometimes. He’s gotten into more than one fight, something neither Sergei or Yakov are happy about. Viktor’s secretly pleased when he wins. He’s a lot stronger than most of them are: they may think spending four days a week at a skating rink makes him a pansy but he’s faster than a lot of them and when he’s backed against a corner he’s a lot meaner, too.

Mariya shakes her head at his fat lip, on these rare occasions, scrubs him off as he leans against the kitchen counter with a scowl that mirrors his mother’s. You’ll be taller than me soon, she realizes, one afternoon, and she’s not sure how the time flew by so quickly. Mariya isn’t good with sentiment so she finishes up by scolding him about his latest English test: you should pay more attention. You never know what you’ll need that for someday, Vitka.

Yakov’s the one who has the clenching line though, the one that motivates Viktor enough to apply himself at least a little bit more: do you really think all the international reporters talk to Alexei or Viktor in Russian at the World Championships?

The Olympics change schedule, which is something Viktor doesn’t understand very well, but it means he’s watching all his heroes again in 1994 for Lillehammer: the new Russian flag flies, and champions are crowned under its auspices in nearly every contest except for ladies’ singles, where Oksana Baiul reigns supreme. That’s nearly good enough: a few years ago, her victory would’ve been a Soviet one.

Alexei Urmanov takes home the gold medal, and he’s a local boy who Viktor has seen around in his lessons. Alexei was born in Leningrad, too, just like Viktor. He trains at the Yubileyny, like Viktor gets to do sometimes. Yakov and Lilia both know him. In fact, they are together in Lillehammer, which makes Viktor’s heartbeat race because he’s that close.

Oksana Baiul skates an exhibition skate where she’s a swan princess that moves his mother to tears when they watch it together, so Viktor spends ages trying to replicate it. It’s an impossible, utterly flawed effort. She’s a professional and he is a child.

Years later, though, it’ll be one of the first tapes Mariya makes sure gets converted to digital.
Vitya begins competing. Russia’s alive with new influxes of music, and maybe this is why his short program is *Rhythm is a Dancer*, which makes his classically-trained parents cringe every time they have to listen to it. They have to listen to it often; Viktor’s taste in music is broader than either of his parents’, and he’s absorbing all these new influences like a sponge. Yakov selecting it earns him nearly as many points as the one time he took Viktor out for sweets after a particularly hard training session. His long program is different: it’s Rachmaninoff’s *Vocalise*, which is one of the pieces whose piano parts are simple enough that he can accompany his father at home when Sergei plays it on the cello, though that doesn’t happen so often now: usually Viktor’s so tired after school and his sessions at the gym that climbing onto the piano bench is the last thing he wants to do.

Lilia and his mother and Yakov spend the whole season arguing about his choreography. It would be wrong to say it gets heated: when Mariya is angry about something, truly angry, she freezes people out. In the winter of their disagreement, Viktor doesn’t win his first competition, or his second, or his third. What he gets instead is something different: little tastes of what this life could be like: he starts to know who the other skaters are, not just as names, as people, and there’s a buzz about Yakov’s newest student, the child who might just have the gift.

Maybe it’s because he keeps refusing to cut his hair, so it can get as long and as beautiful as his mother’s. Right now it’s nearly shoulder-length and Yakov keeps making Lilia braid it out of his eyes, Lilia whose braids are perfect and painful because the pull of her fingers is swift and firm. There’s a lesson in there somewhere, something about the cost of beauty, but Viktor is young and easily distracted and not a particularly good student.

There’s more fairy talk. This doesn’t surprise Sergei in the least. He’s always thought that about his wife; of course her influence would show in their son.

The changeling’s child.

Viktor does gets to travel to Hamburg, and it’s in filling out forms for the contest that his mother writes his name in English letters for the first time, because this is his first international contest:

*NIKIFOROV, VICTOR*

It’s a point of discussion between his parents; Sergei doesn’t think it’s particularly Russian, this subtle change. Mariya tells him that it’s a new world, a cosmopolitan one, and it’s the future that’s calling their son’s name, not the past. From then on, when he writes his name in block letters for forms instead of in cyrillic, he writes *Victor* because Mama said so. His life changes: he’s hanging out with other European teenagers, and ahead of him at some of the contests he can see the seniors, the
real competitors; people who will skate in the Grand Prix series or who will continue the quest for Olympic Gold.

He’s one step closer to that dream now because he can brush shoulders with them, because he touches the same ice a day or two before they’re due to step on. There is a gravity to this, like he’s a comet on a path and every day is pulling him closer and closer to the center of something big and deep and mysterious. Victor doesn’t know what that is but he knows he wants to get there; knows it’s where he’s meant to be.

The closest he gets to glory that first season is a bronze in one of the regional competitions, but he’s praised for his creativity, he’s figuring out his triple flip, he’s got a solid double axel, and he’s not like the other Russian men, who make their programs strident and masculine. When Lilia puts an Ina Bauer into his program, he skates it gloriously well for his age, doesn’t hesitate to borrow from Oksana Baiul’s program because there’s no shame in grace, elegance, or beauty.

At the end of his first season, Yakov tells him he’s done well. Yakov even makes it all the way through the dinner they all have together: Lilia and Yakov, Victor, Sergei and Mariya. His grandparents come: his mother’s mother, stubbornly hanging on to life, and the other Viktor, Sergei’s father; the one he’s named after. Victor calls him Deda. Deda has a rattling cough that makes Sergei look at him often, with a little shadow of worry in his brilliant blue eyes, but tonight they’ve all forgotten about that.

Tonight they eat and they celebrate; tonight the weather is clear and Mariya is smiling and it feels like this could go on forever.

He grows three inches in the offseason and his face is full of zits and the whole world is ending. Nobody understands this, least of all Yakov, who writes up a cheerful program to La Vie en Rose that Victor hates. In the meanwhile, Vitya has discovered bands like The Cure, The Smashing Pumpkins, and Depeche Mode — in fact, these discoveries are probably why Yakov has saddled him with Armstrong, because Yakov is nothing if not merciless. He skates to Vivaldi’s Winter in his long program and with his mother’s help he composes his own exhibition skate to Today, which Yakov actually allows because Yakov has been working with teenagers for too many years to not understand when and how to pick his battles.

Exhibition skates are meaningless. He lets Victor have this. If Victor wants to believe, at age fourteen, that he’s got pink ribbon scars and bruised angel wings, Yakov will let him. Yakov, Lilia,
and Mariya all know that the world is cruel and Victor will learn soon enough.

Another one of Yakov’s skaters, a girl named Irina, kisses Victor on the cheek midway through the season, though, which puts a whole new twist on the words today is the greatest. Victor makes Sergei spit out his tea when he cheerfully explains that he has a girlfriend. Victor’s next question is to ask what he’s supposed to do with his girlfriend, now that he’s got one, and he doesn’t get a very good answer from his father. Something to do with holding hands.

Later, it’s Mariya who discovers how incomplete this education was, who sits Victor down and tells him the way of things. She also tells him this:

*I love you, Vitya, but you are never going to be one of those Russian men who hurts a woman.*

Mariya doesn’t even need to make threats to be terrifying; it’s winter again in her eyes and he takes her meaning perfectly. *Do you understand me?*

Victor decides to maybe stick with the hand-holding part for now. The rest sounds hopelessly complicated. Yakov can tell him how many centimeters high he needs to jump for a quadruple flip, but he can’t figure out the mechanics of this. Instead they play around at pair skating, from time to time, until Yakov bans him from doing lifts in case he hurts himself or worse, Yakov snaps, *Irina.*

It’s a season full of immense highs and terrible lows and the only person who really understands the peaks and plummets of these waves is Mariya, who knows them intimately, who shows a rare display of physical affection and holds him for that one terrible night, the one where he can’t stop crying because triple axels are so hard and he’s so tired. *I know, baby,* she coos for him, and when he’s almost asleep from weariness, right on the borderlands of it, she murmurs something about how she’d hoped he’d take after his father, a comment that troubles his sleep but is nonetheless forgotten by morning.

They travel to France for the first time for the Junior Grand Prix Final, which is in Marseille, the whole family, and Victor lands the triple axel there, gets a very respectable silver. He’s below a Spanish boy on the podium, tan and dangerous with dark, dark eyes. The boy’s name is Andrés. Andrés is about a year and a half older than him and he plans on taking his time to transition up into seniors because his triple axel’s not very consistent and he’s got no quads. What Andrés does have is a crooked, boyish grin, and an awful lot of charisma, and when they take photos together after the medal ceremony he flips the silver strands of Victor’s ponytail and says in accented English: *better luck next time.***

Victor’s heart does the same flips in his chest that it does when Irina kisses him on the cheek but he’s got no time to dwell on his confusion because they’re spending a few days together as a family in Paris, and he gets swept into the rhythm of the city. Paris is a city that it’s hard to hate, and Victor doesn’t know yet that he should hate it, so he falls in love along the Seine, stares for hours at the statues in the Louvre, images that will stay with him for a long, long time. Sergei gets them tickets to the Paris Opera Ballet, and Victor doesn’t understand why Sleeping Beauty makes his mother cry softly into Sergei’s shoulder, but it burns its way into his chest. At their hotel, he pleads his way into phone time with Irina, who didn’t qualify and is back at home, tries to tell her about it, is too blown away by the city of lights and the fact that this is his life now to catch the edge of jealousy in her voice or the way she keeps telling him *I have to go now, Vitka.*

Before he goes to sleep he finds his mother and holds onto her elegant hands:

“I want to skate to Sleeping Beauty next year, Mama,” he says. “Will you choreograph it?”

It’s really not as simple as saying yes; they’ll have to convince Yakov and then Yakov will have to soothe Lilia, and there are other things on her mind: Paris, which is the dream that won’t go away,
and Sergei's father, whose cough is more than smoker-persistent, now; it's a death rattle. Mariya makes the promise anyway.

They’re back in St. Petersburg. As Victor watches the Christmas festivals he feels like he’s finally on the precipice of something.

He wins in Russian nationals. Irina takes a silver.

The World Junior Figure Skating Championships are in Croatia, and he’s looking up at Andrés a second time by a margin of less than two points.

They skate back to the locker room to change, which is where it happens: nimble fingers toying with the edge of his wrist, and Andrés’ teasing, mocking smile. He says something in Spanish while Victor blushes, and then kisses him on the mouth, nips at his lower lip.

Victor’s brain goes blank.

Later, he will wonder if he pushed Andrés away fast enough. His mother’s words haunt him, and because he isn’t the one who initiated, he decides not to tell Irina.

He’s told Andrés, though. *I’m seeing someone else.*

Andrés’ apology is flippant and his eyes are knowing and guilt makes Victor entirely too introspective. Fortunately, he’s still young and thoughtless, and he shakes it off in a day or two, already on the plane that will bring him back home to Irina, whose kiss is a gentle thing, a known quantity.

Comfortable but not surprising.

It's the last competition he gets to tell his Grandfather about. *Deda* passes away in the spring. Emphysema. It's the only time he's ever seen his father cry. Victor tries to cry but can't. It won't hit him for years, and even then it'll be totally random, years later when Yuuri is in St. Petersburg and he's showing him where he first learned how to skate and remembers that it was *Deda* and *Babushka* who'd each agreed to take him there: Sergei's father, Mariya's mother.

By then he'll be old enough to realize that the fact that he cries more often with Yuuri's influence is not a bad thing.

Right now all he feels is that he ought to feel more, and he feels guilty because, in fact, he feels less.
In the offseason, Victor goes from being a good junior figure skater to being a great one. He grows a little bit more; he’s as tall as his mother is, now. His hair is longer than Irina’s, long enough for her to bat at it in annoyance when he’s teasing her or to pull on when she’s irritated with him. He spends his summer chasing her around in St. Petersburg: they go to the beach and he gets to trickle his fingertips along the edges of her swimsuit, finds out where she’s ticklish.

He’s graduated from handholding. There are more kisses.

Irina is the person he loves, Victor thinks, but it’s Andrés who haunts his dreams, and it’s Andrés who he thinks about those mornings when puberty gets the best of him and he’s got a problem to take care of in the shower. It’s so embarrassing that this time he doesn’t talk to either of his parents about it; that would mean admitting that he’s got a problem and explaining the entire locker room fiasco and Victor wants to do neither of those things. He doesn’t have many other friends, actually: older skaters in Yakov’s club that he looks up to, and Irina, who he’s certainly not going to tell, and the other students at school who either envy how often he’s gone for contests or think he’s weird because of it.

Victor is so busy that it never once occurs to him that he doesn’t really have enough actual friends.

He’d like to think he’s come a long way since that first talk with Sergei. He’s traveled to fourteen different countries at this point, though his Grandparents all sniff about how half of them used to be in the bloc. He’s spent time with the older skaters, ones who he knows are doing more than just kissing because there was a scandal with one of the pairs teams last year: they split up mid-season because someone did something unforgivable.

Mariya has chosen The Lilac Fairy for his short program, and true to her promise she choreographs it, too, and Yakov sets his jumps, gives him the flip he’s getting famous for and the axel and even Lilia, when she gets over how outraged she is by this change, admits that it’s a beautiful program. Victor begs Yakov to let him make the other music selections, and Yakov agrees with some guidelines, which sends Victor into his father’s office at the college.

His father’s favorite cello suite is by Benjamin Britten, dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich, a man who Sergei’s met on three occasions and who he insists is the greatest cellist of all time. The whole suite is twenty minutes long, but his father plays it for him and then they spend a weekend figuring out which parts he can skate to and when they come back to Yakov with mirrored, heart-shaped smiles, Yakov insists they’re both crazy but he’ll allow it.

Maybe because he’s still puzzling out his personal life, Victor closes off the season’s plans by figuring an exhibition skate that he can do to Human Behavior, by Bjork. At the start of the season, there’s a new boy joining Yakov’s roster. His name is Georgi Popovich, who’s got blue eyes and ridiculous black hair and who is the world’s biggest David Bowie fan, or at least, the biggest that Victor’s ever met. He watches way too many movies, he’s bootlegging musicals constantly, and Yakov hates that he’s into glam rock and dance and punk music and because of all of this for a brief time he is Victor’s best friend on the whole earth.

They meet the newest addition to the junior circuit in the first contest of the year, a boy who’s already cool enough or whose parents are lax enough that he’s allowed to bleach his own hair. His
name is Christophe Giacometti and he doesn’t medal, but he’s got a great spins, the Swiss skaters always do.

Victor doesn’t see Andrés until his third competition of the year, and when he does he’s at the top of the podium.

*Should I get you back for that?* Andrés purrs.

Because Georgi is there, too, Victor escapes temptation, but he notices before he does his exhibition that Andrés is still waiting rinkside, watching with that goddamn, all-knowing smirk.

Irina breaks up with him halfway through the season because Victor’s winning too much or because he’s not calling enough, he can’t tell which. It’s bittersweet. He feels relieved because he’s been avoiding phones and letters while he’s gone, guilty and disinterested and more guilty because he’s putting things off. He feels sad because he realizes finally that what Irina has been all this time is his *friend*, his first ice skating friend, and now he’s lost her because he didn’t know that, this whole time.

What he does know is that in two weeks he’s due in Madrid for the Grand Prix finals, and Andrés is going to be there, skating to *Malagueña* and to a song from *Phantom of the Opera* on his hometown ice. Victor is in second place after the short program because that *Malagueña* skate is hard to stop thinking about. Andrés invites him to a party some of the other skaters are having back in the hotel and they spend most of it kissing on the couch.

It becomes very clear that Andrés has definitely done a lot more kissing than Victor has, Irina aside, but Victor is a very fast learner and he’s easy to please, so much so that Andrés is the one who drops him back off at the room he’s sharing with Georgi, breathless and laughing. This time he talks in English. Victor thinks this is probably not what his mother had in mind when she lectured him about his English classes.

To his credit, *maybe*, because Andrés doesn’t seem the sort to be particularly responsible, Andrés says that’s enough for one night. Andrés calls him a kitten, and insists that Victor go to sleep so that he can beat him properly in the morning.

Victor takes a very long, very cold shower. When Georgi comes in later, he can tell something’s up, proceeds to drag the entire story in all its lurid detail right out of him while they watch Spanish television with the subtitles on in English, barely comprehending what it is they’re seeing on the screen.

*Huh,* Georgi says, and later when Victor thinks over this moment he’ll laugh about it because Georgi is *such a straight*. What Georgi does is look pointedly at Victor’s long, damp hair, and then at the flower crown still sitting on top of his duffel bag:

*are you really that surprised that you’re gay?*

He beats Andrés by two points and this time it’s Victor who pushes him back in the locker room after the medal ceremony, Victor who’s learned from Andrés how to make a kiss into a collision.

“I’m gay,” he announces.

“No shit,” breathes Andrés.
At that year’s Junior Championships, Andrés comes in third, and Victor’s wearing a gold medal, and there’s too much press afterwards to really do what he wants, which is to find Andrés room and slide his hands under his shirt because he came to Madrid lonely and regretful and confused and now he’s a fifteen year old world champion in Cologne with a budding addiction to a Spanish boy who has a dangerous smile and an intoxicating kiss. He does get to see Andrés in the morning before they fly back, and it’s painfully brief: they sneak poolside early, and Andrés sits on the edge of the pool while Victor straddles him, and these kisses are thorough. Andrés drizzles kisses down his neck and complains about how it’s not fair that Victor can be both so talented and so beautiful. Sometimes he uses his teeth. Georgi comes to find him before Yakov does, because Georgi is a good friend, loyal and merciful, and Victor is still buzzing, floating even, before it dawns on him at the airport that he hasn’t even gotten Andrés’ number.

Irina sees his one of his hickeys when he shows up at the rink at St. Petersburg the next day, a chance meeting, and she doesn’t ask any questions before her slap reverberates against his cheek. She cries in front of him and he can’t figure out what to say. Later, when he tries to figure out why he’s so bad at dealing with people who cry, he will pinpoint this precise moment as one of the many reasons.

A month or two later he asks Yakov why Irina’s not skating at the club anymore, and it’s Lilia who tells him that she’s hanging up her skates to focus on ballet. Irina’s mother tells him not to call and her father turns him away at their house and Victor learns something else about himself, too: he can break hearts.

It’s not until the summer when things really shatter, though: when his mother and father ask him to come sit down with them at the table one day, which always means serious family talk.

Mariya has a job offer to go choreograph in Paris. Sergei, if he wants it, can pick up the conductor’s baton for the Orchestre de Paris. This, Victor realizes, is maybe why they spent those extra days in Paris, a year ago, why his mother cried, and though he’ll regret this moment later when he can look upon it with adult eyes, his fifteen year old self screams at them both and knocks over a chair in his hurry to get up, to get away:

Victor, at fifteen, is the center of his own universe, and all he knows is that Yakov is his coach and this is his dream and they’re going to ruin everything if they take him away from St. Petersburg, which is the only home he’s ever known.

“That went well,” Sergei says, after Victor’s bedroom door slams behind him. Mariya can see the invisible, frozen trail he’s left in his wake.
“About as well as expected,” she replies, which means, again: *I wish he was more like you.*

It falls to his father to iron out the terms of the truce: they are going to Paris, but they will still see him at every competition. Because this is Victor’s dream, he will move in with babushka, Mariya’s mother, which will allow him to still train with Yakov.

Victor lets Sergei hugs him, and protests through angry tears: “I don’t understand why you have to go,” he admits, because life has been fine so far, hasn’t it? His world has been big enough, steadily expanding, adding countries and contests and Spanish boys and all sorts of things into his orbit. Why isn’t that enough?

“Your mother has a dream, too, you know.”

He does know. But Victor is young and he is petty and at that precise moment, he hates her for it.

Chapter End Notes

I will be so glad when these chapters progress to the 21st century and I can stop subjecting myself to 80s/early 90s music references and making polaroids. [here's a link](#) that has a list of all the music references!
Victor’s parents are moving in a week and his father’s taking him out for his day off in St. Petersburg while Mariya frantically oversees the careful packing of scores, programs, costumes, and records back at the house. Victor’s been giving them the broody and silent treatment whenever he’s not skating (it’s been ineffective on Mariya; his mother is immune to these freezes), while trying to figure out how awkward it might be to ask around at the rink to see if anyone else knows how to get in touch with Andrés. It isn’t really Andrés he wants; he can’t imagine talking to him about his personal life. It’s that buzzy, happy feeling, like his chest cavity’s getting bigger instead of the constricting thing in his throat every time his mother reminds him to pack up his things because he’s moving in with his grandmother.

He’s spent a lot of time these past few weeks with Georgi. Georgi has an older brother and a little sister who has a crush on Victor that they laugh about right up until Georgi gets that too-serious look he gets on his face sometimes and makes him promise he’s never going to break her heart.

(That conversation goes like this: “Georgi, I’m gay, remember?” “Oh, right.”)

Georgi’s parents are normal, salt of the earth types, and for the most part his siblings are too. His father works for an oil company and his mother’s a teacher. Their dynamic is as follows: Georgi’s father drinks maybe a little too much, and Georgi’s mother nags him about it, and this is the bedrock which forms the foundation of their marriage. It’s weird for Victor to realize that this is what other people’s lives are like. Georgi’s father had never seen a ballet in his life when his son came home one day and declared that he wanted to learn how to dance. I don’t think anyone at his job knows what to make of it, Georgi admits, and that makes Victor like Georgi’s father a little bit more: he got born into this world of art and music, and so it’s impossible to imagine choosing something else. Georgi got born outside of it and his father, flawed and loud and drunk though he usually is, supported him into it regardless.

Granted he’s not with the Popovich family now. Right now Victor is with his father, hopeless romantic Sergei, who keeps looking around St. Petersburg with nostalgia already alive in his eyes. He doesn’t have to say anything for Victor to know what he’s thinking about, like: where is he going to find a proper Russian market in Paris? They both know Paris won’t crystallize in the winter the
way St. Petersburg does, frozen like a fairytale land waiting on its prince.

“We’re here,” his father says, and Victor squints at what here is before he realizes they’re at a veterinarian’s. Sergei holds the door open with his patient, stupid, heart-shaped smile. Victor offers him a look of idle disdain, copied from Lilia, and steps inside. Because he’s pretending not to be curious he tunes out the conversation his father has while kicking around the front room, and then they’re being led to the back, to rows of cages that feature cats that look like they’ve been plucked off the street and old or frightened dogs who sulk away from the bars.

At the end of the row something barks at him, something brown as sweet coffee, and covered in tousled fur.

“I thought you might get lonely at Babushka’s,” Sergei murmurs, as Victor goes to investigate. There is a brown poodle staring back at him, all hope and eagerness in her big, dark eyes. “A friend of mine at work says their son just —“

He’s tuning his father out again, kneeling down to investigate, and the dog presses her nose to the cage, licks at his fingers as they curl around the bars. Victor ignores Sergei entirely and looks up at the woman on staff who’s come back with them. He also ignores the subtle crinkling at the corner of his father’s eyes. Wants to shout shut up, you don’t know anything about me. “Why is she here?”

“A man brought her in a couple days ago. Says she’s gotten too big for their flat.” The words are spoken disdainfully, making it obvious what a ridiculous reason that is to get rid of a young dog like this. Victor finds himself agreeing with the sentiment: what sort of idiot buys a poodle and then kicks it out on the street when it won’t comply with the boundaries of their neat little life?

Oh.

It’s like he’s cut himself with a knife, and badly: it hits Victor hard, how much he feels for this abandoned, precious poodle, stuck in a cage that’s too small for her. The dog is his already the next time he looks at her, but he wants to play aloof for Sergei, wants to twist the knife.

“You can’t just get me a dog and expect I’m not still going to be mad at you.”

“Well, if you’re not interested,” Sergei hums, as though he’s got no interest in this exchange. “Of course who knows what’ll happen to her …”

“Shut up,” Victor snaps, and he looks at the woman, who’s giving his father a sympathetic look: teenagers.

“I guess we’re taking the dog,” his father says cheerfully, as unaffected as he always is. Victor names her Makkachin when they stop for tea on the way home, and then it hits him:

“Babushka has cats,” he says, and Sergei, who always manages to find the bright side in everything, shrugs his shoulders carelessly.

“As you’ve pointed out at least a dozen times in the last three days alone,” his father chirps, with a mischievous glint in his eyes that Victor thinks means he hasn’t cleared this with Babushka or possibly even with his mother, “it’s not my problem.”

He doesn’t cry when his parents head to the airport, when they say goodbye there; or not goodbye, but see you soon, his father insists, but when he gets back to his new room at Babushka’s house he curls into Makkachin’s fur and cries for hours because it’s not fair that whatever it is that Paris has to offer isn’t in Russia, and that he’s here now in a room that doesn’t feel like his because at least three of the shelves are featuring Matryoshka dolls and the mattress squeaks and probably predates Stalin.
Makkachin doesn’t understand at all, but what Makkachin does instead is almost good enough: she boofs him on the nose, sloppily licks his whole cheek, and then gets a pair of old socks his father knotted together to make a toy.

Yakov is not surprised to find him at the gym early the next day.

What else is he supposed to do with his time now but skate?

_Babushka_ is Evgeniya Kuznetsova, and Victor has never hated her house before, but that’s because he’s never had to live in it. Everything in Babushka’s house is old, including her two cats, and even though she doesn’t intend to make him feel like he’s always in the way, he’s always in the way. His music is too loud and too modern, and the rooms are small and crowded with knick-knacks and everywhere he turns he’s elbowed another bookshelf.

That and the cats both hate Makkachin, which means Evgeniya only just barely _tolerates_ Makka because Makka is his and he’s her only Grandson.

It’s a weird environment. Evgeniya tells crazy stories about Soviet years that he can’t relate to, has specific ideas about what it really means to be Russian. This is a house in which every old wives’ tale ever told comes alive: when Victor catches the flu she makes him lean over a pot of boiling potatoes and inhale steam. Evgeniya admits that she knew everything was going to be okay when Mariya got into Vaganova, but that she still doesn’t quite understand how it is Victor is going to make a living as an ice skater. She’s much more familiar with dancing.
Which is to say: she’s supporting him as best as she can, but between them is the divide of two different worlds; the one that existed before the wall came down, and the one he’s part of, the one that came after.

He takes long bicycle rides with his dog to stay away, collaborates with Lilia on his choreography. He’s mad at his mother so the invitation of last year hasn’t been re-extended. Lilia’s not thrilled with him, either, and so this means a few weeks of making elaborate apologies to catch her attention. *You always think you know what’s best,* she says, *why don’t you show me some of your ideas?*

This season matters. It’s probably going to be his last full season with the juniors, and next year the Olympics looms large in Turin, a dream he just might achieve if he works really hard and has just enough luck.

This year he wants to make a point with all of his programs, wants to send a message. Yakov endures this within reason, except for the one week where Victor’s insisting he’ll skate to *Rite of Spring* because the dancer dies at the end: “*Even you know you don’t really mean that.*” They argue about it, fiercely, even though it isn’t Yakov who Victor is mad at. He’s mad at people who won’t even do him the courtesy of being physically present to endure his anger. People whose voices crinkle over the phone on expensive long-distance phone calls. Yakov sends him home early and that sucks, everything sucks, and before he knows it he’s back at Georgi’s and they’re both listening to the radio complaining about *everything* again.

That’s when he hears it: *like any hot-blooded woman, I have simply wanted an object to crave.*

He bikes two miles to get to the right record store so he can buy this album, and halfway through getting his ear talked off by the record store guy about other female artists (”*what about Tori Amos? Bjork? Oh, you know Bjork!*”) he realizes the record store guy is *cute* and buys another five CDs just because they come recommended and because it lets them talk for longer.

He already knows he’ll be back, just to be talked to and smiled at. It’s nice to make a music friend who listens to music from roughly this decade, at least. The same can’t be said for Georgi.

He doesn’t realize it’s because he’s lonely. He’s the junior world champion, everything is fine.

*Uninvited* stays with him, though, and it becomes an iconic short program that Victor competes in an outfit he repeatedly has to revise with the designer, until it looks the way it does in his head. It’s
properly androgynous by then, black and red, mesh, big, chunky streaks of silver, something that conveys how he feels every time he thinks of Andrés.

_I don’t think you unworthy. I need a moment to deliberate._

When he’s older he’ll understand it was never Andrés he wanted: it’s about starting to understand desire — wanting someone else, being wanted himself. It won’t occur to him for years that a world away, _Uninvited_ is the program Katsuki Yuuri falls in love with him for while watching from Japan. When it does finally dawn on Victor (after they’re engaged, after they’ve moved back to St. Petersburg, even) he skates it late at night in an empty rink, just for Yuuri. By then, it takes on new meaning, the way everything else already has.

For now that’s a whole lifetime away.

His long program this year is skated to an instrumental of _Paranoid Android_ by Radiohead, which is one of the weirder suggestions from Cute Record Store Boy, but it’s long enough and it saves him from having to put something out there that’s classical. With his parents off in Paris, classical is the last thing Victor wants to be listening to nearly every day of the week. He discovers Yakov only lets him do it because of the pickup in tempo in the last minute of the song, because Yakov is a sadist who can coerce his wife to design devastatingly hard footwork sequences right up into the last hard stop of the program, which is exactly that: a hard stop. Like watching an automobile collision.

He plans a fun, funky exhibition skate to Daft Punk’s _One More Time_, because of all the music he plays upstairs it’s this stuff that makes Babushka grumble at him the loudest, and he’s inclined to be contrary. Permanently contrary. At school his reputation is shifting: it’s because he’s a champion now, a hero; because his confidence is growing and sometimes he sasses the teachers; because he’s too cool for his homework; and because evidently he’s developing good taste in music. Whatever that means. When one of his classmates, a boy named Igor, asks to draw his portrait for an art class, Victor agrees with great enthusiasm.

“You’re pretty the way girls are, you know?”

“Am I?” Victor can be whatever it is that people want, right now. He’s trying on an identity a week, it feels like. Sometimes more. For now, he tries on Andrés’ crooked grin, chases that buzzy feeling right into Igor’s mouth.

He’s in and out of the country for competitions, struggling to keep up with his homework. It’s easier to just not do it, now, especially when he can just lie to Babushka, who can’t read him as well as Mariya can. His parents show up for all of his assignments, just like they promised, which sometimes gives him a warm feeling and sometimes makes him boil with rage.

Victor never can figure out which one is worse.

As it turns out there are at least three other boys at school he can make out with when he’s not traveling, and two other girls he tries kissing besides, _just to be sure._

None of it does anything about the noise that’s building up in his head.

Andrés is having a shit debut in the seniors, not that Victor’s paying attention or anything — their contest schedules aren’t lining up, not that Victor’s paid attention to _that_, either.

(He’s paid too much attention to it. More than he should.)

He comes back to St. Petersburg after winning his first contests, after his birthday, and Record Store Boy tells him about an underground concert he ought to check out. Victor says yes without any
thought whatsoever. He already knows he’ll be home well after Babushka’s curfew; in fact, he’s happy about that. He wants to break a window climbing in well after midnight, *wants to get caught.*

Someone at the concert introduces him to vodka. Victor has had vodka before, in tiny, sputtering sips like practically every Russian child, but this is different. This time he’s out to prove something, out to burn the edges of winter away, so even though he’s coughing and some older teenager — one of Pavel’s friends, *oh,* Record Store Boy’s name is Pavel — is patting him on the back with a laugh that’s all sympathy he’s already gesturing for more. He’s a world-class athlete. *I can take it.*

He tells himself this all the way through the night, through bad decisions that get made in a bathroom which are equal parts exhilarating and terrifying. Pavel kisses very differently than Andrés does, in a way that would be nicer if it wasn’t in a dirty bathroom in a noisy venue. It’s not his mouth that matters, it’s his hands, and where they go, and the sounds he elicits while Victor mewls helplessly and clings to his shoulders before he clumsily remembers to reciprocate.

When he does finally get home it’s well past two in the morning. The lights are still on and he’s barely done puking on Babushka’s front steps before she’s calling Yakov.

Yakov has to hold his hair back for him at least two other times while Victor drunk cries about how his hair smells and how his first time was almost in a bathroom, a noisy, gross bathroom, and Yakov has to answer-slash-ignore questions about whether or not it counts as your first time if it isn’t with a girl or if you don’t wind up, *you know,* Yakov. Yakov doesn’t want to know about *you know* or how close Victor came to *you know,* but he gets to hear about it anyway, even if he repeatedly tells Victor to shut up.

Victor, whose impulse control surrendered the reins multiple blood alcohol points ago, explains in lurid detail how Pavel wasn’t carrying a condom and so they couldn’t actually fuck, and does Yakov know that everyone says the Olympic Village is a whole mountain of them? Condoms, he means. Victor needs to buy some to try them on, and he needs places to hide things from Babushka, because evidently this is a conversation he’s willing to have while he’s drunk with his coach but under no circumstances will it ever happen with Evgeniya Kuznetsova.

This single night probably costs Yakov approximately a thousand individual hairs from the top of his head. Perhaps more.

Victor wakes up with his first real hangover, and it’s a bear; he pulls the blankets up higher and tries
to get swallowed by his rickety twin bed. There’s a point in the afternoon where his grandmother comes in and opens the curtains with a vengeance and he seriously wishes for death.

The week after that, Babushka gets a call from Victor’s school about his grades, and if he was in trouble before, he’s really in for it now.

He hangs up on Sergei when his parents try and call to sort it out, and two days later when he’s getting ready for practice he steps outside and Yakov’s car is out front. They are pointedly not talking about the incident in the bathroom — either bathroom, really, something Victor assumes is some kind of gentleman’s agreement whereby Yakov will allow him to move along with his life and perhaps make some quieter mistakes with a slightly smaller amount of alcohol. Victor only remembers it in flashes, anyhow; remembers puking, knows that Yakov got him into bed and didn’t do too much yelling. He has blacked out the mountain of condoms conversation entirely, which is something Yakov probably wishes he could do, but Yakov doesn’t really drink anymore.

With the skaters he manages, if he started drinking again, he’d probably never stop.

“We’re doing something different today,” Yakov says, and opens the door. “Get in.”

Something different is a house that Yakov lets him into and a stranger who he introduces as Vasily Semenov, an older man with a beard. Vasily blinks owlishly and patiently at him from behind a pair of round, tortoise-shell glasses and he wears one of those tweed sports blazers that probably should never have been in style. Vasily, Victor comes to find out, is a therapist.

“No fucking way am I seeing a shrink,” Victor declares, trying out a curse word on his coach for the first time because after The Bathroom Incident he doesn’t really need to be concerned about shame.

“That’s fine,” Yakov says, and Victor knows he’s in trouble because nothing is ever just fine with Yakov. Yakov hits him with the ultimatum right then and there: Victor is too good, he says, too much of a natural to start trying to throw his talent away just because he can’t keep his own head on straight. They’re going to nip this in the bud, before the Olympics, before his senior debut. “You’re seeing a shrink or you’re not seeing my rink, Vitya,” Yakov says, and Victor scowls and shouts back that’s fine, that he doesn’t need a rink or a coach or anything for that matter.

“Same time next week?” He hears Vasily ask, just before he slams the door behind him. He makes it all of 48 hours grounded at Babushka’s, only allowed to leave the house to walk Makkachin and therefore unable to take any of his outrage out on Pavel, on Igor, on any convenient and willing body — before he surrenders.

He misses the rink too much, more than he misses his parents or Pavel or Igor or Georgi or anyone, really. The first time he gets back out on it, just to do laps on the ice, it dawns on him that in the middle of their argument, Yakov called him Vitya for the first time, almost like he’s a son.

It doesn’t happen again. Not for a long time.
This image is no longer available. Visit tinypic.com for more information.
He wins Russian Nationals for a second time and he makes it to Worlds, of course.

Andrés isn’t there. His parents are, and maybe because he’s been talking to Vasily about them for a good month now he doesn’t flinch away from Mariya’s hug. Instead he talks to her over dinner about how he and Lilia worked together on the choreography this time, and she looks at him with a piercing, all-seeing gaze and wants to know what he was thinking about when he worked on the *Uninvited* program.

Sergei’s not mad that he’s using modern music; he thinks these Radiohead people are interesting, if more than somewhat unintelligible. *It’s very postmodern, somehow*, his father assures him, which
just makes Victor laugh and shake his head, the first time he’s laughed with his parents all year long.

It feels a little bit like something gets lifted off of his chest, and at the end of that night, he asks his mother to come for a walk with him. He doesn’t tell her the whole story about Uninvited, he can’t. What he does tell her is what his head gets like, sometimes, the way his thoughts knot in on themselves until he’s a little bit unrecognizable to himself.

Like Sergei, she doesn’t tell him it’s going to get better. Oh, Vitya, she says, and she touches his chin, has to reach up to do it now — he’s taller. Like his father. I know.

He goes to visit his parents in the summer at the Paris flat for three weeks. Back in St. Petersburg, Georgi has promised to spare Makkachin from Babushka and the cats.

Georgi is a good friend.

After almost a year with his grandmother the Paris flat feels foreign because it’s so neat. Paris has an aesthetic and even his Russian parents have fallen victim to it. The guest room bed is bigger than what he sleeps on back in St. Petersburg, and it definitely doesn’t squeak. They’ve tried to decorate the room for him a little bit, make it something that feels like it’s saved for him, but because he didn’t do it, it feels a little artificial. Victor sleeps uneasy because he doesn’t really understand where home is now.

Together, though, they go all over the city again. Even better, they take him deep into the heart of the Palais Garnier and the Salle Pleyel, walk him through all the secret places in these concert halls that nobody else gets to see. Victor gets to look at stage rigging and the costumes workshop at the ballet, watches the way his mother’s eyes light up when she talks about the choreography they’re planning for the next season, the way she laughs more often and keeps touching his father’s shoulder.

His father is rushing over his shoes, opening doors for her again, catching her hand while she walks up and down the stairs. They’re happy, he realizes, and he wants to be happy for them but can’t quite manage it, because they get all this, and he gets the room with the nesting dolls and the Stalin mattress and the confused, barbed thing that is his heart.

Besides, something about them is different, something he can’t quite puzzle out.

At the end of the first day they sit him down again for family talk.
“I want you to understand that this is a big surprise for us,” his father says slowly, and they’ve each taken hold of one of Victor’s hands to steady themselves, or him, he can’t tell which, from the reaction that they’re both expecting.

Mariya is pregnant.

He’s sixteen years old and he’s going to be a big brother.

The noise in Victor’s head grows teeth and roars.

Later, a lot later, after he’s had time to think about it and when he catches his thoughts doing that thing that they do, Victor decides that it’s either a phone call or the liquor cabinet — he’s already mapped out the Paris apartment, he knows exactly where it is.

Why settle for one when you can have both? Sergei catches him three shots in when he demands to use the phone, has to talk to Vasily somehow. It’s summer and somehow the whole world is shrinking in on one very shadowy, dim place. This is what they pay Vasily for, to get him out of this sinkhole, to pull him out of the dark; this is what they pay him for:

“Breathe, Victor. Breathe.”

When he gets home, Babushka has a computer hooked up to one of those old secretary desks, so big
that it barely fits. It’s a monstrosity, she says, ugly, and she hates the sound the dial up makes until it
connects: wheeeeee-wheeee-beep-beep-wheee-blip. It’s also very expensive, she says, and so he ought to be grateful for his parents and their fancy French jobs. He does not want to think about, or talk about, either of his parents or their fancy French jobs. Evgeniya thinks everything is expensive in this new post-Soviet world. Not that it wasn’t bad before. Now there’s just a dozen more countries to blame or something. Who’s keeping count? Certainly not his grandmother, who struggles to keep up with her two cats and Victor’s lies about school.

She asks if he’s excited about having a baby sister and he calls her a hag, like Baba Yaga, and gets grounded for a week again before he can actually use the computer. He doesn’t feel grateful, but he and Georgi use it for hours. Georgi saves up his allowance to buy games for it, games he gets to play while Victor does his homework under Babushka’s newly alerted hawk-eyes. Eventually it dawns on him that there might be a website for skaters, which there is, and it’s terrible, and it doesn’t connect him to Andrés directly but it inadvertently connects him to someone who can do the rest.

He’s nearly breathless with anticipation when he can finally make that call.

“You had a good season last year,” Andrés notes, and this time Victor can hear the envy he’d been blind to with Irina.

“Did you see my short program?”

“Victor,” Andrés growls, exasperated, “everyone saw your short program.”

This isn’t going at all the way Victor’s imagined it so many times, and his irritation makes him bold. “I want to see you next season,” he says. “Tell me how we make that happen.”

“I guess you better make sure you qualify for Turin,” quips Andrés blithely, which nearly makes Victor ask how Andrés, with his 25% landing ratio on triple axels, is so sure that he’s going to be there. But of course he will be: there’s not another option for Spain.

“I’ll be at Turin,” Victor says back. “Hopefully you get to skate a long program.”

There’s no guarantee Victor will get to skate a long program, but he’s got a better shot at it than Andrés does, which is a pleasant surprise. Andrés laughs and it isn’t a nice laugh. “You’re a dick,” he says, and it’s so validating, to finally have someone in his life who will call him terrible properly. “So are you.”
“I talked to Andrés finally,” Victor tells Vasily that week at therapy. Vasily knows about Andrés because Victor spent the first session together being petulant and curt, and the second trying to be as scandalous as possible, which almost certainly played out in Vasily’s favor.

“How was it?” Vasily asks, with the professional disinterest that makes it easy to forget that his job is to literally rearrange all of Victor’s twisty insides.

“Not what I expected,” He admits, because Vasily’s study is a place where it’s okay to give voice to his dissatisfaction. Vasily doesn’t judge him for his unhappiness. Victor knows Vasily is about to ask him why, so he pre-empts the question. “He’s pissed that I won last season,” he murmurs. “Like how Irina used to get.”

They’ve talked about Irina, too, enough that Vasily can raise an eyebrow at him, skeptical. “Just like that?” He inquires, and Victor sighs heavily. There is an ocean of difference between these two people and they both know it.

“No.” Irina wanted him to pay more attention to her, might’ve been a little jealous but never once rooted for him to fail. He thinks about that, the attention part, and thinks about Andrés and realizes he’s been acting the same way, smitten and maybe a little bit pathetic, if he’s perfectly honest. His blue eyes flicker over to Vasily, who knows when to sit still and when to wait. “But he is jealous,” Victor insists.

“Are you a better skater than he is?” Vasily asks. There’s something about how Vasily talks that is different than other people. It always cuts to the heart of the matter. Vasily doesn’t ask do you think you’re a better skater than he is. He never equivocates. They’ve had sessions before where Victor’s raged about how he hates his mother and Vasily hasn’t even blinked; always gives feelings their due, even when they’re illogical and irrational: what does it feel like, to hate your mother?

(That they both know that Victor doesn’t actually hate his mother is irrelevant.)

“Yes.” He’s a better skater than Georgi, too. It’s strange to admit it, to acknowledge the little bit of gulf that separates him from everyone else his age, even the ones he ought to have the most in common with.

“Mm.” Vasily hums to himself for a moment. “Wouldn’t you rather spend your time with someone who’s happy for you?”

Victor considers his options. He’s never told Pavel that he’s a skater. Igor’s too star-struck, can’t actually relate. Andrés, at least, comes from the same world, even if the implication is laid bare: wouldn’t you rather spend time with someone who’s good for you?

“I guess,” he agrees, equivocating, and then he smirks over at Vasily: “Why, have you been sitting on some skating nephew with a heart of gold this whole time?”

“Would you want to be introduced, if I was?” Vasily counters.

“No.” Victor exhales again. “It’d feel contrived.” They both know his appetite for surprise, the way he hungers for the unpredictable.

That’s part of the problem.
His music choices are suddenly very narrow. It’s an Olympic year and Yakov won’t take any chances, doesn’t want to encourage any of what he calls Victor’s nonsense. He and Georgi shut themselves in for a weekend at Babushka’s house to sort through a whole host of classical options, and putting record after record on is probably the happiest Victor’s seen her in his presence in months. It’s not coincidental: taking notes on old recordings on a Saturday is also the tamest he’s behaved in any week since his return from Paris.

For the short program he eventually picks the first movement of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, something Victor can almost play himself when he tinkers at a piano, although he can’t evoke the right emotions out of the instrument at all, and he’s a clumsy, ugly player. It’s his body that he can use for feeling. That’s where his real proficiency lies. The long program comes together to Saint-Saëns’ Bacchanale, which thankfully at least is twisty and intricate enough that Victor can set the churn of his thoughts to it. It’s an exotic sounding song, too, with a clack of castanets and big, loud percussion that makes him think of Spain. Like Victor, it’s a song that doesn’t seem to quite know what it wants to be, a whole host of gorgeous contradictions. He and Lilia have to pick through recordings to find one a little slower than average so he’s not tripping over himself to skate it.

Nonetheless, he skates it with a sense of urgency, headed into something mad and dark, and because it’s the Olympics, Yakov lets him debut a jump he hasn’t been allowed to use before, his first quad, choreographed right as the song gets big and expansive and drifts into a major key. Lilia writes a full-ice step sequence after that which is designed, Victor thinks, to put him out of his misery early. He jokes about how after skating it his parents will wind up still having a one child family and nobody laughs about that. After a few months he stops joking about the pregnancy at all: apparently it’s a difficult one, and when his father calls he can tell he’s trying not to talk about the extra doctor’s appointments. Sergei always fails at that: he’s worried about his wife, about his daughter. That’s news: Victor is going to be a brother who has a sister.

Something about that softens him a little bit, makes the locks around his chest loosen up a little. There’s a chance Mariya might be on bed rest by the Olympics, which Victor admits isn’t what he wants. They’re in February, just before the baby is due. He hopes that’s not how things play out. Catches himself hoping his sister comes on time, and healthy. One day he even asks what names they’re thinking about.

(“You’ve been busy lately,” Pavel notes on a free weekend, when Victor sneaks out to another one of those concerts, takes a little more care with his alcohol. Yeah, says Victor, who’s not drunk enough to be forthcoming with facts, and doesn’t know how to begin at this point anyway. Sorry. There’s been a lot going on.)
He is not the best skater in Russia. Evgeni Plushenko is. Plushenko is someone he knows, through Yakov, but doesn’t understand: he’s stoic and he’s got his shit together and for those two reasons alone Victor can’t relate to him. He’s not even really sure if he’s the second best skater in Russia but somehow he squeaks into qualifications and before Victor knows it, Georgi is hanging out in his room while he packs up his suitcase for the Games.

Victor thinks about the way Andrés was jealous, but Georgi has a fundamentally good heart, wishes him good luck and then even shows him the gift he’s gotten him for the journey: a couple new CDs, and a pair of new headphones.

He is seventeen years old, and he is going to the Olympics.

Babushka travels with him, this time, and Victor has to hide his laughter over the skeptical manner in which she boards the plane. She grips the armrest with bone-white hands the whole way to Turin.

He writes about it in a brand new notebook Vasily’s given him just for the trip.

At his first practice session he’s caught around the waist by Andrés, who flashes the crooked smirk that makes him so dangerous. “You made it,” the Spanish skater purrs into the curve of Victor’s ear. Rinkside, Yakov is already yelling at him to stop messing around.

“Were you worried?”

“No,” Andrés says, which from anyone else would be a confession of faith, and heart-warming: “I avoid worrying, as a general rule.”

“Or practicing,” quips another voice, breezing by. Victor Nikiforov looks up, and realizes he’s breathing oxygen in the same room as Stephane Lambiel. Later, even though Andrés has made a filthy bet with him privately in the locker rooms about the results of the Short Program, and who’s going to owe whom what in the event of making it into the final cut, it’s Lambiel Victor spends the most time writing about, and not whatever it is that’s going to happen or not happen with Andrés.

Stephane is objectively beautiful, and it’s a kind of beauty that is about radiance and light, instead of Andrés' mayhem and danger. More importantly still, he skates gorgeously, with crisp, tight jumps that he can execute in either direction, and perfectly centered spins.
Victor scores a little over sixty points with his short program, which lands him roughly in the middle of the twenty four competitors who will get to compete in the finals. Andrés scores a 53.46, which puts him in twenty fifth place.

He will be skating his long program and Andrés will not, something Victor doesn’t remember for hours because Yakov is already giving him an itemized list of what to improve on. He’s swept into pressers afterwards, does a couple interviews, and then heads out to a late dinner with his family. Mariya waddles, and her every step seems displeasing to her, somehow: the baby, his sister, who they’re calling Sofia, has swallowed up all of her grace. Like ‘Victor’, Sofia is a name that could belong to someone from anywhere on the European continent. It occurs to him that she will grow up in Paris, and she’ll go to French schools.

Victor hasn’t seen his mother in a few weeks and wonders at it all, is in the right sort of mood after the Short Program to ask her if he was this difficult, this dangerous. “Things that are worth it are always hard,” his mother tells him, and shoos him off to bed in part because she’s exhausted and has promised all her physicians that she’ll take care of herself, that she’ll make sure to get some rest.

Bed is back in the Olympic village, and he’s just finished trying to capture his feelings in the notebook for Vasily when there’s a knock on the door, several of them, actually. It’s Andrés, whose Olympics are over already. He smells a little bit of liquor. All Victor’s had is half a glass of champagne, an allowance from his father over dinner, a little bit of secret celebrating. “I’m surprised you didn’t come to collect.”

“I was out with my family.”

Andrés plays with the silver tips of Victor’s hair, standing there in the doorframe, eyes dark. “Such a good boy,” he hums, and Victor knows that he’s standing on a precipice: he can close the door now and he will never speak to Andrés again, or he can open it a little wider, and let the shadows in.

He does the latter.
Victor doesn’t know what hour it is when Andrés leaves, but he does know he doesn’t feel the way he’d expected to feel. He’s sore in strange, new places, and his legs don’t want to cooperate and he knows he needs a shower.

His hair’s a mess. Running his fingers through it to pick at the tangles just makes him think about how easy it was for Andrés to grasp it in his fist and pull, pleasantly at first and then harder, a hot weight over Victor’s back. He runs the water hot, and then icy cold, and he scrubs at his skin for a while with some lavender-smelling soap, which is a futile exercise. Something about what has just happened with Andrés has made him feel dirty in a way that he can’t quite explain, makes him regret all the places where he’s let the other skater put his mouth.

It’s as he passes the mirror and sees the blemishes on his chest and his throat that revelation hits him like a ton of bricks. He doesn’t feel wanted at all. He feels as used as the evidence of tonight’s bad decisions, neatly tied off in the trash can. Victor had the choice at the door all wrong: no matter which way it swung, he was never going to speak with Andrés again.

He is dripping wet hair and pathetic gloom when he shows up at Yakov’s door not long after, which Lilia answers, looking supremely annoyed at the racket he’s been making at their door so late at night. She gives him a once-over, has the same all-seeing gaze his mother has, the kind you can’t hide from. “Yakovya,” she murmurs, telling a joke that Victor doesn’t understand, “Victor has discovered the mountain of condoms.”

Yakov appears in flannel pajamas, about ready to go red-faced and shouting. He takes one look at Victor and doesn’t. “Stupid boy,” he grumbles instead, rubbing the sleep off of his eyes, and the door opens wider for Victor. In some ways this is a door that will always be open for him. To Yakov’s credit, he’s not looking for a lot of the details. He wants to know that Victor isn’t drunk (he isn’t), that whatever’s happened happened with his consent (it did). After that, he doesn’t ask who it is that Victor collided with, who’s left him shaken up and kiss-bitten and thinking overlong on why virginity is something that’s always been referred to as a kind of despoiling. Instead Yakov turns the television on, though he keeps it on mute, little more than a visual distraction, and he asks questions of a more practical sort to make sure Victor’s okay, that he’s not hurt.

He is not hurt, but he is hurting, and Victor almost falls asleep on the couch listening to Yakov tell stories about how the Olympics used to be, back when he competed, how believe it or not back in his day nobody had even conceived of landing a triple axel, much less any of the quads.

“Why are you telling me all this?”
“Because I want you to remember the right things about today.” I don’t know what the right things are is the sort of admission Victor usually saves for Vasily, but it’s late and he’s sick of himself and Yakov is still listening to him. “That’s why you have a coach,” Yakov says. “Today you accomplished things I couldn’t have dreamed of in my prime. Today some of your dreams became a reality. Don’t give someone else the power to take that from you.”

He sees Andrés once more at a bit of a party one of the other skaters is hosting, the more innocuous kind, arm thrown over the shoulder of an ice dancer from France. Victor has an easy time pretending he doesn’t exist: too easy, in fact, and just before it looks like Andrés might have a thing or two to say about that, the door opens and it’s a few of the older skaters dropping in, including Stephane Lambiel, who is an actual angel in human form.

Lambiel compliments his programs and wishes him good luck tomorrow and Andrés matters less and less already: the next time they speak to each other will be on Grand Prix assignments the next year, and by then Victor will be able to say:

you are a pit stop I took once to figure out what it might be like to go nowhere with my life.

The next day, he doesn’t manage the quad, it’s underrotated and takes a deduction, plus his hand sweeps the ice. He falls on his axel. The rest of the program is clean, though, and on its artistic merits, which get widely praised, Victor’s standing in the rankings improves.

Evgeni Plushenko takes gold. Stephane Lambiel takes silver. He finishes tenth.

He is seventeen years old and objectively, in this one moment, there are only nine other skaters in the
He’s back in Russia for a week before they get the call from Sergei. Mariya’s going into labor.
Victor is back on a plane with his Grandmother, still has his suitcase when a taxi unceremoniously
dumps them both off at a hospital. Some nurse at the front desk eyes him skeptically when he begs
for details in English, finally directs him to the right floor so that she doesn’t have to listen to his
terrible accent anymore or get stared at by Evgeniya, who keeps grumbling in Russian about how
rude the French are.

Victor knows enough about what goes on to know that he’s happier waiting outside the room.
Babushka goes in, though, and a few hours go by while he paces in a waiting room. He’s out of
batteries for his walkman and the magazines are all in French and everything is terrible. Finally his
father comes out, and he tells Victor that they can go in for a little while, that Sofia is fine, that he
should come and say hello to his mother but that they’re arranging for a surgery because there’s
something wrong with her heartbeat; it’s too fast and it hasn’t slowed down, since the birth.

It’s one of those rooms that suddenly has entirely too much going on: his Grandmother keeps
grousing at his father about how French doctors are too fancy and know nothing about women,
really. His mother is a wreck, splotchy and sweaty and exhausted from crying, and when he leans
over the bed to kiss the top of her head his eyes can’t help but look over at the heart monitor.

Then there is his baby sister, red-faced and bald and squinty-eyed, blind to the whole world, and
when he touches her gently there’s suddenly a tiny set of fingers curled around his pinky.

Victor suddenly wants to apologize to this child for everything he’s ever thought about her: he’s
hated the very idea of this tiny, helpless little creature. Now that she’s here, this child his mother
assumed was impossible, he knows he could never hate her.

He doesn’t know how to be a very good person but he vows he’s going to be a good brother, and
then all the medical staff are shooing them out, wheeling his mother out to prep for surgery and
taking Sofia to a room that’s full of babies, where he and Sergei and Evgeniya are allowed to stand
outside and look in.

“Ridiculous,” says Evgeniya, which has been her opinion on the entire series of events, from start to
finish. Sergei looks worn out, and so Victor reaches over and puts his arm around his father’s shoulders.

They’re nearly the same height, now. It’s only now that he’s noticed.

Yakov unceremoniously cancels the rest of his season, and he and Babushka stay in Paris for a whole month. They make alternate arrangements, places Victor can go skate, and he’s free from the tyranny of classes, which is a problem he’s going to have to fix in the summer, when he gets back to St. Petersburg and has to somehow catch up. Right now none of that matters: his mother is fine, though this time there will definitely be no other siblings, no I didn’t think this was still possible surprises, and his sister has the entire family twined around her tiny little fingers.

The food in Paris is very good, and he’s reminded of how beautiful a city it is when he does get out. He even picks up a few words of French, a necessity that evolves around things like getting to the rink, buying things, wandering down among the Seine.

He gets his hair cut in Paris. Tears up when there’s a pile of platinum blonde around his feet, an irrevocable severing of the before and after of this specific moment. Later, though, walking around the Latin Quarter, the breeze picks up and ruffles his hair and he feels physically lighter, like he might actually lift up on the wind too, picked up like a leaf.

He gets used to the Paris flat. Lets his mother buy him more Paris clothes, things that are nicer than what’s in his closet back home, like the new suit his parents got him for the Olympics.

He can sense that life here would have a specific rhythm that would not be unpleasant, but he also realizes that he’s almost an adult now, and Paris isn’t home. He misses Makkachin and misses Georgi, and he’d strongly consider death before admitting that he also misses Yakov and Vasily and Lilia, but there it is: while he wasn’t paying attention, a second family’s been growing around him this whole time.

When he lands back in St. Petersburg with Babushka, Yakov’s the one who picks them up at the airport. “Lilia and I have been thinking,” he says, later that night, while they sit out on the steps of Evgeniya’s quirky, stuffy house. “We’ve got a spare room, if you …”

“Are you asking me to move in with you, old man?” Victor knows about the house Lilia and Yakov have just bought. They’re going to make a run of this business together now; choreographer and
coach. It’s a nice house, really big and really clean, and he thinks Makkachin would be happier there, which is the real sell.

“My wife won’t tolerate any of your *forgot my homework* bullshit,” Yakov snorts.

They agree to it in companionable silence; when he moves in he’s Vitya, now and permanently, to them both.

A few weeks later it’s an afternoon at the record store, and Pavel just offers him a blank stare from behind the counter. “You. You went to the *Olympics*. For fuck’s sake, you could’ve said something.”

It hadn’t even occurred to Victor that this was a possible outcome of his afternoon; the fact that Pavel might’ve been watching completely slipped his mind. So did the fact that Pavel might’ve been *working*. “I just didn’t think it was relevant,” he admits, which seems to send Pavel further into incredulity.

“Didn’t think it was relevant?” Pavel sighs, heavily, like Victor’s hopeless. He seems to debate what it is he’s going to say next, and what he settles on is this: “… There’s a show tomorrow night, the band’s pretty new.”

“What, you still want me to come?”

“Yeah,” says Pavel. “I’ll meet you there.”
This is how he finds out that Pavel is a bassist in a band.

“You weren’t going to tell me?”

Pavel grins his cute Record Store Boy grin, and there it is, that elusive, fuzzy feeling. “It didn’t seem relevant,” he quips, and before Victor can protest, there’s a kiss blooming between them, something soft, something clean.

They have a long talk in the alleyway after that, and when Victor gets home, on time for Lilia’s curfew, he beams a heart-shaped smile as he sails through the door, greeted by the rush of his dog.

“What are you so happy about?” Yakov asks idly, suspicious of anything that makes Victor Nikiforov look that mischievous. It usually means trouble because it usually means Vitya is up to something.

Teenagers.

“I’ve got a boyfriend.”
Stay tuned for the next chapter, wherein Victor gets:

- his phone (RIP polaroids)
- five world championships
- two olympic medals
- katsuki yuuri?!?!

Music links: here @ tumblr
we could break a silver lining

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pavel, it turns out, is not much older than Victor is: just a year or so between them. He’s had this record store job the whole time because his parents are not particularly pleased with his career choices. He bought his bass himself. Nearly everyone else Victor knows is a skater whose parents are willing to pay an arm and a leg in rink fees, for costumes, for coaches. He can’t relate to Pavel’s personal life, not really, and Pavel can’t relate to his: Victor is living with a coach and a choreographer, instead of with his own family, and Victor’s getting to do what he wants in this last year. Nobody is trying to get Victor to be a lawyer, an engineer, a doctor or any other flavor of the week, ordinary-mortal job. Victor has abysmal, barely-passing grades, but he’ll probably still get in on a part time schedule to some college somewhere, just so they can count him as alumni. But it literally won’t matter what he studies: if he can just keep going at this rate, what could he possibly use a degree for? Pavel, on the other hand, is taking a year off before he faces university, working at the record store, trying to get his band off the ground. One of them struggles and one of them glides and between them there really should be more friction than there is because all they’ve got in common is the music and, perhaps, a little bit of a fascination with the way the other person smiles.

It should be a disaster. Except Pavel’s so nice: he genuinely wants to see Victor succeed, makes an effort to learn what it is Victor’s complaining about when he talks about complicated footwork and the different entries and exits of his jumps. He never gets the differences between the jumps right, but it’s a heartwarming effort. Yakov learns to tolerate his presence in their household, and Lilia seems to think he’s an amusing addition but never explains why.

Their dates: Victor tries and fails to teach him how to skate, winds up laughing himself breathless at the way Pavel clings to the wall of the rink. Pavel discovers that Victor can play the piano passably, and they tinker around at rock songs until Victor invariably fucks up because he’s not actually a good pianist. They take Makkachin for long walks around St. Petersburg and Victor sees an awful lot of concerts. It’s nice to be kissed by Pavel, too, and Victor’s making an encyclopedia of what Pavel feels like. Writes about how nice it is to be liked in this way, genuinely and without reservation. Pavel is thoughtful. He notices, for instance, that Victor’s blush peaks on his nose, and tends to kiss the tip of it. He catches on to the way Victor likes having his hair played with, gently, that just a light sweep of fingers through the feathery fall of his bangs tends to evaporate tension and set Victor at ease. Victor, not to be outdone, learns that Pavel is ticklish almost everywhere. His
knees. The bottoms of his feet. His abdomen is especially sensitive.

When they do finally have sex, and it takes a while, because Victor’s been avoiding it, he expects to plummet back into that narrow place of shadow and shame he discovered with Andrés.

He doesn’t.

Pavel makes everything feel normal. It’s strange that someone so perfectly ordinary could make Victor’s life feel clean.

Apparently Yakov must’ve relayed something to his parents, because Sergei tries to reinforce the talk Mariya gave him once. Sergei’s version of it is all romance and bliss, which isn’t quite how Victor feels, and then Mariya gets back on the phone and tells him bluntly and in no uncertain terms that they better be using condoms and to go see a doctor. He is spared anything more embarrassing because his blessed baby sister starts to cry in the background, and he hears his mother’s heavy sigh, doesn’t understand how she could possibly be tired of this angel child that’s come into their lives. She does seem that way for a while, though: tired and cranky, easily aggravated. When Victor tells Vasily about it, Vasily hums to himself and takes a note in his own notebook, then artfully redirects Victor’s attention back to his own life.

Vasily says he’s making good progress.

This season, he skates to Now We Are Free from the Gladiator soundtrack in his short program and the fourth part of the Pines of Rome by Respighi. It takes him a long time to decide on an exhibition skate because there’s so many messages he wants to send: a giant fuck you to Andrés, something for Pavel, some way of expressing something like gratitude. Instead, he settles on a simple, happy tune: We’re Going To Be Friends, by The White Stripes. Sofia isn’t old enough to understand it now, but he hopes he can share it with her someday, dig up some video where he’s skated it cleanly so that he can explain that this was the only offering he had at the time, his way of welcoming her to the world.

He just barely misses the Grand Prix Finals, comes in second place at Russian Nationals, behind Plushenko, but it’s a gap that it feels like he might someday be able to close. That or someday Plushenko’s going to retire and then maybe for a while he’ll be at the top of that podium. That’s how things work. For example, Georgi’s doing his last season in Juniors: wins the Russian title there in Victor’s absence.

Georgi is doing a ridiculous exhibition skate this year because he’s on a Prince kick. He keeps insisting that nobody gets Prince phases. Prince is a lifestyle. "Okay, Georgi," Victor says. Okay.

Victor sees his family in flashes, which makes the changes Sofia is going through all the more remarkable. She goes from being a bald, pink, squirmy thing to having a halo of blonde hair as soft as dandelion fluff, and when she starts making cooing, unintelligible noises, Victor is even more smitten than he was before. He’s afraid at first, to get to hold something so small and so precious, but when Mariya shows him the right way to do it he parades this child through the streets of whatever city they happen to be in this month.

This is Sofia Nikiforova, the queen of his heart.

Somewhere during the year the dynamic with Pavel starts to shift, so imperceptibly that Victor doesn’t notice it at first. There’s a routine between them now: Pavel knows which days Victor has off at the rink, and knows his competition schedule, and suddenly they’re basically on a calendar, and Pavel is like the spa that Victor goes to when he’s exhausted and tired and wants to recharge.

They’re starting to feel predictable. In his encyclopedia of what it's like to be liked he's adding fewer and fewer new entries, no new surprises.
At the end of the year he’s at Worlds again, which he missed last season because Sofia was born, and he gets to the finals, improves on his Olympics score. At this precise moment there are now only seven figure skaters in the world who are better than he is.

His baby sister is a year older and puts everything, even the silver medal he won at Russian nationals, into her mouth. He takes a two week break in Paris to spend time with his family. Mariya seems to have finally caught her breath; that tension he’d noticed earlier has evaporated from her shoulders and it’s springtime again, season of potential. At the end of this he’s back in St. Petersburg with his dog and a hovering Lilia, who makes sure he’s caught up on his homework.

He’s surprised and not surprised when Pavel pulls him aside one evening, after a show, and they go for a walk, and this time Pavel’s not holding his hand. *I’m moving to Moscow*, Pavel says. He and the drummer are going to be roommates; he’s starting school, next fall.

They talk about what they want to do about this predicament of time and space and it ends amiably, a slow fizzle, like a campfire that’s just gone out.

There is nothing else that he and Pavel are capable of learning about each other.

He spends most of the summer playing third wheel with Georgi and Georgi’s new girlfriend. Georgi is in love and ecstatic, and Victor is not.

Life gets lonely again.

When he does finally graduate at the end of the summer with heavily negotiated exemptions he takes the path of least resistance for university. Lilia makes a lot of calls to make this happen, calls him a troublesome boy, but there he is, set to start at the Saint-Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts.
University is another chance to invent himself. Victor surprises himself and makes friends: people who are brave enough to approach the Olympic figure skater in their midst. Alena Gorelova is into theatre and has a way of dissecting people that reminds him of Vasily. She’s not interested in his well-being, the way Vasily is; she wants to be sure he’s an artist, a real one, that he belongs among them. She is not their ringleader, but she is the gatekeeper: anyone admitted into this loose, rag-tag crew that’s starting to assemble while they study the arts has to pass her muster, and Alena’s bar is high. The jury is out for a long time because nobody has ever asked Victor to articulate what it is that he thinks art is, and when he hears what Alena thinks it is, he disagrees with her.

Then he agrees to show some of his new studymates what his upcoming long program is going to be like. It’s set to *Wandering Star* because it’s a song that sounds the way he feels, sometimes, lost in a way that’s not entirely good but isn’t entirely bad either. It’s a little bit mysterious, as a song. Like it’s holding something back.

Alena decides he’s okay. Because she’s bossy she also demands to see the short program, which comes together on another day to *One Day More* from *Les Miserables*.

Their ringleader is Evgeny Mosin, and looking at him is a bit like looking at an inverted picture of Andrés. He has the same dark, laughing eyes, and tousled, dark hair, but he’s taller and when he smiles it isn’t coyote-lean or wolfish and hungry: it’s genuine, bright exuberance. Evgeny is pure chaos, always just this side of getting expelled and never for anything malicious. To be his friend is to have befriended an imp, a sprite, which is exactly what Alena calls him when they’re taking different dares.

Evgeny is interested in everyone and everything and there’s probably not a single person in their circle he hasn’t made out with while drunk, including Victor, and somehow this is fine because it’s just who Evgeny is. Evgeny is going to be a photographer someday, and he’ll be a good one, great perhaps: he’s got a sharp eye and a mien that makes everyone want to please him.

He tells himself this is going to be the year he makes the Grand Prix Finals and so he tries out his own choreography in his spare time, this time to another one of those dance mixes his Grandmother would complain about if he was still living at Babushka’s. It’s the sort of song that’s meant to be played for someone, but it’s not for Pavel or for Andrés or even for Evgeny. It’s for someone more elusive than that, someone who will come along someday and turn his universe upside down the way Sergei did to Mariya. *Days go by and still I think of you* …

There are others: a sweet dancer they call Kenya because his full name, Innokentiy, is the sort of thing Evgeny can’t manage to say drunk with a straight face. Dmitri wants to be a writer, is best
friends with a girl named Zhanna. She’s going to be an artist, has a real talent for sculpting things. Georgi is a year behind him but decides the instant that he meets them, one late autumn weekend at Yakov’s, that these are also all his tribe and Alena allows it because she, too, is a Bowie fan.

Victor’s world is now so big that when he does talk to Vasily, which is less frequent, these days, he’s mostly complaining about how hard it is to keep up, how just last week he totally spaced on Dmitri’s birthday and does Vasily have a cure for forgetfulness?

Vasily does have a cure but it’s not one Victor likes because it sounds hard, having to learn how to care for so many people properly.

He makes it to the Grand Prix Finals for the first time, comes in last place, which almost doesn’t matter: Lambiel is on top of the podium, and it’s always a joy to watch him skate. His parents decide that last place amidst the best skaters in the world is still something worth celebrating. Baby Sofia isn’t much of a baby anymore, she crawls and babbles about Mama and Papa and makes words that don’t sound Russian and don’t sound very French either. She’s got Mariya’s eyes and Mariya’s features, but her hair is getting darker, it’ll be sandy like Sergei’s, and she’s a bit of a mischievous child: Victor learns that putting anything shiny or colorful within her line of sight is usually cause for theft, so naturally he does it all the time.

When he makes it back to Russia, Evgeny is there to pick him up at the airport, to clap an arm around Victor’s shoulder and insist that he’s got custody for the night because they’ve got something very special planned. Something very special turns out to be a makeshift party put together back at Alena’s place, where all of his friends conspire to get blackout drunk. He wakes up in a strange bed without his clothes on, uncomfortable, in a pile of limbs. Alena swears they’re never going to talk about it, or do that again, and Evgeny does what he always does: laughs his head off like it’s hilarious and then gives Victor a sloppy, enthusiastic good morning kiss.

He unsuccessfully tries to pretend like that didn’t happen for a week, gets a French tutor, goes back to practice trying to be a good boy. But when Evgeny tells him, two weeks later, that he’s got a photo assignment that Victor would be perfect for, Victor doesn’t say no, and the first session ends differently than Victor expected: with him pushing Evgeny back gently, and shaking his head. “I don’t want this to get complicated.”

“When have I ever made anything complicated?” Evgeny wants to know.

“Not you,” Victor says, and thinks, me.

Later he confesses to Alena while they walk Makkachin around the historic part of St. Petersburg, each of them nursing a mug of tea while the poodle leads them over bridge after bridge. Alena is the wisest of them all, which is saying tremendously little: she’s got the gift of insight, but her tongue is sharp and she always tells it like it is. She knows all about the way Evgeny burns through muses and develops these fascinations of his.

“Is that what you want? To be someone’s muse?”

Victor shrugs, says it’s nice to inspire someone, and she just laughs and shakes her head.

“Victor Nikiforov,” Alena chuckles, and he remembers suddenly that she’s got a mole on her ribcage that he’s kissed once, that one time after the Grand Prix. She proceeds to insult him with great and terrible clarity, but she does it with such fondness that it almost doesn’t sting. “You are the most inauthentic person I have ever met. Have you ever once thought about what you want to be to yourself before trying to be whatever it is everyone else wants?”
It’s clear he has no answer for that, though he writes it down in his journal, intending to bring it up with Vasily a month from now. By then, he’s forgotten, though Alena has taken to calling him Чameleon whenever she thinks about it. Chameleon.

Just before Russian Nationals he gets angry with her about it. Isn’t being chameleon what actors do?

“Sure,” Alena agrees. “It’s a perfectly good thing if it’s what you’ve decided you want.”

He gets another second place at Russian Nationals. Finishes just off the podium at the European championships. Before worlds Evgeny wants to photograph him again, this upstart growing up in Plushenko’s shadow.

For once Evgeny’s behaving himself, honoring the distance Victor put between them.

Victor, though, is buzzy and nervy and thinking too much about how if he can just land his combinations cleanly he’s in striking distance of the podium. It would be such a welcome distraction to think about literally anything else. Evgeny’s putting the camera away, idly promising prints and proofs when Victor comes back, and Victor makes his choice. Victor decides that he will be whatever Evgeny wants because whatever that is has got to be better than just being himself.

Evgeny is better with his mouth than anything Victor has half-remembered about the party, and paradise arrives when he’s tugging on Evgeny’s dark hair, in that one moment of bliss where he doesn’t think about anything at all. He comes in fourth place at the end of the season, watching the three skaters ahead of him climb the podium, glory so close he can almost taste it.

Suddenly, Victor blinks and his first year at university is behind him and it’s time to spend another three weeks in Paris. His father introduces him to a French musical: Notre-Dame de Paris, and he plays the recording to Les Sans Papiers to Yakov over the phone to get permission to start choreographing it. He and Mariya work on it together, their first collaborative effort since the Sleeping Beauty program, and he spends a fair amount of time with his French-Russian dictionary open, making sure that he understands the lyrics properly so that he can convey their meaning. He’s got nothing in common with these people the musical portrays living in the shadow of the great cathedral, but cries for asylum are something Victor thinks he can understand.

For his long program he asks his father for a suggestion. This turns into a longer exercise than expected: Sergei wants to know how he feels when he listens to different pieces of music, wants to
know what he thinks he might evoke when he puts the songs to the ice. Like that one time with Alena, Victor can’t put what’s in his head into words. “I’ll know it when I hear it,” he mumbles, and dives into record after record. He wants to offset the French musical with something Russian, something from his roots, and so he makes his father pull out options from Mussorgsky, Shostakovich, Tchaikovsky until he settles on Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto. After a further consult with Yakov and Lilia it’s decided that the third movement is the sort of thing someone could skate to.

Then he’s back at school and so, actually, is Georgi. Georgi develops a crush on Alena, who Victor warns is going to eat him alive. This does nothing to deter Georgi, who cheerfully offers his heart to whichever girl seems most readily available to stomp on it. Alena, fortunately, has the sense to keep him at arms’ length. She reminds Victor that this is because she’s not an idiot, unlike some people she knows, which is her way of telling him that she knows what he and Evgeny are up to.

“We’re not a couple.”

“Evgeny doesn’t do couples.”

Victor shrugs. Right now belonging to someone else is a complication he doesn’t need and Evgeny’s got a lot of talents, chief of which is being diverting enough that Victor’s always too distracted to really bother contemplating his relationship status or lack thereof.

His first Grand Prix assignment is the Cup of Russia. When he shows up to skate it, someone else makes a splashy debut and edges past Georgi into third place. This person is Christophe Giacometti, whose short program is skated to Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) and whose long program is skated to El Tango de Roxanne from Moulin Rouge. Second place is a predictable (if, in Victor’s opinion, forgettable), showing from a French skater.

The French skater doesn’t let his fingers momentarily drift down Victor’s spine, though: that’s all Christophe’s cheek and pluck. Victor struggles for a moment, attempting to reconcile this edition of Chris with the cherubic version he recalls from juniors. Then he’s more preoccupied with the fact that he’s being flirted with, and determinedly, too.

Christophe is a bit like Evgeny in that way, but worse, actually: if he wanted to, he could probably seduce stone. At the exhibition skate Christophe skates to SexyBack because of course he would. “Take me out to dinner,” the Swiss skater hums when the interviews and the exhibition skates are all over and done with.

“Sorry, what?”

“Two things: You’re the one who lives here.” Victor does not, in fact, live here. They are in Moscow. He knows Moscow as well as he knows Christophe’s hometown of Geneva, which is to say: not at all. “Also we made a bet.” They did not make a bet. “Winner buys dinner. So where are we going?”

“I don’t live here.”

“I know.”

“We didn’t make a bet.”

“We did.” Christophe’s hazel eyes twinkle. “I just didn’t tell you about it.”

This, Victor learns over the dinner that he does wind up paying for after all, is the kind of chaos one should expect from Christophe, who has grown up into an irrepressible flirt while Victor wasn’t
“What’s your number?” Victor does not have a cellular phone, which Christophe seems to think is a disaster. “Fix that before we see each other again,” he murmurs, bumping a knee against Victor’s under the table as he leans forward, chin in his hand. For all of his confidence, he’s still younger than Victor, and so underneath all of the bravado Victor can sense a little thread of fragility, something that suggests this may mean something to Christophe that it doesn’t mean to him.

“When will that be?” Victor asks, buying himself time to think about it. Thinking about it isn’t great, actually: he’s transported to his own past, just a few years before, stuck in St. Petersburg without a way to get in touch with someone who represented nothing but danger for him. There’s a little thread in Christophe somewhere that he could pull if he wanted to, to see if he could make someone else unravel.

Christophe hesitates, not quite ready to say that he’ll be at the Grand Prix Final because this year’s contest looks to be pretty difficult, with Lambiel, Lysacek, Weir, Takahashi, and Chan out there. “European championships, probably,” he murmurs finally.

Victor exhales a breath he hadn’t quite realized he was holding. “If you make it to the Grand Prix, you’re buying me dinner,” he says, and Christophe’s eyes light up.

“Don’t think I’m going to go easy on you, Nikiforov.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Victor says, and he walks Christophe back to his hotel. But he does something else, too, and this is the difference, he realizes later, between him and Andrés.

He leaves Christophe there.

At first glance it’s such a small thing: Christophe is objectively attractive, and probably willing, and Victor and Evgeny are nothing more than friends who sometimes fuck. There is no one in this situation whom Victor owes anything to.

Except for himself. Put in the position where he’s someone else’s enigma, he chooses differently, and it makes all the difference in the world.
Christophe does not make the Grand Prix Final. Victor collects his first major medal, a bronze, standing just ahead of Johnny Weir, which is a revelation unto itself, almost an accident, because he’s still been expecting steady, incremental improvement. He’s gotten so used to being behind people like Lambiel and Weir that being ahead of them almost feels like a fluke. He’s unaware of how much he’s begun to grow into his own skin, and how people are watching him now, waiting for an ascendancy that isn’t quite inevitable yet, but could be.

He’s become the one to watch.

Christophe is at the European Championship, and on the first night in Helsinki, Victor buys him dinner and lets Christophe educate him about his smartphone, a luxury Victor has now decided he can afford now that he’s seen what the prize money can look like up on the podium. He’s got a laptop, now, too, though he doesn’t tell Christophe that; doesn’t want to dwell on the divide that still exists between Western Europe and Eastern. For example, his grandmother still has that old desktop PC, collecting dust in her house, and his cell service is better traveling than it ever is back in Russia.

Christophe also sets him up with a Myspace account, something they’ll cackle about years later when Yuri Plisetsky is around and doesn’t realize that he’s surrounded by Actual Veterans of the Internet. This is something they never tell Yuri Plisetsky, incidentally: Yuri Plisetsky needs no additional excuses to call either Christophe or Victor old men.

It’s a fun night, and Victor can’t remember the last time he’s laughed this hard at a skating competition, away from his real friends back in St. Petersburg. Christophe drifts closer and closer every time he smiles, which reminds Victor anew that the stakes between them are a little bit uneven. He indulges a single kiss out of his own curiosity, but it’s the wrong time or Christophe’s the wrong person, Victor doesn’t know which.

Christophe takes it remarkably well, which is to say he squeezes Victor’s ass with a wink before he
goes, purring something about how you can’t blame a man for trying as he waltzes — no, that’s got to be a tango — back into the hotel lobby.

It’s the next morning’s warmup when disaster strikes: Victor is out of fingers and toes for counting the number of times he’s fallen when figure skating. He knows that there are right and wrong ways to fall, knows how to salvage a landing where his skates are still a little bit crossed, how to try to shift his center of gravity in such a way that he falls on a softer part of his body.

This time there’s no time, just the unforgiving blunt surface of the ice, and the body’s treacherous instinct to protect itself betrays him when he flings a hand out in pure instinct. Indescribable, new pain bursts like fireworks all over his wrist, sharp and searing, and Yakov immediately sends him back to the medics, who in turn send him off to a hospital for an x-ray.

It’s a serious break. Eight weeks recovery. Just like that, Victor’s season is over.

Back in St. Petersburg, Yakov won’t let him skate and he’s grumpy and irritable and taking it out on everyone he knows. There is a buzzing noise bouncing around Victor’s skull that even Evgeny can’t erase, although it’s not for lack of trying: Victor is so bored that he’s gotten or given blowjobs in at least four different places around campus, and he’s spent a whole day shut up in Evgeny’s room for portraits and sex. It’s all so dissatisfying that he feels a scream lodged in his throat, the sort of thing that’ll get ripped out of him if he gets just one more reason to shout.

What is he, without figure skating to define him?

Yakov has him running and stretching, riding a fucking bicycle, and doing ballet practice with Lilia. By the fifth day he’s scheduled an emergency appointment with Vasily to explain that he’s losing his goddamn mind and he’s pretty sure he won’t make it through eight weeks without murdering his coach. He thinks Lilia might be amenable to hiding the body. How he’s supposed to make two months of this bullshit is beyond Victor completely.

On the sixth day he sneaks out to a public skate just to feel the ice under his feet, but someone recognizes him in the wrist brace and word makes it back to Yakov (of course) and they have an all-out shouting match that doesn’t end well for either party.

Two days later, Lilia catches him coming home completely shitfaced after one of those nights out with Evgeny, the sort he hasn’t had since making his first Grand Prix Finals: this time it’s Dmitri
they’ve fallen into bed with, and Victor’s got a big red mark on his neck, fresh, for which the writer is wholly to blame: too enthusiastic with his teeth.

One of his Professors calls and wants to know if he intends to come back to class.

Next year is an Olympic season.

Victor realizes with sudden, startling clarity that he’s done darkening the doors of classrooms. He’s an adult now; no one can stop him from processing his withdrawal.

Yakov calls him hopeless and stuffs him and Makkachin on a plane back to Paris for the summer. Before he lands, Mariya’s already gotten the phone call with his entire training regimen, and it’s one thing to tell Yakov and Lilia to fuck off and entirely another to say those words to his own mother.

His French is good enough now that he gives the cab driver the address, manages half a conversation on the ride in from Charles de Gaulle. While in Paris, he ignores his phone, his email, mostly posts photos of his time spent babysitting a toddler who is mayhem and madness in the house but who does no wrong in Victor’s eyes. It’s more time than he’s ever gotten to spend with Sofia, almost enough to soothe the downtime he has to spend waiting on his bones to come back together they way they’re supposed to.

Seven weeks in he takes her to a public skate, nothing more than a cherub in tiny shoes and a helmet, holds her up as he does slow laps: not because he’s only got a few days until he gets the brace off, but because she is precious, something Victor won’t ever let fall.

He fills a whole notebook with choreography ideas, and for the first time, he choreographs his programs alone from start to finish. Once he’s cleared to skate he books rink time in Paris. He’s got his eye on a new quad, something nobody else has done yet: a way to come back into the sport with a vengeance, and carve his name into it forever.

At the end of the summer, back in St. Petersburg, he skates all three of them: short, long, and exhibition for Yakov and Lilia — without the jumps, this early, and Yakov calls him an idiot but Lilia’s peridot eyes glow with grim approval.

The short program he sets to a Damien Rice song, and the long program comes together to Mussorgsky’s *Great Gate of Kiev* from *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which is one of the most Olympic sounding pieces of music Victor has ever heard: big and broad and brassy, without being as frequently used as Stravinsky’s *Firebird* or as on the nose, for that matter.

This year is now or never.

Alena yells at him when he comes back about how he’s been ignoring all of them. Evgeny’s moved on, more or less, and Victor doesn’t really care. They’ve been downgraded from friends who fuck to just regular friends. He’s on the fringes with the university crowd now that he’s not taking classes, anyway; he’s apologetic about how unavailable he is, since it’s such an important season, and this lie is believable to everyone except Alena, who calls him the most insincere person she’s ever met but keeps hanging out with him anyway because he makes good art and his portrait series with Evgeny was a major hit at the university’s exhibition last year.

Because she understands him, even with all the masks he wears, all the flaws they cover up, he lets her in on a little secret. “I’m going to do a jump nobody’s done before this year,” he says.

“I don’t care about your stupid jumps,” grumbles Alena, which is a damn lie, because Victor knows she’s curious. She wants to make it to Vancouver: in spite of his distance, the St. Petersburg crowd is
raising money to try to come over to Vancouver. Georgi is also expected to qualify, though it’s hard to tell if he’ll make it into the finals.

Victor skates without the new jump for the first half of the season, though he throws it in every now and then during warmups, just to make everyone else nervous. He wins the Grand Prix Finals without it, takes home a shockingly large, six figure check.

It occurs to him that he no longer needs to live with Yakov and Lilia, which is a thought he tables, something he’ll come back to at the end of the season when there’s time. For now it’s convenient to be with the two of them, to sit down over dinner talking about what he might be able to change in his footwork sequences to drag a fraction of a point more out of each program. It could make no difference, or it could make all the difference in the world.

Georgi comes in second place at Russian Nationals, makes it into the finals of Europeans, and it’s nice to have him there, nice to see Christophe again. It’s there that Victor decides to finally show everyone what he can do, and at the European Championship he lands the first ever quadruple flip, almost perfectly, with nothing more than a brush of his fingers across the cold surface of the ice to steady himself from the impact.

It’s the quadruple flip. It’s his forever now.

He will think this until Katsuki Yuuri comes along, and takes it from him without so much as a whisper of protest.

Christophe tells him he’s just bought him and Georgi another dinner. Victor obliges.

Before Vancouver, he learns that Omega watches wants to run an advertising campaign using up-and-coming faces from all over Europe. Up-and-coming in this case means something a little bit more like the ones who are pretty, but the money is good, and Yakov tells him he’d be an idiot to decline. This is how he finds himself flown to Switzerland, where he’s modeling with an American speed skater, a Canadian snowboarder, and a downhill skier from Sweden.

It isn’t that he hasn’t modeled before. He has.

It’s that he’s not prepared for what he sees when he walks onto the set after the stylists are done with him. They’ve told him the skier’s already there and ready. He sees hands first: slender fingers raking through a wild mess of bleach-blonde hair, short, a bit faux-hawked. The arms these hands belong to
are wiry and lean, and below the rolled up white sleeves of a button-down shirt, Victor can see the hint of a tattoo that he immediately wants to know more about. He is not prepared for Saga Niequist when she turns around and lifts a hand in greeting, one of the most striking people he’s ever met. Victor left his own androgyny behind him years ago on the floor of a hair salon in Paris; now Saga is beating him at his own game, looks better in a suit than he does.

She’s got high cheekbones and plump lips and an eyebrow that’s permanently cocked, it seems like; the photographer immediately senses their similarities and puts them together in the frame. It makes for Omega’s best print ad of the season, and she leaves him there bewildered with a wry smirk and a promise to see him in Vancouver.

Victor resolves to himself that this is someone he is going to get to know.

Victor uses some of the Omega money making sure that all of his friends can make it to Vancouver. He expects more high-art protests against corporate money than he gets, which he initially chalks up to the fact that it’s only Zhanna and Dmitri who are still a little short on money for plane tickets. Evgeny’s the one who sets him straight, surprisingly; Evgeny who steps into Alena’s usual role to tell Victor that he’s an idiot, that they’re coming because he’s their friend and they all love him.

It’s something Victor thinks about for both flights: first to London for a layover and then onwards to Vancouver. He takes the journal out, starts to make a list of the people he thinks he loves. At first he can’t do it, so instead he writes their names and the one thing that he loves about them, which is strangely easier. He falls asleep wondering whether his list is too long or too short and why he can’t commit to any of the names properly, why the only person he knows for sure that he loves wholeheartedly and without any reservation is his sister, who is maybe too young to be spoiled, either by life or by him.

When they all arrive, he and Georgi are wise enough to stay clear of the temptation the cheap hotel their friends are staying in offers. Victor’s heard stories about other athletes trying to defend their drug tests by remarking about inhaling and accidental exposure, and he’s got no doubt the first thing they’re going to all do is buy a cartload of alcohol, find a weed dealer, and party. His friends are all here for fun, but this is his career on the line and he’s expected to give Lysacek and Takahashi — other champions from other continents, his competitors, now — a serious challenge in the medal rankings. Victor isn’t envious, just conscious of the distance this puts between him and the people who are his friends: they will never walk in an Opening Ceremony, will never hear their name called on the ice, will never ascend the podium or hear Государственный гимн Российской Федерации
played overhead while they watch the flags descend.

His short program places him behind Lysacek by precisely half a point. Georgi and Christophe have both snuck into the finals: Georgi’s in twelfth place, and Christophe is just two spots behind him. They make a few more bets, silly things like how Georgi will wave the Swiss flag if Christophe places ahead of him, and how the first round of drinks after the finals is totally going to be on Victor so long as he tries a Quad Flip. (“You know I’m doing a Quad Flip,” Victor grumbles without actual complaint, and Christophe flashes his megawatt smile, traipses fingers across Victor’s shoulder, and purrs, because that’s the point, darling.)

At the end of the night he can’t sleep, so he walks along the water in plainclothes, hood pulled up, finds a place where he can just sit and watch the water for a while. Vancouver is more modern than St. Petersburg is, and it’s a jewel of a city, set on the ocean the way it is, but being near the sea sets him a little more at ease. He puts a playlist on, jogs back to the village, sleeps. In the morning, Yakov lets him eat breakfast with his family, and Victor collects a good luck kiss from his little sister, who babbles his name with an accent that’s more French than it is Russian. Still, it’s Russian flags they’re all carrying into the stands.

Time passes quickly and slowly at the same time, because suddenly his name’s been called and he’s skating to center-ice, standing under the lights to wait for Mussorgsky’s opening notes.

His quad flip is perfect.
Watching Lysacek’s skate is probably the hardest thing Victor’s ever done, but when it’s over and done he thinks he’s won. He looks at Yakov, trying to read his coach’s face, but as usual it’s stony and impassive. Suddenly scores are announced and the old bear has let out an uncharacteristically loud whoop of congratulations and bodily picked Victor up off the floor.

He is an Olympic gold medalist.

At this moment in time, there is no skater on earth better than Victor Nikiforov.

He doesn’t get to celebrate properly for a few days; there are interviews to conduct, after all, places where it’s best not to look hungover. When those two days are over he’s crammed into a bar with a swarm of Russians and a Swiss skater who’s playing tag-along, even if he can barely understand what it is anyone is saying. Evgeny orders shots until Victor can barely stand up straight. Someone has scribbled KISS THE GOLD MEDALIST onto his shirt in sharpie: several people, actually — Russian first, then English, then French.

He forgets how many people partake, just knows he has a blast, forgets himself for a long, long time. For anyone else, this would easily be the best night of their lives. For Victor, the best has already happened: it was there on the ice, when he heard the clean crunch of his skates at the end of the quad flip, when he stood heaving for breath in the center of the rink almost certain that victory was his.

Victor wakes up in a room in the village that isn’t his with a hangover that screams worth it.

Two days later Omega’s organizing an impromptu shoot. Out of the athletes from the first set of ads, both he and Saga have gotten medals: he wears his gold, and she’s got a bronze and a silver clenched in each fist. The ad itself winds up being nothing special, just two competitors in suits and ties, wearing fancy watches, standing nose to nose. Evgeny complains about its lack of vision to him later: there’s so much he could’ve done with someone like Saga Niequist, so many lines he could’ve tried to blur. Victor explains that Omega is not a brand that blurs lines, Evgeny calls him a sellout, they drink away their disagreement on Victor’s rubles. There’s an outtake that leaks online, though: Saga’s straddling his knee, biting into her silver with a big, lopsided grin; Victor is sitting with his arms loose at his sides like he’s not sure what to do with them, nonplussed because even Alena is nothing like this.
At the end of the shoot, he gets her phone number, invites her to the exhibition skate on a whim, realizes he’s got no idea what it is that he’s doing. Victor can’t remember the last time he’s asked for a woman’s phone number in a circumstance that wasn’t strictly professional.

Maybe that’s what makes the prospect of it interesting. Something different. Something new.

His exhibition skate program is set to Jeff Buckley’s version of Hallelujah. He’s fighting back tears before the first verse is even out: the minor fall and the major lift, the baffled King composing Hallelujah ... Real tears, coming from Victor who’s never sure if he feels too many things or too few. Alena sees from the audience and understands him better, perhaps for the first time. It’s a strange and terrible thing to acknowledge: he’s never been this happy before, doesn’t know what to do with himself at this exact moment, because his insides feel bigger than his outsides, because he doesn’t fit in his skin.

When it’s over, he cries, he smiles his heart-shaped smile. He skates back out for his second bow, presses both of his hands to his lips, blows the entire watching world a kiss.

Life will be different, he thinks, from here on out. It has to be.

Chapter End Notes

okay i lied last time about when yuuri shows up. evidently i also lied about the end of the polaroids, although check out that rad myspace throwback.

the good news is that yuuri for sure shows up in chapter 4. an anon on tumblr gave me the best, most well-deserved shade about this ... if you are reading this, anon: i loved that sass, so. it was the dark-laugh highlight of my week. contains music links for the curious.
Victor wins his first world championship and before he knows it, two things happen: he makes a down payment on a house in St. Petersburg, a flat all his own. It’s in a newer building on an open floor plan, which Evgeniya says is ridiculous. She hates the place, thinks it has bad whatever-it-is that Russian grandmothers think that houses anything less than thirty years old have. Of course her house is one of the old Soviet-era builds, and so it’s like its own set of nested dolls, every room bundled together and tinier than the last, with a stove that has a burner that doesn’t work, peeling wallpaper, mismatched floral sofas.

He gets good furniture, some bookshelves, starts filling them up with the things that he likes. Gets copies of his favorite records, scores, a collection of concert programs. Plays that his University friends have recommended. Books that he keeps reading only most of the way through. His condo’s got space enough that if he pushes his couch back towards the kitchen there’s room to dance in his living room. *Room enough to dance in.* That’s the sort of comment that’s dangerous, makes Alena eye him speculatively and go *but Vitya, who with?* Like most of Alena’s questions, he doesn’t have a good answer.

Right now he’s on top of the world, though, and that’s not the sort of place suited for introspection.

He also discovers that he’s now a celebrity: he’s recognized pretty much anywhere in St. Petersburg, the hometown hero, the new heir to the throne. Suddenly all doors are open to Victor. He picks up a couple more advertising contracts, an accountant, and a significant uptick in Evgeny’s playful disdain. *Sell-out.* It’s fine. Selling out has gotten him this condo, custom skates bearing Russia’s flag with special blades, and the ability to travel in comfort to Paris whenever he wants. Evgeny would sell out immediately, too, if anyone was asking him to do the kind of shoots Victor’s getting booked on, even both of them are happier doing things that are a little edgier, photos that can play in galleries instead of magazine spreads.

Victor helps him out with one of those types of shoots, wearing smeared lipstick and high heels and fishnets in a portrait series Evgeny’s putting together about blurred lines. When a PR Agent for Omega calls to talk to Victor about his image he’s confident enough to tell them not to expect him to sit inside of a neatly defined box. He throws Saga’s name out, too, a weird thing to use in a sentence
with his own, like it doesn’t quite fit: you knew you weren’t getting ordinary out of us going in.
Don’t call and act disappointed now.

He probably buys too many things at once. Nobody’s ever really educated him about money. The designer suits he wears in his shoots are a dangerous temptation, and soon he’s been given a number of them; Burberry has noticed that he’s overfond of peacoats, for instance, and before he knows it Victor’s got six different ones, each in a different color. There are people, suddenly, who are interested in what he’s going to wear, who cut their hair the way he does. It’s surreal. What he’s not spending on suits and cologne, Victor spends on spoiling his sister. Toddler Sofia babbles in French more often than in Russian. In another year or two she’ll be better than him at it; she’ll speak Russian with a French accent, instead of the other way around.

Victor sees their father in her; she’s a summer child, laughs the way Sergei does. He may have Sergei’s smile and the brilliance of his eyes, but he’s Mariya’s boy.

They are already inverses of each other, photo negatives, opposites.

Because a gold medal has convinced him that he’s beyond all danger now, he fondly parts ways with Vasily, thanks the old man for all of his help. He’s too busy for therapy now, and anyway, what is there to talk about? Last week I flew first class to Madrid. It was terrible. All of Victor’s problems are first world problems now. Luxuries. His celebrity extends beyond just Russia’s borders: the sponsors like having him as a model, and when he takes a vacation along the French riviera, just for himself, recovering in crystal-clear infinity pools and spending long nights out at popular clubs, the doors are still open for him.

He discovers he has dozens of new almost-friends; people who are attracted by the bright light of celebrity and who, for better or worse, try to hang onto it and somehow keep a little for themselves. Some of these people are exciting and fun, and others are draining, and Alena chuckles at how they never quite make it into the inner rings of Victor’s personal orbit, places that are all occupied by artists and skaters who’ve simply been there for long enough that they’re comfortable, known quantities. Safe. Why someone like Victor Nikiforov should care whether or not people are safe for him is another one of those little mysteries, left unsolved.

This doesn’t stop Victor from having an almost overwhelming amount of fun. He does a shoot in Monaco for a bespoke shoe company, finds himself back in his own dressing room with the other model — the man who closed Valentino’s runway show last year — on his knees, working kisses down Victor’s stomach. It’s euphoric to be this wanted, everywhere he goes, and there is no place on earth he can’t go now. There is no reason to be lonely again: not when he can stumble back home (or wherever home is, this week) with practically anyone, and put them politely back out on the street in the morning with the full weight of his most charming smile. Nobody can be offended by this: he’s Victor Nikiforov, world champion, Olympic gold medalist; he’s got a very busy competition schedule, and sponsorship obligations besides, and he’s just not looking for a serious relationship right now.

It’s all very understandable.

He gets very good at kissing, in the meanwhile.

The novelty of this lasts for a good six months, well into the next season, when he’s skating to Nimrod and to Glósóli by Sigur Rós. The Grand Prix series gets off to a shaky start: he’s drinking perhaps a little too much and staying out a little too late, and it’s only after he finishes in second place in both of his qualifiers that Yakov finally manages to shake some sense into him, reminds him that he’s expected to defend these titles of his or all of the little luxuries he’s so quickly gotten acclimated to will evaporate: the condo, the first class seats, the overnight guests, the spas.
By the Grand Prix he’s back on form, using the quad flip in combination. From here on out, there’s never a moment where he isn’t in first place. Now that he’s decided to win there’s nobody capable of stopping him.

He goes out on his birthday with his friends, wakes up at home well and truly hungover wearing two different and unrecognizable socks with his shirt on backwards. Victor watches the Christmas festivals in St. Petersburg, but after they’ve passed and he’s just left with the rest of January and February ahead — the harder part of the season, something changes. Maybe it’s winter itself, or maybe it’s an offhand comment about a girlfriend that gets made by another skater while they’re in Amsterdam, but he finds himself later walking cobblestone streets by himself, watching couples leave bars arm in arm with their laughter crystallizing in front of their mouths: visible signs of happiness, warm exhales, little clouds of love.

For reasons he can’t describe, even, he flips open his phone, looks back at a message Saga sent him back at the very end of November, complaining about shitty snow conditions.

He writes back the next morning. Two months late.

He looks at his phone for a long, long time, standing there in the street, growing colder and colder by the minute.
Victor wins European Championships at the end of January in Bern. Georgi and Christophe each make the top ten. Victor makes Christophe show them around, even though Christophe doesn’t live in Bern, because turnover is a fair play, and then they spend a weekend together in Geneva for fun. It’s there that Christophe accuses him of being distracted, which is when Victor admits that he’s going to Rosa Khutor soon to watch a woman ski for reasons that he doesn’t entirely understand himself.

When he gets there, it’s after Saga’s first round of races that they’re both tipsy and handsy, back at her hotel room, and it’s Saga who pushes him back and straddles his hips. Victor feels clumsy, teenage again, admits something he shouldn’t:

“I’ve never —“

“You’re kidding.”

“With a woman,” he clarifies, and Saga throws her head back and laughs, sits back on her heels. “Do you still want to?”

“Yes.” Yes, he still wants to. That’s the grand mystery.

She looks at him for a moment, thoughtful, and then lightning seems to strike in Saga’s eyes. Victor watches in total astonishment as she proceeds to fetch a strap-on from her luggage. Of course. Saga, who he’s never seen be afraid of anything in her entire life, never be anything other than precisely what she is, unapologetically checks multiple sex toys in her luggage with an astonishing lack of concern. She’s good with it, too; fucks him senseless, or boneless, or whatever, like she’s had a decent amount of practice. It’s not Saga’s first time, that much is clear. After, he’s so ready for a second round that there’s no hesitation beyond the way his thoughts sometimes catch on how different this is when it’s with a woman.

When she settles over his hips and sinks down, Victor still finds his way to paradise.
It’s good enough that the conversation that probably should’ve happened earlier in the evening, about this, about her, about him, doesn’t happen until after her finals the next day. They talk about gender and sex for what feels like hours, openly and candidly. It would be terrifying to be so clear about his own experiences, his fantasies, the things he’s learned he likes and he dislikes except that she’s even more transparent. Saga leaves in all the blemishes, like the way she was outed to her parents because her bedframe broke with her first girlfriend, back in school. Saga admits that if it had been more popular when she was younger that she would’ve been tempted by transition, but that now is different, that she feels like she lives in the intersection of all of these different identities, somewhere between male and female, somewhere between gay and straight.

He doesn’t know as much as he should about all of this, for someone who’s spent the better part of several years calling himself gay, and who is now considering whether or not that’s even accurate, but Victor knows enough to ask her what pronoun to use, and in exchange Saga asks why he cut his hair.

He tells her the story.

“I’ve gotten off to the idea of you growing it out again,” says Saga, the way she’s been admitting to all kinds of sensational things, which is enough for Victor to remind her that they came back to the hotel because she wanted a shower. There he makes her show him, just how, and when he pushes her back against the shower tiles and she bites down on his collarbone, Victor decides he doesn’t need a clear answer on who he is or what this means.

He can live with the ambiguity of his own body so long as it feels this good.

He wins worlds and Saga is there, and when it’s all over, after they’ve gone out and celebrated and they’re back at the hotel, Victor looks at her and contemplates again. Saga is naked and still flushed from sex, and she’s wearing his gold medal while she finishes off the final pour of the bottle of champagne she’d ordered on a whim. He doesn’t see the things he sees in men that make his breath catch sometimes: the sharp jawline or the angle of the body, masculine shoulderblades or the narrow angle of a man’s hips. Saga is mercurial and fey and smirks when she catches him studying her like this, sits back on her palm, opened up for inspection.

Victor thinks that he would never let someone look at him the way he’s studying her now, like she’s something he’s going to be able to solve, but Saga’s the sort of person who doesn’t hide who she is or what she thinks. He still doesn’t manage to get past the mystery of it, why this, why her. What he decides is that he likes talking to her. That he likes the way she moves when she walks, like a cat on the prowl, stealthy and silent and with purpose. He likes that he knows that she packs sometimes, that there’s a reason why she prefers boyshorts and boxer-briefs. He likes that she’s a little bit forceful, that she’s direct, that she knows precisely what she wants.

Saga is the sort of person who should be infinitely more complicated than she actually is.

In the morning she’s photographed checking out with him and that makes the two of them an item. The subsequent article forces a conversation sooner than either one of them would’ve gotten around to it, otherwise, had over text messages while she sits in an airport getting ready to fly to the Alps for the end of the season.
Being Saga’s boyfriend is not as simple as an ‘ok’ given over a phone. Suddenly, in the off season, he’s traveling everywhere. There’s skiing in South America — he sees Machu Picchu, they hike it, she insists — and New Zealand over the summer, places Saga wants to hit up to stay sharp. She teaches him how to ski, ignores Yakov’s red-faced threats about what will happen if she gets his idiot skater’s legs broken on the slope of some god-forsaken mountain. Saga is the world’s most intense tourist. He realizes he’s never traveled with as much purpose or enthusiasm as she does. He’s walked aimlessly through cities, stumbled into bars. Saga pulls him into ruins and temples, makes him take the time, insists that he learn how to see places for what they are. Victor goes skydiving for the first time that summer. Learns how to scuba dive. Sues The Daily Mail for publishing paparazzi photos taken of them both paddle-boarding without any clothes on, shot from what must’ve been half a mile away, and so grainy that Victor’s honestly astonished by the way people online have zoomed in trying to figure out which pixels constitute his dick.

“That picture does not do you justice.”

“You look good,” Victor hums, and Saga leans over his shoulder to look at the grainy series.

“Tits are too small,” she jokes, and then because she’s still delighted by her ‘gay boyfriend’, she makes Victor tell her three different stories about times he’s had to escape the advances of buxom women, because Saga is certain he can’t possibly be as oblivious as he seems sometimes, and she knows from experience the way people will throw themselves at a champion.

Christophe sends him a text message after that that’s mostly emoticons and instructions for how to sign up for something called Instagram.
They go to Beijing, and he admits he’s never seen the Temple of Heaven. Saga takes him there. Takes him to the Great Wall of China. Pays too much money for a wall scroll from a street vendor. She makes Victor be a tourist in New York, forces him to eat one of those street hot dogs just so he can say he’s done it. *What have you been doing with your life this entire time*, Saga wants to know, steadily filling it up with so many new experiences that even Victor is wondering if he’s been making a mistake this whole time. Saga will try anything once, and he’s with Saga now. It’s the sort of thing that will stay with him for years after, and it will be because of Saga Niequist that Victor Nikiforov looks at his future husband one day and shouts *NINJAS?!* with the enthusiasm of a five year old child.

For a time, she’s the best mistake he ever makes.
The next season begins. He skates a Paul Oakenfold song that Saga listens to all the time just before she’s due to push past the start gates. It’s something that she says resonates with her even though it’s impossible to understand, nothing more than the creep of a beat, some simple strings, a plaintive voice in the distance. His other program he choreographs to Faure, which in its own way is simple: his father tells him that Pavane is scored simply, for a smaller orchestra, that it’s not meant to be a big, sweeping gesture. It’s a quiet thing, Spanish-influenced and sinuous and a little bit smoky: something kept between the two imaginary dancers who must’ve heard this music and moved to it once.

Victor turns around one day, skates, and suddenly his sister is in school in Paris. He’s in Paris, too, and so is Saga, and this is a bit of a shock. Sofia thinks Saga is cool, almost as cool as he is. They spend a day together, and he carries her around on his shoulders, taller than everyone else in the whole city. He tries to tell Sofia that she’s a Princess but she adamantly shakes her head. “Je ne veux pas être une princesse,” she insists, stretching her arms out. He translates this for Saga, who grins with bright eyes and says I like this girl. Then Sofia beams down at them both and flaps her arms again, because she’s so high up. “Je suis un oiseau!”

“You’re right,” Victor agrees. “You are a bird.” They spend the rest of the walk through the park deciding on what kind of bird she should be, and then they have dinner with his parents and Victor can’t shake how strange it is to be bringing Saga into this part of his life. They talk about it later, long after dinner, all the while reminding himself that they both make enough money that he can get a hotel, and not feel obligated to sleep in the spare room of his parents’ flat simply because it belongs to his parents.

“Ah,” says Saga, with sudden understanding, characteristic bluntness, and the mischievous grin that he’s so weak for. “I’m the first person you’ve fucked that they’ve met, eh?”

Because Saga sometimes likes to cause trouble, she’s dived back under the sheets before he can give a proper answer, and Victor eventually gives up trying to swat her away, because Saga knows his body so well by now. He comes in her mouth biting down on his own fist to keep from shouting
because somewhere in this house his little sister, the Kingfisher, is asleep.

Georgi tells him at Russian Nationals that he’s in love with someone new, one of the pairs skaters. Victor never gets the sort of look in his eye talking about Saga that Georgi gets when he’s talking about a girl, which Victor has always written off as Georgi being Georgi.

Her name is Anya. Georgi insists he’s serious. *I’m going to marry her.*

Alena reminds him: *you said that about me, once.*

“He was young and foolish,” protests Georgi, hand over his heart, and Alena nearly snorts out her beer.

“Just because you’ve graduated doesn’t mean you’re old and wise now, Georgi Popovich.”

Yakov invites him out to dinner one night, and instead of going back to the house where, presumably, Lilia is waiting, they eat out in the city. Lilia is not with them. Victor doesn’t think to ask why. He hasn’t seen Lilia much lately, but that’s no surprise: he’s doing his own choreography now. Anyway, Yakov wants to talk to him about a young skater with a lot of potential, a boy from Moscow named Yuri Plisetsky. Yakov’s got videos; the kid’s angelic looking, like a cherubic little kitten.
“He looks up to you,” Yakov grumbles over vodka, and Victor contemplates that. He’s not Plushenko; doesn’t have it all together. Can’t imagine relating to this child with a round, sweet face that can’t possibly have any jagged edges.

Like everything else, he’ll learn how wrong he is in time.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Just talk to him sometimes,” Yakov mutters, like he hates that he’s sitting here, resorting to bribing Plisetsky’s idol to motivate his newest skater. This is partially truth and partially lie: Victor can be kinder, too, whenever he’s forced to be self-aware. “It’ll help him.”

_It might help you, too._

He sprains his ankle at the European Championships during the short program and comes in second when he downgrades the quads in his free skate. It’s an infuriating end to his winning streak, and Victor is unkind to himself for weeks until Worlds, tunes out everyone in his life who isn’t Saga or Yakov.

He doesn’t always listen to them, either. Injuries always put Victor on edge. Something about them always makes him ask the same old question:

_Without the ice, who are you?_

He still doesn’t know.

He skates with a vengeance at worlds, this time without Saga around. She’s in Switzerland, their schedules don’t always work out. It narrows his world down to the edge of a blade, which might be for the best. Saga is the kind of person who is always trying to rip things open.

He sets a new personal best, a new world record.

It erases everyone’s doubts about whether or not he’s the best figure skater in the world.

Perhaps even his own.
Victor decides to be in France for the summer, makes himself settle down. Sofia is growing up much too quickly for his liking, tall for her age and thin as a reed. She’s the darling of her dance class — why wouldn’t she be, considering? — and everywhere she goes she brags about her big brother, who won the whole Olympics. A child’s understanding of these things, but he does have the gold medal, and he’s just vicious enough to bring it home so that Sofia can show it off to her other friends and prove that she’s royalty.

“You spoil her,” mutters Mariya in Russian, slightly disapproving, shaking her head with a cluck of her tongue that reminds him of Babushka. Victor grins his father’s grin: of course he does.

He doesn’t see the people he loves often enough to not shower them in gifts and glory, to make up for his absence in their life and their absence in his. His surprise of the summer is the house he’s rented in Marseilles while both the ballet and the symphony are on holiday. Victor still loves Paris even though he long ago decided he shouldn’t, but there’s nothing for him that’s as soothing as the sea. The Mediterranean is the wrong color; too like his eyes, his fathers, but it’s all the same water after all, isn’t it?

He wakes up obscenely early to have the local rink to himself, the sort of thing which used to be obscenely expensive until he became Victor Nikiforov. Now it’s de-facto habit. His father brings along his cello and for three whole weeks his evenings are mostly domestic affairs. Victor realizes he’s forgotten what this is like; hasn’t thought of the old St. Petersburg flat in a long time. There’s a Philip Glass song, Opening, that is nothing more than a constant unfurling of piano notes, and it makes him think about how the world kept spinning on in defiance of his unhappiness. Naturally he chooses it to skate to. This time choreography is a three-way effort: Mariya leans against the wall of the rink those early mornings, and sometimes, when she’s not grumpy, Sofia is there too, telling her brother that he needs more spins because she thinks they’re very pretty.

He adds more spins. Because Sofia said so.

Saga avoids the place like the plague. The entire affair is too domestic, too settled for her: she’s got
summer skiing to do in the Southern Hemisphere and tackles it with the same ferocity Victor has always admired, even if this time he’s doing it from a distance, swapping flirty comments on Instagram and spending a decent chunk of his time on Skype.

Everything is fine until he’s out walking Makkachin with his mother one day — they’ve been at the beach, chasing sticks — and she asks him point blank:

“Why are Yakov and Lilia divorcing?”

“What?”

He calls Yakov directly. Yakov is gruff, the way he always is, pretending like he’s not a man whose whole world is getting split into neat halves by a woman of exacting measure. “I didn’t want it to be a distraction, Vitya,” he says, and, standing there looking out over the sea, all Victor knows is that for all the times in his life that he’s been accused of feeling too little, now cannot possibly be one of them.

Look at me now, he wants to say to Alena, while he seethes, because Lilia and Yakov took him into their home once, fed him and sheltered him like a son, and neither one of them has seen fit to share this piece of news with him. Underneath his fury is a sharp twist of guilt, the sort of thing Victor will go to great lengths to avoid, because there’s been entire dinners with Yakov where all Victor has talked about is skating because he’s just assumed that’s all Yakov’s had to talk about.

There is a deep sadness that he hates because he hasn’t been this close to loneliness in a long, long time. In Victor’s head, Lilia and Yakov were a permanency he expected to continue in their present form for the rest of time.

It won’t be until he’s back in Russia that he can see Yakov face to face and realize what it was the other man’s been trying to say for such a long time: I didn’t want you to see me fail at something.

Saga is skiing in New Zealand and can’t answer the phone for another six hours when he finishes talking to Yakov. He spends them sitting on the porch with his dog, headphones plugged in, trying to imagine all the ways things fall apart.

He writes his short program literally the next morning. It’ll be skated to the theme song from Requiem for a Dream.

When he’s back to St. Petersburg, Saga makes an impromptu trip to try to cheer him up. She meets Babushka. They have dinner together at the kind of place that’s so nice that Victor has to refuse to
give his Grandmother a menu, lest she try to order something like bread and butter with ice water to spare him the expense. The old woman nudges him during the second course and leans over the table to speak in heavy Russian:

“Vitya, it’s clear you’re doing all kinds of indecent things with this woman,” she grumbles, which nearly makes him spit out his drink. These are the sorts of things that lead to accidents, like the time Sergei knocked her daughter up and gave the world a gold medalist instead of a prima donna ballerina.

“What is she saying?” Saga wants to know.

“I’ll tell you later,” Victor murmurs, because this is not a conversation he wants to have in a public restaurant in two different languages. Later, much later, when Saga’s got him drunk enough to wheedle the truth out of him, Victor admits that Evgeniya is a traditionalist and in a traditionalist’s mind the kinds of things they do lead to matrimony and children always, even if not necessarily in that order.

*I don’t really want kids,* Saga says, offhand, and later Victor will realize this is the first thing she’s ever said that has actually bothered him.

It also marks the beginning of the end, the start of the decline of this thing he was born to lose.

Another season flies by. He makes an offhand comment to a young Yuri Plisetsky which will be held against him in years that Victor can’t imagine yet, though it will also force Katsuki Yuuri to strive to hold onto him sooner than he might have done otherwise. Yuri is an intense, serious child, and he’s all but friendless in St. Petersburg. He’s stubborn, too: determinedly working up jumps that Yakov will never let him skate in the juniors. He falls often and hard, like he’s punishing himself, though Victor has no idea what for, or what his hurry is. Victor watches him at the rink. With outsider eyes, he can’t help but wonder if this was how he looked at the same age: skating so hard that he was bound, eventually, to hurt himself. It’s while watching Yuri skate that Victor realizes how unforgiving the ice can be sometimes.

But maybe he’s just in a mood, the way Yakov and Lilia are both in moods. “They were arguing a lot,” Georgi mutters one evening at the end of a practice where Lilia’s been going over choreography with him. Victor gives her some credit for that: whatever’s happened with her marriage, she hasn’t abandoned his friends or her work. It means he sees her less, though; it’s generally understood that he choreographs his own programs now. “Didn’t you notice?”

No. He hadn’t noticed. His hands clench into fists and release in his pockets.

Victor has not realized that he wants to be married, ever, until this crisis with Yakov and Lilia. It’s been too distant a concept to relate to in his own life. Now one of the marriages he assumed would never dissolve is ended while he and everyone he knows watches from the front row. He’s been with Saga for a while at this point, though he’s bad at pinpointing precisely how long off the top of his head. *Airhead,* someone scoffs. They’re not wrong.

When, though, is he supposed to know? When is he supposed to do what Evgeniya wants, when is he going to think of Saga and be sure?

(“I’m not talking to you while you’re being such a grump,” Saga huffs, over the phone.)

Georgi just misses qualifying for the Grand Prix Finals, where Victor sprains his ankle again, this time so badly saving himself from a fall that he subsequently has to sit out Russian Nationals. He spends a week off the ice with Saga in the Alps while she trains, and then flies back home to root for
his friends, even if it’s from the sidelines. Georgi wins the title, but they both know it’s because Victor isn’t there. He’s happy for Georgi, but he’s curious too: born in any other year, Georgi might have a very different life, might have gotten to skate outside of the large radius of Victor’s shadow. Georgi insists it doesn’t matter; he’s got other things on his mind anyhow: namely, the fact that he still hasn’t convinced Anya to go on a second date.

“Not everyone’s got your luck, Vitya,” he quips wryly. Victor’s not quite sure what he means until Georgi references Saga, who Victor’s gotten to see just a handful of times so far this season.

Is that all Saga is? Luck?

If it is, it doesn’t hold. Victor flies to the Winter X-Games, rushing to Park City in order to see her compete. Her first run is fine; it’s the second that is terrible: she crashes coming around one of the trickier turns, sliding into the protective fencing where the cameras linger overlong on the way she’s clutching at one of her legs and screaming. Victor’s so jet-lagged and sleep-deprived that the trip to get to the hospital feels surreal, like he’s watching the whole thing on television, someone else’s life, instead of really being inside of this taxi, riding to the hospital on his own.

Saga has torn up a knee. At first she’s in so much pain that he sees actual tears, which are scary enough for someone like Victor, who never knows what to do with someone when they’re crying. They’re scarier coming from Saga, who is someone he’s never seen near sadness, much less in something like this agony.

They give her strong painkillers, and her coach swears they’re going to find the best ortho for the surgery and that she’ll be back on her feet in no time. Unfortunately, the best orthopedic surgeons happen to also have very busy schedules — as do figure skating champions — and Victor can’t decide whether he feels relieved or guilty that he’s going to miss the surgery and Saga’s first few days of recovery at home.

“You’re so damn ambivalent,” Alena curses him. “Useless.”

When he does see Saga — he’s got three days off, just three — her leg’s cased up in a big black brace. She’s restless and grumpy, doesn’t appreciate being stuck back at home in an apartment that feels like a birdcage because she can’t just come and go the way she’s used to. Victor meets her family. Her parents are divorced, so there’s two separate dinners; her mother thinks it was only a matter of time before she got a career ending injury. *I’m not finished yet,* she snaps, and Victor sits
stoic, holds her hand under the table. Her father is a businessman, re-married; he’s vaguely supportive, but just vaguely: when he first meets Victor all he can say is *ah, Nick, right?*

Saga has to correct him. *This is Victor. Victor Nikiforov.* Mr. Niequist has two other children and his company to keep track of, and his daughter’s boyfriend’s name was just one step too far, evidently, no matter how famous Victor is. *Ah, of course. You skate, yes?*

By Europeans, Georgi has convinced Anya to give him a kiss on the cheek for good luck just before he skates. It must do something for him: he’s third place on the podium, though Christophe has just edged past him into second place. When they gather together for their photo, the first of all three of them sharing a podium together, Christophe helps himself to a handful of Victor’s ass and then grins, unapologetic. “I’m coming for you,” Christophe purrs, which is the sort of thing he can manage to make sound like a lurid promise, even when they both know it isn’t.

Victor grins. Flirting with Christophe without the pressure of payoff has become one of his favorite hobbies. It’s one of the nicest things about his relationship with Saga: she doesn’t seem to think he’ll ever stop thinking men are attractive, has no expectation whatsoever that either one of them will change who they are. Even though Saga seems to have a much better grip on that than he does. “Aren’t you always?”

Christophe says nothing, giving one cheek a hearty squeeze as he flashes the cameras a wink to match.

Saga comes to see him win worlds, walking slowly and carefully around the rink. She’s got months of physical therapy ahead, a process that demands a patience Victor knows she doesn’t have. Fortunately Saga’s got a good coach, good trainers. She’ll be okay.

It doesn’t occur to him that he’s probably got a part to play in this, too.

Because he doesn’t have to spend this summer chasing Saga all over the world, Victor schedules time between Paris and Stockholm. It’s less hectic, like he’s going to be able to breathe again, and somehow Victor misses the big cues while he’s basking in the relief of not being on a new plane every week.

The next season is the Olympics; Saga will have to qualify coming off of months of recovery, amid skepticism about her career. On the other hand, Victor’s the hands-down favorite.

It’s another clue he misses.
She calls him, early one morning in August, sounding hungover and distant. “I wanted you to hear this from me before it goes public,” Saga says, and what Victor subsequently receives is a lesson in the downside to being with someone excruciatingly honest, someone who never hides anything. It’s more detail than he needs about a night out that she’s just had in Ibiza, and how there’s a media outlet ready to go public with pictures of her making out with another woman, some DJ she met on the night out on the town with friends.

He’s got a million questions that don’t make it past his teeth; questions like what sort of friends Saga has, if they didn’t know she was already in a relationship, like why he didn’t mean enough to merit any consideration in return.

It’s not like he hasn’t been around dozens of attractive and willing men in the same amount of time.

“Victor?”

“It’s fine,” he lies, which Saga does not like, and which she had once had the right to protest about, to push him on. “Goodbye, Saga,” he adds, which is the truth. He hangs up before she can press him for honesty, because in his mind she’s no longer deserving of it, and he stops answering her texts, which go from apologetic to angry in a matter of days.

Later, when the press corps wants to know what happened, Victor takes advantage of the fact that sometimes they go weeks without being photographed together. He lies because lying is easier than admitting that Victor Nikiforov, World Champion, Gold Medalist, has just been cheated on by another Olympian — a drunk one, probably miserable and overwhelmed by the possibility of entering the Olympic season coming off of an injury, but nonetheless. It’s not like he hasn’t had his
own miserable moments.

“We were on a break.” They weren’t on a break. But it kills the story sooner to say that they were.

His heart is supposed to be broken, but all Victor feels is curiously numb, like he’s been swathed in so much protective cotton that he can’t feel a thing anymore. All of his friends try to help in different ways. Victor sleeps with Evgeny twice on the rebound, something they both know is just sex and nothing else. Georgi tries to talk to him about the nature of heartbreak and about his certainty that Victor has a soulmate out there somewhere, same as he’s got Anya, which isn’t what he wants to hear right now but Georgi’s a good soul, and he’s trying. Christophe promises to get him well and truly drunk the next time they see each other, and swears he’s identified every gay club worth going to in each of the Grand Prix cities this year. Alena is furious and tries to get to the cold heart of Victor’s own anger, tries to slice through his malaise.

*What do you think you owe that woman, that you’d protect her with a lie?*

He tells his mother the truth when she calls to ask him about it: not just about what Saga did, but about himself, too. He admits, only to Mariya, that it’s probably at least partially his fault: had their situations been reversed, and Saga as absent from his rehabilitation as he’s been from hers, they likely would have arrived at precisely the same outcome.

He wonders if he should call Vasily for a session and decides against it. Looking at it through this angle, Victor finally answers the question he’s spent over a year trying to solve:

*Why Saga?*

Because Saga, in a lot of ways, was just like him. He doesn’t need Vasily to understand narcissism.

His father tries to be gentle. His grandmother insists *I never liked that woman anyway.* Yakov says it’s for the best that he doesn’t have to deal with all the extra travel this season. Sochi is practically a hometown games for Victor; his media schedule will be manic, the entire country has eyes on him now. Trust Yakov to be a pragmatist in the middle of catastrophe. Just look how he’s handling his divorce, with the same exact Russian stoicism. Years later, when Victor properly understands memes, there will be one produced of a dog sitting inside of a house on fire. *This is fine,* says the dog. The dog is Yakov. The dog is him.

The *actual* dog is Makkachin, who loves him perfectly and enthusiastically in spite of all of his flaws.

A week later Yakov’s adding a fourth skater to his roster. He rarely coaches women, and yet here one is: Mila Babicheva, fresh out of juniors, a sassy redhead who argued her way past every one of his objections. *It’s the Olympics,* she says. *If I have to make my senior debut at the Olympics I need to be coached by the best.*

She splits the distance between him and Plisetsky, relates to the kid in a way Victor can’t.

She’d almost be likable if he was in a better mood.

Victor throws himself into perfecting his programs. He’s doing *Scheherazade* for his long program, something decided long before this mess with Saga. The short program comes together to the lullaby theme from *Pan’s Labyrinth.* It becomes something otherworldly, the sort of program people keep talking about long after he skates it; by the European Championships, it sets the World Record that Yuri Plisetsky will someday break.

He does his exhibition skate to a song he’s loved for a long time, without caring whether or not
“You’re skating from the perspective of two women this year,” his mother asks. Not quite, Victor thinks. In Scheherazade he’s skating as the villain.

Nobody comes close to him in the regular season, which makes him a favorite leading up to Sochi. He gets a call that changes everything one afternoon from a Russian Olympic committee official. You’ve been selected to be our flag-bearer. He thinks about how his sister, nearly eight, is going to get to see this: to see him, walking into that arena, carrying the Russian flag. That idea alone buoys his mood for months. Makes him almost normal again.

Mila’s exhibition skate is to I Put A Spell On You, which has made Yuri Plisetsky give her a new nickname: Baba, after Baba-Yaga, and then he amuses himself by coming up with a thousand different variations on the underlying hag joke. Mila takes it all in stride. Why shouldn’t she? She can lift Yuri over her head. Georgi is doing an All-Russian set of programs: Waltz. No. 2 by Shostakovich and Night on Bald Mountain by Mussorgsky. It’s very patriotic, that, but his penchant for classic glam rock comes back when he does his Exhibition to Under Pressure.

He sees Saga once at Sochi — by accident. He’s been ignoring the skiers, trying not to check to see if she makes it back on the podium. It’s a party that they wind up at, unintentionally. When Victor walks in he owns this bar: he’s the home-country hero, and Saga’s just the woman everyone thinks broke his heart. She cedes the territory almost immediately, catches him in passing on the way out. “Can we not be those exes?”

“I’m not that nice,” Victor admits.

“Idiot,” says Saga. “I know.”

It’s nothing like forgiveness. Just a little hint of passing understanding, a seed that someone else will come along and nurture, someone who makes Victor want to be kinder than he is, someone who gives him aspirations that aren’t just about the places he’s been or the championships he’s won.

The Russian team takes gold in the team event that they’ve made up to add more figure skating to the agenda — everyone knows how well it sells — thanks largely to him, Mila, Georgi, and Anya. Mila surprises everyone but Victor and Yuri and Yakov, who know what she’s capable of, when she takes a bronze in the women’s singles, beaming from the podium.

Victor skates his way to a gold medal and the history books. Again.

Then it’s all over and Worlds are almost an afterthought and it’s at worlds that he manages to catch a coffee with Lambiel, whose legacy he’s already surpassed. Aside from that one special moment in the Opening Ceremonies, walking into a stadium absolutely surging with cheers for Team Russia, Victor feels no different than he did before.

“Did you think you would?” Stéphane wants to know.

He realizes he did. He thought he’d emerge from these fires transformed.

“I don’t think that’s how change works.”
hey look there's three consecutive times when i've lied to myself about how much time victor is going to spend wallowing before he gets to his husband ugh whatever fine.

regarding saga, when i started this fic i wanted to find a way to acknowledge the fact that when victor talks to yuuri on the beach he's like "got any girlfriends" "want to hear about mine" in a way that to me, sounded rather plural. so here we are. victor's had two girlfriends, one in the haha-trying-to-be-a-straight sense, and the other in the find-yourself-attracted-to-someone-magnetic-but-not-necessarily-typical-for-you sense. people may or may not like that (or her) but hey, what's the worst that could happen? probably something like ending up on a yoi-shitlist out there in tumblr's discourse-verse. oh wait, that's already happened today. haaaaay.

this took what felt like forever, here's the music list.

CHAPTER FIVE REALLY HAS YUURI IN IT. I SWEAR. and i'm actually really really happy that i get to write it this weekend, so. there's that. see you soon, fam.
you can turn me into the real thing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another worlds. Another gold medal. Victor’s made half a million dollars in competitions alone, this year, and that’s not counting the sponsorship money, the modeling fees. The money’s become almost an abstraction, now. He has a closet full of Tom Ford and Yves Saint Laurent; he’s got handmade Italian shoes; he’s bought thousand-thread-count ridiculous sheets for practically everyone he knows. All this, and: Babushka is still living in the nested doll flat, refusing to let him replace anything she owns.

All this, and: he doesn’t have the energy for his own life. He skates. He trains. He works. He shows up at photoshoots and he smiles the Victor Nikiforov smile. He comes home, walks the dog, collapses into bed.

As they say: rinse, repeat.

It’s because he’s busy, logically.

He misses dozens of texts.
It takes him longer than usual to get his ideas for the upcoming season crystallized. His father’s the one to send along *Stammi Vicino*, in two different arrangements, and Victor picks the one that’s sparse and singular. Sergei reads Italian well enough, after all these decades of studying and conducting music, to translate it when Victor starts to take the aria seriously.

It’s not that he feels like skating to a love song. He definitively doesn’t. Love feels like an
improbability right now, possibly even a lie. The fear of loss gets to him, though, and he adapts it into a free skate in the same way that the Arecibo message was once sent out to space: without any real intention of communicating to anyone, and without hope of reply.

Victor crafts this program from the pit of a deep sadness that he’s unable to recognize. It will become one of life’s little oddities, that he later has Stammi Vicino to thank for his every happiness.

His short program is almost an afterthought; in the history of his life it won’t matter. His exhibition skate is to Your Hand in Mine and is nothing more than Victor wandering across the ice, sweeping his hands down over it as he glides, caressing it like a lover, perhaps the only real one he has. Some people think it also looks like a farewell, which sparks a rumor long before the Grand Prix Finals that Victor Nikiforov might really be thinking about retiring.

You can’t retire, Plisetsky snaps. Not until I’m up in seniors to kick your ass. Last season Yuri Plisetsky won his first junior championship and morphed from innocent kitten to devil teenager. Victor routinely, and sweetly, threatens to wash his mouth out with soap. He sounds like his own grandmother when he does it, which is the sort of thing he should hate, except that hate is like any other emotion, requires an energy he doesn’t have.

In a way, he can appreciate Yuri. Yuri, at this age, is actually giving voice to the things Victor wouldn’t have ever let himself say. He never tells Plisetsky this, in part because offering Plisetsky anything nice now is a guaranteed way to get his haunches raised to the ceiling, because he doesn’t know what to do with anything soft. Strange how twelve months can make gentleness foreign on a person. Victor knows what it’s like to try all those identities on, though, and Yuri is choosing sharp and hard for now. It’s a valid choice.

In some ways Victor is also still choosing.

He gives himself bruises in practice trying to come up with new ways to surpass himself. That’s where the competition is these days: Victor can only chase his own ghost.

The first time he hears the words Yuuri Katsuki they actually come off of Mila’s lips, and it happens like this: she and Yuri are already off the rink, lounging in the hockey bench, watching videos of the first Grand Prix assignments. Victor is still skating — he’s not happy with his footwork, exactly, in Stammi Vicino, has been repeating the step sequence until his ankle aches. Passing by, he overhears them talking:

“He skates like Victor, don’t you think?”
Nobody skates like Victor does. He slows down. Glances over to watch Yuri’s face as he scowls at the phone Mila’s holding up.

“He’s not as good as the old man,” Yuri grumbles, which is, for Yuri, agreement because it isn’t first and foremost outright rejection. Curiosity gets the best of Victor, and he skates over, and Mila refuses to show him the video until he’s on the bench, too, propping a skate up on the rail to give his leg a break. Mila ruffles his hair while he watches, and then makes *tch gross* noises because it’s sweaty and sticky and now that he’s no longer moving Victor feels what this training session has taken out of his body, knows that afterwards he’ll be done with practice too. Inertia will set in. It’s impossible to spend every minute of every day punishing himself into new levels of greatness, no matter how hard he tries.

“Who is he?”

“Yuuri Katsuki,” says Mila. She sounds faintly disapproving for some reason Victor can’t place. Like he ought to have known the answer to that question. Victor’s tired, though; he already has more people in his life than he can actually keep track of. He can’t add competitors to that list right now.

“He’s from Japan.”

“His jumps are shit,” Yuri mutters. “Not like yours.”

“Mm,” says Victor, only half paying attention to the teenager. He sees what Mila sees in Katsuki’s skating instead: all the little homages, here and there. A gorgeous layback Ina Bauer. There’s something about the way Yuuri does his artistic elements, too, with the same reach and poignance that Victor tries to infuse his programs with. *Tries,* because after all these years it’s starting to feel rote, and here’s Yuuri, whose skating has half a dozen significant technical flaws but who seems to have more feeling in his pinky finger than Victor currently possesses in his entire body.

They’re assigned to no events together, so that’s all he gets, that one preview. Victor has already forgotten about the video by the time he gets home and goes to walk Makkachin and get back to bed. He dreams for the first time in months, and in the morning can’t remember what about.

Nonetheless: this is how the conversation between them begins, without Victor even realizing it. Later he will think that life is strange, that it’s curious the way some of its most significant moments can only be seen clearly in hindsight.

Victor skates Rostelecom and the *Trophée de France* and before he knows it, the Grand Prix finals have arrived. It’s strange to be back on Olympic ice in Sochi after all the venues have been nearly abandoned but there they are, the top six from the Grand Prix series. After the Short Program, Victor is in first, with a gleeful Christophe chasing him down from second place. There’s a new Canadian in the mix, too, a kid named Jean-Jacques Leroy whose way of introducing himself to Victor is to ask: *hey, what was with the chick programs, last year?*

At which point Victor, petty as he is, decides to promptly forget JJ’s name.

Katsuki’s in fourth place, striking distance of taking John-Jacob or whatever he’s called out for a medal. This is an outcome Victor finds himself deeply wishing for, but there’s no chance to introduce himself or wish the Japanese skater luck before his long program.

That free skate is the longest four minutes and thirty seconds of both of their lives. Katsuki falls and falls again and every time some part of Victor wants to reach out to him and say *don’t, don’t put yourself through this,* he’s back on his feet, rushing into his jumps, over-rotating, under-rotating. He makes nearly every mistake. It’s a disaster from start to finish, inexplicably nothing like the Short Program from the day before and nothing like the skater he vaguely remembers from Mila’s videos.
It’s the kind of meltdown that will leave the press speculating about how it might’ve been better if someone else had qualified instead. Victor watches the end of the collapse with a strange, foreign muscle aching: his heart. Yuuri sits in the Kiss and Cry, which is more Cry than Kiss right now for sure. Doesn’t acknowledge the score.

He looks like the sort of person who’s just been told somebody died.

A couple performances later, Victor has to put it all out of his mind because he’s the World Champion and he’s got a job to do, a performance that people expect. He does that job. Doing it puts thirty points between him and Christophe; second place isn’t even close. Christophe, in an impish mood, gives Leroy Jenkins the start of his life on the podium when he leans over and whispers: are you sure it’s safe to touch you? I’ve heard that straight can be catching.

Victor smiles his heart-shaped smile, goes through the motions at the press conference. Does that thing where he takes off his sunglasses and winks for the photographers. Then he collects his things with the Russian team and tries to tell Yuri Plisetsky that his performances in juniors have gotten a little bit rote, that just because he’s distanced himself from every competitor doesn’t mean he shouldn’t be putting his heart into his skating.

You’re projecting, thinks Victor, in Vasily’s voice, to himself. Except he’s not wrong, either. Yuri looks at him with the same bland distance that Victor feels. I won, so what does it matter?

Victor shrugs it off, smiles another one of his tight smiles, and then he feels the weight of someone looking at him and lets his attention drift elsewhere. Elsewhere happens to be Katsuki Yuuri, bundled into a plain jacket for Team Japan — nothing as ostentatious as what the Russian team gets. Victor has one shot to introduce himself properly to Katsuki Yuuri, to try to say something that might ease the hurt Katsuki is probably feeling on this day. For someone who normally performs so well under pressure, he ruins this, because when he meets Yuuri’s dark gaze he realizes he’s being stared at with a wistfulness that takes Victor’s breath away. There is a sadness there which is so profound and obvious that it makes his own feel stunted by comparison because he can’t express it, won’t radiate it, never lets it show.

He opens his mouth and tries to think of the right words and the fact that English isn’t Victor’s first language catches up to him when all that tumbles out of his mouth is commemorative photo. The photograph was meant to be a stall, a way to get them talking, anything other than stating the obvious and asking, like the idiot that he is, about what’s just happened and if there’s anything he can do. The truth is that Victor never knows what to do with people. He can usually be trusted to say the wrong thing in a crisis. He’s just done it again. Spectacularly.

Katsuki looks crestfallen and turns his back on him. Victor knows he’s just failed a test of some kind; that between them there was a question in the air, and he’s given the wrong answer.

He just wishes he knows what that question was.

(At their wedding, when Yuuri leans over post-ceremony and whispers: “Vitya, should we get a commemorative photo?” Victor will still admit that he deserved that. He will also relish it, the actual opportunity to spend a lifetime with this man living it down.)
He’s late to the banquet. Yakov has arranged another interview for him with the Russian sports media, since this year the Grand Prix Finals is hosted at home. Finishing it sends him back through the hotel to fulfill his obligations to show up at these sorts of things; to smile and be polite and enjoy what is typically a somewhat boring cocktail affair. Christophe can usually be relied upon to have interesting plans for after.

Because he hasn’t been at the banquet he hasn’t had a chance to stop Katsuki Yuuri from drinking sixteen glasses of champagne. On the trip to New York with Saga, that one time, Victor got to hear all about how there’s a hot dog eating championship on Coney Island where men and women assemble to eat hot dogs by the dozens. Katuski Yuuri has just done to sixteen glasses of champagne what those people do to a pile of hot dogs and he’s still on his feet.

In fact, he’s more than on his feet. He’s in the middle of some type of dance off with Yura. Yuri Plisetsky is a child prodigy and particularly good at ballet, and drunk Katsuki Yuuri is making him look like it’s amateur hour. Victor loses count of how many influences he catches while he wanders closer to see what’s going on. Salsa. Viennese Waltz. Is that breakdancing? “Jesus,” he murmurs, standing next to Christophe, who is watching all of this with a knowing gleam in his eye, and occasionally eyeing a support pole that’s in the middle of the room like he’s got one of those ideas.

“Jesus,” Christophe says, patting Victor’s Russian-Orthodox upbringing on the shoulder while it goes down in flames, “has definitely left the building.”

“How did this even —?”

“Don’t you know not to question your blessings?” Christophe hums, sounding terribly pleased with himself, and then he’s made an excuse about needing to go see about a thing that Victor hardly hears at all. Victor will learn what the thing was later, when Christophe reappears in his underwear after having decided that this beam was made for pole-dancing. That is the moment where Victor will realize that Christophe is a good, good friend. Perhaps the very best friend, even.

Right now, he’s too sober for something like this, hasn’t even had a chance to have a drink yet, although a significant amount of the champagne is gone for some reason. Mila’s there on the edge of the battle, dancing too, and so he comes and joins her, and then keeps drifting closer without realizing exactly what he’s doing. Tango, he processes, adding another type of dance to the impressive list of things Katsuki Yuuri apparently knows about. This is how it happens. This is how Katsuki Yuuri makes a single, perfect turn, catches a whole fistful of Victor Nikiforov’s jacket, and pulls him in without missing a beat.
Their first dance.

Yuuri leads him effortlessly, with a sixth-sense for where everyone else is standing, transfixed by the metamorphosis Japan’s shy skater has undergone after sixteen glasses and half a bottle of champagne. Victor is also transfixed for a different reason: Yuuri’s hair is a mess, tumbling over his forehead, and he’s as red as an apple, but he keeps throwing his head back and howling laughter every time he tries to wrangle Victor into some complicated twist and then discovers how beautifully they’ve executed it together. Victor does not have the language for this.

It’s the most exhilarating, liberating thing Victor has done since the day he drew in a deep breath and leapt out of a plane.

Yuuri dips him, easily, fluidly, and his fingers traverse Victor’s thigh, lead his leg up into a long extension. It’s electric, that touch, and the laughter is catching. Someone is laughing, at least. It’s a foreign sound, something he hasn’t heard in a while: his own laugh.

Imagine that.

Victor thinks that he could do this forever, but at some point reality sets in, sweat and that feeling of getting parched, and he fumbles through a promise that he’s going to go find them drinks. Drinks winds up being a tall glass of water, because the champagne has gone missing, and he’s just gotten a second glass for Yuuri when he realizes that Yuuri is gone. The crowd that was assembled around them has shifted ever-so-slightly to a new focal point.

Christophe Giacometti is doing a strip-tease on that one, inexplicable pole in the center of the banquet room. Victor looks left and right for the blue tie twisted around Yuuri’s head, catches him a second too late — right as Yuuri’s dropped his pants, and then thrown them towards anyone for safe-keeping. Surely not, Victor thinks dimly, this cannot possibly be his life, because Christophe pole-dancing makes sense, but surely —

— no, that is Yuuri, who jumps up onto the pole with practiced ease. He swiftly renders Victor Nikiforov incapable of anything resembling a rational thought.

Victor has known for a long time that Christophe grew up and got cut. Victor’s no saint, so he’ll happily admit that Christophe is easy to look at, that he’s got one of those bodies that’s magazine-ready, lean and long and hard. Yuuri, though; Yuuri is something else: underneath that unassuming demeanor, Yuuri has the most gorgeous legs. Strong, powerful quads. Thighs that Victor thinks he would happily die between (he’s not thinking straight; he knows he isn’t, but he also can’t stop). Perfect calves.

Jesus Christ, even his ankles are amazing. That Yuuri wears boxer-briefs is a piece of Katsuki Yuuri trivia Victor didn’t know he needed in his life, because he never knew he needed this in his life to begin with. He’d be able to wax poetic about that ass, too, if only Yuuri’s untucked shirt wasn’t getting in the —

Oh. Christophe is wolf-whistling and something interesting is happening on Yuuri’s upper body, the part Victor hasn’t even had a chance to process yet. Soon he can’t even do that properly because something white has hit him in the face and is obstructing his view. It smells like a cologne he can’t place, and musk, and sweat, and he belatedly realizes it’s Yuuri’s shirt, lets it hang over his shoulder in a daze, one hand resting on crumpled fabric for safekeeping. Now he can see all of the muscle that runs along Yuuri’s sides, his abdomen, his hipbones. Victor wants to find the champagne and pour it on Yuuri’s abdomen, wants to lick it up with sticky-sweet kisses.

He wants, he wants, he wants.
When Yuuri gets Christophe into one arm, anchored in a backbend over his knee, Victor Nikiforov has decided one thing about his life. Two things. Three things.

One: he is taking pole dancing lessons at first opportunity.
Two: he is installing a stripping pole into his condo. This is an overlooked necessity that he didn’t understand when first evaluating real estate. It will fit in the living room. He’ll back the couch up towards the kitchen. That will be fine. Yes. Good.
Three: he has never had as powerful an urge to find a person, back them up a wall, and kiss them senseless as he is experiencing right now.

Somehow, though, it’s over almost before it began, and Christophe pushes Yuuri in Victor’s direction, watches with laughing, knowing eyes as Victor helps him back into his shirt, fumbling with buttons. He is certain he is blushing in every place that could possibly give him away: the tips of his ears, the high bridge of his nose, perhaps even the tips of his fingers whenever they catch on Yuuri’s chest. Christophe is putting his own pants back on when Yuuri suddenly flings his arms around Victor. Yuuri’s eyes are honey, chocolate, coffee; it’s not lost on Victor that these are all things he likes to eat. Delicious, his brain helpfully supplies. That’s what this is.

Katsuki Yuuri rolls his hips against Victor’s and Victor is lost. This is practically every filthy idea that’s sprung through his mind in the last hour coming to life. He and everyone else present have just gotten a demonstration in all the ways Yuuri can move, and now Yuuri is moving against him, and it is taking all of Victor’s self-control (of which there was so precious little to begin with) to not drag him into one of the elevators and upstairs to his suite.

“After this season ends, my family runs a hot springs resort, so please come,” Yuuri babbles, his smile miles wide. If he hadn’t just gone limp, Victor might’ve noticed Yuri Plisetsky’s rage hitting the richter scale behind him, or remembered the circle of skaters and officials surrounding them on all sides. Truth be told at this exact moment, his world has narrowed down to just one individual. He’s lost his surroundings. He’s being swallowed up in body heat. Any moment now he is going to melt through the floor and that will be fine. Just fine. It’s as good a way to die as any. He thinks about his death certificate.

Cause of death: Yuuri Katsuki’s shameless, perfect hips.

“Victor,” Yuuri pleads, bright-eyed, humming, and still doing things that are as wonderful as they are terrible to Victor’s body, which is reacting at an alarming rate.

God, he’s so beautiful.

Victor can’t speak. The part of his brain that processes English is on sabbatical. Actually, his brain may have left the building.

“Be my coach!”
It becomes clear soon afterwards that Yuuri’s about to pay the price for his sixteen glasses and half a bottle of champagne, and so Victor and Christophe work together to get him back to his room, where Yuuri’s babbling rapidly deteriorates to his native Japanese.

*You’re amazing.* This is what Yuuri is saying, though neither of them will ever know. *You’re amazing and I’ve watched you for as long as I can remember. My dog died, Yuuri’s trying to tell him. My dog that I named after you died and I wanted to be as good as you, and I was so close, until today, I was going to make the podium so that you’d —*

Yuuri throws up twice while Victor holds his hair back and rubs his back, still smitten, and when they finally get him into bed Victor leaves his name and number on a folded up piece of paper on the nightstand next to Yuuri’s glasses. In the hallway, Christophe gives him a long, knowing look, his green eyes bubbling with delight and mischief.

“Shut up,” Victor says, and he gives Christophe a little bit of a shove as he heads back to his own room, where he will need to take a very long shower.

“See you at Europeans, Vitya.”

Victor’s last thought, before he goes to sleep, is that it’s much too long before Worlds, which is where he’ll see Yuuri next. It’s not entirely true; he sees Yuuri in his dreams, dancing and twisting someplace that is just always out of Victor’s reach.
(A maid finds the bent up piece of paper underneath the nightstand where Yuuri swept it unwittingly when he woke up and fumbled for his glasses from the thick of his hangover. She throws it away.)

Yuuri doesn’t call. Yuuri doesn’t text. Yuuri does not appear on the ice at Four Continents, which Victor sets aside time to watch. And Katsuki Yuuri is not at Worlds when Victor wins his fifth world championship and stands on the podium with a smile that doesn’t fool anyone he actually knows, least of all his former therapist, watching at home.
He watches the video sitting on the couch he’s pushed back in the living room he hasn’t gotten the stripper pole installed in yet. He watches it over. And over. And over.

It isn’t that Victor doesn’t see the flaws in the routine. He does. He sees a dozen different micro-adjustments he would make in the way Yuuri goes into his jumps. He notices three distinct different bad habits. He sees how hard fought the landing on the Flip is fought for, and how the Salchow is downgraded to a triple. He sees the way Yuuri’s winded at the end of the program, like he’s a little bit out of shape, like it’s more punishing than it really ought to be to make it all the way through Stammi Vicino.

He also sees the way Yuuri does something with his step sequence that Victor never could, he sees what Minako sees, when she says that the choreography would be better executed in the hands of someone younger, more naive. He sees the way Yuuri’s combination spin is more perfectly centered than his own, pictures the reaction he’d be able to evoke from an audience in the step sequence that carries him all the way to the edge of the ice.

He sees the incredible sadness Yuuri starts the program with, but he also sees the tiny blossom of hope he finishes it with.

He watches it so many times in a row that he loses count, and then he calls Paris, where Mariya answers the phone. Today he wants to talk to Sergei, and he waits, impatient as ever, to be reassured that his father’s in his study and nobody else is on the line. “Vitya, what’s this about?”

“How did you know, with Mama?”

“What?”

Victor hates that he’s sitting here hundreds of miles away struggling to explain himself to his father of all people; his father who has always been a silly, empty-headed Romantic, the man who once
decided he could pluck the Mariinsky’s rising star from the sky. There is still that air between his parents of something stolen, of a life his mother could have had if his father hadn’t come crashing into hers. Except Victor no longer thinks she regrets it the way she used to, when he was younger, a child who was too quick to pick up on her sadness. As a choreographer and a teacher she’s wanted the world over now, and anyone can look at Sofia, and see the way only the right decisions were ever made. “You decided you could spend the rest of your life with someone, once. How?”

Sergei exhales, and he’s quiet for so long a time that Victor scowls and checks his phone to see if he’s dropped the call. “Your mother’s very beautiful, and back then —“

“Lots of people are beautiful. Mama is difficult and sour and stubborn. How did you know?”

“I think you think I’m going to have a magical answer for you, Vitenka. Your mother and I would have had fine, lovely lives without each other.”

He needs to know, though. Victor bites the inside of his cheek and waits for an answer while Sergei tries to put his feelings into words. It’s a struggle. He can imagine that his father would much rather reach for a cello and play it. “… I knew all of those things,” Sergei says finally. “I saw in another person the shape of all the problems I was willing to have. I saw that I would not be perfectly happy for every day of my life. I saw that I would have arguments, and I would weather storms. I also saw that there would be mornings where everything would be luminous and clear, and times where my heart felt like it was too big for my chest, and I decided that those were the things I wanted.”

Victor is silent, looks down at his laptop where the video is paused and where several other browser tabs lay open, responsible for things like the airplane ticket he hasn’t quite purchased yet, Japan’s pet policies, and a google search for ‘yuuri katsuki hot springs japan.’

“Vitenka?” His father sounds worried.

Victor pinches the bridge of his nose and laughs. “I’m going to Japan,” he says finally. “People will talk. Tell mama —”

Tell mama I needed to see about a boy.

Tell mama I’m in love.

“Ah,” Sergei says with sudden understanding, too damn perceptive in the matter of the winter-bitten hearts of his wife and his son. “Vitya?”

“Yes?”

“Real love isn’t ever perfect.” Sergei dispenses his last piece of advice, but it might be the one thing Victor has needed to hear for the whole of his life, at the one time when he’s laid open and waiting to hear it. “Be kind to yourself.”

Victor thinks back to that one time he tried to make a list of people he loved.

God, he’s had it so wrong for so long.
Georgi takes forever to reply. When he does he calls and he’s a bluberring mess. He’s just broken up with Anya. More accurately, Anya has broken up with him. Victor swears in Russian, and brings Georgi over just to drink. They do that the way they haven’t done since before college, sitting on the floor sharing a bottle of vodka in front of the couch.

Georgi is half-passed out on his couch when Victor loses control of his mouth. “I just don’t understand why he didn’t call,” he tells Georgi, whose eyes are already closed, who might be asleep. Victor can’t remember the last time any of his friends came and passed out at his place like this. That means it’s been too long. “He didn’t call and then he learns my routine, and — Georgi?”

Yeah. Georgi’s out cold. Victor wakes up three hours later to the sound of Georgi’s snores with pain in his back, because he’s fallen asleep on the floor with Makkachin. Everyone except the dog is going to be hungover tomorrow.
He sees Vasily once before he goes, returning a phone call that he’s put off ever since Worlds. It’s not a therapy session back in Vasily’s office, but it might as well be, sitting on a park bench in the old part of St. Petersburg just watching people pass by.

That’s basically Vasily’s profession, isn’t it?

“So. Are we just here to eat pastries, or are you planning on telling me what this is all about?” Vasily’s kind eyes crinkle at the edges. “I have an hourly rate,” he reminds Victor with a subtle smirk.

“I’ve just bought a one-way ticket to Japan,” Victor murmurs, and he chuckles when he sees the old man’s eyebrows rise. He isn’t sure what he wants out of this conversation:

Tell me I’m crazy and that this is an illness and I should cancel it. Put me on medication.

Tell me this is the best thing I’ve ever done with my life.

He knows Vasily isn’t going to give him the answer. He learned that early on. Vasily told him years ago that’s what people want out of therapists, and that what therapists actually do is something different. Victor thinks back on years of appointments with Vasily, and the way those early sessions were rather akin to taking his organs and putting them into a blender, and then pouring the mash back inside of his skin. Somehow he always left feeling better. Lighter. He has not felt light in a long time. Perhaps it was a mistake to stop.

“Oh?”

“I think I fell in love with someone,” Victor admits. This seems like the only way to be sure. Vasily hmmms to himself, and then he reaches inside of his briefcase and shuffles through a plastic bag put inside. It’s from a local bookstore, Victor can tell that much. Vasily fetches a business card and puts it into the first page of a brand new moleskine.

Vasily does not mention that in all the years he’s known Victor, Victor has never once used these words. It would be stating the obvious.

“Make sure you write,” he says, and thumps Victor in the chest with the brand-new journal, and one of his all-too-piercing looks. The I know you haven’t been goes unspoken.

Yakov is the one who gives him a ride to the airport, in part because it’s a last chance to talk him out of making what Yakov thinks is bound to be the biggest mistake in his whole Professional career. It’s snowing in St. Petersburg when Victor says goodbye to him, the best coach he’s ever had.

Yakov calls him Vitya, and Victor kisses him on the cheek. Dasvidanya. This is a hard thing to do, to say goodbye to the man who stepped in to raise him when his parents left for Paris. But he’s not even the slightest bit sorry for not doing as Yakov says, something they both know, because Yakov, in all of his disapproval, still sees him all the way to security and stays there until Victor switches his phone to airplane mode on the plane.
He lands in Tokyo to soft rain, gets himself and Makkachin through customs, blearily boards his next flight. Next is a train that will take him to Hasetsu, where the sky slowly transitions to a steady snowfall that makes Victor feel at home. He checks in early, early in the morning, speaking to a pleasant, round-faced woman who recognizes him instantly.

“You are Victor Nikiforov,” says Hiroko Katsuki, whose English is strongly accented, and so she butchers his name before she’s even accepted his passport for check-in. It’s a forgivable sin; she’s got a sweet face and kind eyes. “Your Dog? Makkachin.” He remembers explaining the presence of his dog in the notes for his reservation, but he’s not sure if he included her name, debating how much else he should’ve written in the two hundred and fifty character space. Something like: Hello. I am coming to stay with you indefinitely because google tells me that this is the inn Yuuri Katsuki’s parents run. If so, please know that your son got drunk and asked me to be his coach. Also I think I am in love with him. P.S. I’m bringing a large standard poodle. P.P.S. I am terrible at looking after people and I have no experience coaching, please wish me all the best.

He knows he didn’t include the dog’s name, now that he’s thinking about it. This woman’s recognition of him goes a step or several farther than making assumptions about the Russian guest who paid by credit card for an entire month’s stay up front. “I am Hiroko Katsuki,” she adds, which makes everything click into place for Victor. Yuuri looks like her, a little bit; it’s in their eyes and in the softness of her cheeks.

“Victor,” he says lamely. He smiles a dumb smile. He’s tired from the plane ride. He’s star struck. This is the woman who put Katsuki Yuuri on the planet.

“Victor,” she repeats, making a concentrated effort to mimic him. Her gaze gets a little searching, the way his father’s gaze gets sometimes. He waits for the outcome. “Are you looking for Yuuri?”

*I have been looking for Yuuri my entire life.*

Melodramatic, Vasily would say. Victor smiles to hide how nervous he is, all of a sudden. “I heard
he was looking for a new coach.”

Hiroko’s eyes shine suddenly, like he’s just given her a precious gift. Victor doesn’t understand it, but he’s not going to question the radiance of it. Later, much later, when Yuuri admits that he spends the whole of their season together still balanced on the precipice of quitting, Victor will think back on this moment and realize what it was that made Hiroko so glad. “He is asleep,” she tells him. “Let’s get you checked in.”

Yu-topia Katsuki is a small, nested maze, and it reminds him in strange ways of Babushka’s apartment. Except he likes it more. Likes imagining what it might’ve been like to grow up here, in the bustle of a small business, with a family built on hospitality. She walks him past the kitchens, where something smells delicious, and then slides open a door to escort him to the room they’re holding for him. Hiroko apologizes a thousand times over when she explains that they’re putting Victor into what used to be a storage room, and that they weren’t expecting him quite so soon this morning. If he’ll set his suitcase down, he can go use the onsen while they finish getting it ready.

“… There are boxes coming,” Victor adds, which is an assumption unto itself: that Yuuri, after making that video, is going to say he can stay. But Victor Nikiforov doesn’t know how to do things by halves: he’s all or nothing. “Onsen?” He adds, because it’s an unfamiliar word.

“We will take care of it,” Hiroko says, still smiling that peaceful smile that he’ll get to watch someday, when it’s on Yuuri’s face, when Yuuri sleeps. “The hot springs,” she clarifies.

“Oh.” Yes. Okay. He’s been traveling and it’d be worth it to stretch his limbs out in something warm and soothing. Truthfully, in this strange place, it’s nice to have someone tell him what to do, even if she does it so gently that he doesn’t even realize he’s obeying orders until he’s already outside, watching steam rise from the springs. It’s still snowing, and for a moment Victor’s arrested by this little spot of beauty in somebody’s backyard.

It’s also cold, so it’s with great relief that he leaves Makkachin in the Katsukis’ capable hands — they like dogs, he can’t help but notice — and sinks into the water.

It’s hot and wonderful. It chases away all doubt.
Someone bursts through the doors of the hot springs to the outdoor part of the onsen, bundled up in so many layers that the first thing Victor thinks is that it’s an admirable attempt at making a burrito out of one’s clothes. The young man plants a hand on the ground and helps himself up, and only then does Victor recognize Yuuri, catches the sheen of his umber eyes and the soft, wild curl of his hair. The wild blush he remembers, because the way it spreads over Yuuri’s nose, across his cheekbones, and up to his ears is one of the little details that Victor has been utterly unsuccessful at erasing from his daydreams. Yuuri stares at him in shock, visibly works to collect himself to recover. “Vi-Victor?!? Why are you here?”

“Yuuri.” He likes the way Yuuri’s name sounds, likes saying it. He grins brightly, as though it’s obvious: he’s seen Yuuri’s Stammi Vicino video and he remembers the Grand Prix Finals, and he’s here to make good on Yuuri’s offer to be his coach. After what he’s seen, he knows he can make Yuuri win. He’s sure of it.

There are a lot of things he expected Katsuki Yuuri to do in response. None of those things included Yuuri’s subsequent wail: “WHAT?!”

(It becomes a story told at their wedding, by the father of the groom, to all kinds of collective laughter: and then I told him Makkachin belonged to a handsome foreign guest. You should’ve seen the way he ran!)

Chapter End Notes

HE’S HERE AND HE’S BEAUTIFUL ♡
Jetlag catches up to Victor in a dining room at Yu-Topia. Before he knows it he’s dozing on the floor, pretending and sometimes succeeding in sleeping through a conversation being held between Yuuri, his mother, and another woman who’s burst onto the scene. Their Japanese is nonsensical to him, white noise. It makes him homesick without him even realizing it: most of the time he’s in Russia, or Paris, or somewhere else in Europe where most people will speak a language he knows. This is totally new. It leaves Victor curled a little more deeply into Makkachin’s side, trying not to wonder whether or not Yakov was right.

(He doesn’t realize that in Russia, at this very moment, Yakov is giving a press conference, screaming about how Victor only thinks of himself. He’ll never be anyone’s coach!)

The conversation being held over his head doesn’t sound like it’s going to stop, though, and so Victor exhales slowly, makes himself sit up. The green robe he’s been given falls off his shoulder as he does so, artfully, in a way that could be considered an accident if he hadn’t already participated in at least four different photo shoots with exactly this kind of angle: oops, I’m Victor Nikiforov. Oops, my shirt is falling off. Like he’s still an innocent.

That dichotomy is what all the photographers love about him. In every photoshoot he’s either an angel or a demon. Evgeny’s the only one who’s ever let him be something like a man. It’s the kind of thing Alena would notice, what with her beady hawk eyes, but Alena isn’t here.

None of his friends are. It’s been a decade since Victor has known such uneven footing.

“I’m starving,” Victor announces in slow, sleepy English. “Hungry.” It’s true in more ways than one. Perhaps the best description of himself at this precise junction. Victor has spent his whole life starved for something Yuuri Katsuki woke up in him. That thing is a creature with sharp teeth and no name, and it prowls his every nerve, demands satisfaction. Yuuri, on the other hand, seems to have either forgotten Sochi following his episode of blackout drunk or he’s too embarrassed to acknowledge it; Victor can’t tell. He’s a little bit irritable right now, wants to shake Yuuri and tell him he’s
accountable for this thing he’s made of what was once Victor Nikiforov. Except now is not the time or the place. There’s a fragility in Yuuri that he saw just after the Grand Prix Finals, the first time they met, and then forgot about on the dance floor. It’s back now. Victor has the sense that it’s a bit of a beast, too, that when Yuuri grows teeth he turns them on himself. It’s in the way Yuuri watches him, in the way he’s too careful about what he says, in how he’s kept his range of motion confined to a very small, tight space.

Like he would get smaller if he could only manage it. Like he’d like to disappear.

There are very few people in Victor’s life that he treads carefully around, and he hasn’t figured out how to do it around Yuuri Katsuki and still be himself yet. So Victor leans in, and he smiles his slow smile, the dangerous one. This is the photoshoot for devil, for temptation, and Victor watches as it pays off in the flush that spreads over Yuuri’s nose and cheeks like ink in a glass of clear water.

“As your coach,” he purrs, because Victor has decided the matter’s settled, “I’d like to know what your favorite food is, Yuuri.” He decides as soon as he’s said this that this is an excuse he will repeat at every opportunity. Your coach. Yours. There are a thousand things he wants to know about Yuuri Katsuki. He wants to know where he learned how to dance. He wants to know where his tolerance for alcohol came from. He needs an itemized list of other ways to make him blush.

He wants to know what makes Yuuri smile. He remembers the sound of Yuuri’s laugh when they danced together, in Sochi. He needs to know how to make that happen again, wants to commit these new ideas to memory. Victor is naturally forgetful, but maybe that’s because so many things in his life, up until now, have been unimportant.

Yuuri is something he wants to remember.

Hiroko takes it on her able hands to introduce him to Katsudon directly. Soon enough he’s got a steaming dish of pork cutlet in front of him, listening to her describe it with the gentle smile he’s coming quickly to associate with the Katsuki clan. Because Victor is starving, he digs in, and he’s rewarded with the incredible, homestyle flavor of Yu-Topia’s favorite dish. Vkusno!

“Is this what god eats?” He asks. Because he really does want to know.

“I’m glad you like it,” Yuuri says, in English that’s over-polite. These words don’t betray his delight, but his shoulders do: Yuuri practically shimmies in happiness, and his eyes are warmer now. Katsudon isn’t the most luxurious thing Victor Nikiforov has ever eaten, nor is it the most interesting, but there’s something steadying and bracing about it.

It’s a sort of food that screams home. He wonders if this is what Yuuri likes so much about it.

He’s been introduced to the other woman as Minako-sensei, evidently Yuuri’s ballet teacher. Victor is going to have a heart-to-heart with this woman later, now that he knows she’s at least partially responsible for the way Yuuri moves. It will be nine parts gratitude and one part brutal analysis of bad habits: there’s something in Minako’s gaze that Victor identifies with, something that suggests they’re alike. She proves him right when she smiles softly and says:

“Yuuri gains weight easily, so he’s only allowed to eat this when he’s won a competition, right?”

Yuuri squirms and looks guilty.

“Oh,” Victor murmurs, and flashes a polite smile. His most polite smile. Surely Yuuri didn’t invite him here and then not take care of himself. “… so you’ve eaten this pork cutlet bowl recently?”
“Yes,” Yuuri confirms, and he smiles briefly, quickly, nervously. It’s the sort of thing a kinder man would hesitate before ripping into, but Victor has no illusions about himself: he’s not precisely nice. “Yes, I eat it all the time.”

“Why?” He inquires sweetly. Underneath the heart-shaped smile and the megawatts of charm there is a monster. Victor doesn’t let it out often, but he’s tired, he’s jetlagged, and Yuuri Katsuki appears to have lost all memory of once dry-humping his leg before inviting him here, and, thanks to Minako, Victor now realizes he’s put on a solid fifteen pounds. “You haven’t won anything.”

He watches Yuuri wilt. If Yuuri thinks this is mean, he really ought to spend more time with Yakov. Victor lets his gaze grow serious, pins Yuuri with it. Evgeny’s not here to laugh with him about putting the Nikiforov smoulder from countless photoshoots to good use as he tells Yuuri that there’ll be no ice time until he’s back to Grand Prix form. No pork cutlet bowls. “Okay, little piggy?”

He catches the ghost of a smirk on Minako’s face even as Yuuri deflates.

(Later, when he’s teaching Yuuri Russian, when they’re talking about pet names, Yuuri will start to laugh and shake his head. “What?” Victor will ask.

“Piggy,” Yuuri will say, and then his eyes will narrow. “Vitenka. You. Called. Me. A. Pig.”

“Yes, Yuuranya.” Victor resumes their lesson by making apologies for all the ways things get lost in translation by calling Yuuri all sorts of things against his throat. My kitten. My sun. He’s terribly, horribly affectionate. Yuuri catches on quick.)

His boxes arrive. Victor decides Yuuri’s new workout regimen can start immediately. Boxes make for great weights.

While Yuuri helps him stack his belongings up against one of the room’s narrow walls, Victor tries to make small talk. He gets a mumbled apology and something about the word banquet, which gives him pause.

Flashbacks, actually. Ideas. Victor’s got a lot of things he could say about the arc of Yuuri’s back, for instance. Yuuri’s face betrays nothing other than fear, and so Victor chooses another smile, even if he’s tired of them. “You look anxious,” he says, with a wink. He promises Yuuri can bill him later. What does he need the coaching fees for anyway?
Yuuri’s blushing again, and now that they’re alone, Victor can’t help himself. He leans in, dips a finger under Yuuri’s chin. “Yuuri,” he hums. “Tell me everything about you.”

Where do you skate?

The blush is growing again. He feels bolder. “Is there a girl you like?” Okay: that one is courage wrapped in cowardice. He’s had Yuuri’s body pressed up against his before. He has some idea that maybe girls aren’t entirely Yuuri’s thing.

What if it was all a drunk mistake, though? The kind of thing Yuuri doesn’t want to repeat?

The robe’s sliding open again. Victor’s clothes know what he wants. So do his fingers, which trace Yuuri’s forearm, find purchase in the back of his hand. Victor catches himself talking about trust, uses the word relationship before he can shut himself up.

It’s as though he’s been taking a stroll through a forest and stumbled upon a fawn in the trees. With the one word, Victor has stepped on a twig and sent the deer running.

He asks before he can help himself, because he can’t not. “Why are you running?”

Look at what you did to me. Get back here right now and fix it.

“N-no reason.”

He tries again before bed, uses that as your coach line again. It’s a little bit possessive, he realizes suddenly, something Yakov never did, some little way of planting a flag on Yuuri Katsuki’s person and saying Victor Nikiforov wants to be here.

Yuuri, as it turns out, does not want to sleep with him, even in this context, which leaves Victor to go lick his wounds back in the unused banquet room. He’s got dozens of missed texts. He thumbs through a few; lets the St. Petersburg crowd know he’s arrived, tells Christophe to cut it out with the eggplant emoji, and only makes one phone call.

It’s long-distance to Paris. Can you put Sofia on the line?

He tells his sister about the magical inn with the hot springs, the soft beauty of the snow, the way he can see the ocean here. Then he asks about her day, because if he says too much more about his own, he’ll break his own heart. “What did you do at school?”

It’s a distraction. Something to keep him from spending too much time dwelling on the way his eyes prickle, or the way he keeps pinching the bridge of his nose. Victor curls up around Makkachin, which is another way to fight loneliness, sleeps fitfully, unsure of the odds of his own success for the first time in years.

He doesn’t realize that this is how everyone else feels, when they want something, and aren’t sure they can get it. It’s been so long since Victor’s experienced actual longing that he’s perhaps forgotten it except as an idea, as a concept. Something he can put on and convey like a program, like a costume.

No wonder Alena’s always called him fake.

Now he’s re-learning: real yearning hurts.

What he does not see is Yuuri unable to sleep across the inn, hands pressed to his face, unable to believe that his actual life could be this good, that the universe might be this kind after all. This
gentle, this good to him. This forgiving.

It’s something they’ll have to discuss later, once they’ve learned how to talk to each other.

In the morning Victor gets one fact to add to the encyclopedia of Yuuri Katsuki that he’s trying to build. Yuuri is not a morning person. By all appearances, Mari and Hiroko aren’t morning people either: it’s Toshiya awake in the entry, reading a newspaper and nursing a cup of tea. He doesn’t offer to make Victor breakfast -- he realizes he’s not going to be that kind of guest for much longer -- but he does direct him to the kitchen, where Victor has to come to terms with the fact that Japanese breakfast is, objectively speaking, kind of weird.

He wants to make this entire family a whole skillet full of sausages and fried eggs. The ache of homesickness strikes, and stays with him until he finds a mug in the cabinet with an adorable poodle drawn onto its surface. The handle is chipped. Victor takes it anyway, feels a little bit better, like the universe is trying to tell him something because why else would there be a poodle coffee mug here, halfway around the world, in the kitchen Yuuri Katsuki grew up in? Toshiya watches him with patient benevolence as Victor makes a fresh cup of tea for himself, flips another page in his newspaper as though nothing is out of the ordinary.

Victor watches the clock, wonders when Yuuri will finally be awake, wonders if it’s okay to ask. He’s already made so many assumptions. In morning’s light, he’s thrown himself into stark relief again. It’s not a flattering portrait. He must think I’m crazy. Insane.

Toshiya watches Victor.

He goes back to his room, gets the journal, comes back to sit by one of the windows where he can write. There’s comfort in knowing none of these people can read what he commits to the page, and so he gives into the pretense of his teenage years, tells a story about the way hearts can be stolen.
Like breath, they can be caught. Like glass, they break too.

Then he turns another one and he writes about the people he misses. He misses Yakov, who has a sixth sense for the way Victor gets when he isn’t really himself, who thinks the surest way to chase off a mood is to shout it away. He thinks about the last bottle of vodka he split with Georgi, pictures him standing outside of Anya’s apartment with a boombox and the world’s worst glamrock playlist. About how Alena would have some clever, cutting remark. About the way Evgeny would’ve played a joke by now to lighten the mood. Hell, he even misses Mila and Yuri.

He doesn’t think Mila will be particularly surprised to learn where he’s run off to. He also instinctively knows that Yuri won’t understand it. Looking at Yuri Plisetsky is like looking into his own past, except stripped of the privilege Victor grew up with it’s got even sharper edges. It’s given Yuri an even bigger chip on his shoulder because the mountain he’s set to climb will be steeper.

It surprises Victor to realize that in some ways it’s these flaws that he misses in each of the people he’s thinking about. Like the little chip in the curve of the mug, the parts he’s grown to recognize because when he looks at himself all he sees are the things behind the veneer that somehow got sold to the public. He goes to the kitchen to empty it once the tea’s gone stale, and doesn’t get any further into the dichotomy of his two ideas, of attraction or friendship, because Toshiya is done with his newspaper. Victor hears him politely clear his throat, which shatters the silence between them.

“Why did you come?”

He stands in the kitchen for a moment, rinsing out the cup. For some reason he wants to treat it with care. Because your son danced into my life one evening and made me want him, some part of Victor wants to growl. As though Yuuri Katsuki woke up one day and decided Victor Nikiforov would love him. Another part wants to explain that Stammi Vicino was born out of the depths of his sadness, even when it’s skated in a romantic costume the color of soft roses or danced to with a smile. That when Yuuri skated to it, the way that he had, he’d stepped into a place nobody else was privvy to and he’d done it with a gentle, earnest grace that had changed everything.

He looks back at Toshiya finally, knows in an instant that lying to Yuuri’s father is not something that he’s going to be able to do. Telling him the whole truth is not an option either, not when he’s known this man for less than twenty four hours, when Sochi seems to be some sort of secret locked inside of Yuuri Katsuki that he may be keeping even from himself. “I saw the video,” Victor says, which is truth at its most concise. I saw the video and I couldn’t not come. “Now here we are.”

Toshiya hums to himself for a moment and then stands up with a little bit of a twinkle in his eye. “I’ll go wake him up.”

Victor feels his lips curl, relieved. It’s not quite a smile. “Thank you,” he demurs, and then, because he’s just not the sort to linger in one place for long, and because he’s protecting himself from his own moods, he taps a finger on his chin and asks: “does anyone have a bicycle I can borrow?”

It turns out there are two bicycles. Victor smiles, angelic. “We just need the one.”
He makes sure to ring the bicycle’s bell and chirp hello at every single person they pass on the way to Ice Castle Hasetsu, while Yuuri labors behind him. Victor ratchets up -- actually manufactures -- the impression of cheer as he gets introduced to the rink’s family of proprietors, including the three triplets he’s given to understand are, in a way, responsible for his presence. It’s a good thing they’re avid fans of skating: names like Axel, Lutz, and Loop don’t seem particularly easily pronounced by most Japanese speakers.

Victor takes to the ice. The bicycle ride over served as a good warmup for his muscles, and anyhow asking him not to step out onto fresh ice, clean from a fresh sweep of the zamboni, is a bit like asking Victor to hold his breath. He shows Yuuri his stretch routine, gets into his skates, and then steps out onto an empty rink. Victor may be terrible at processing his own feelings in a conscious way, but he’s always been able to exorcise them, and it feels good to whip up two furious laps around the boards and then throw down his signature jump.

The triplets eat it up, though he distantly hears Yuuri chide them. He can’t understand what it is that Yuuri’s said, though he gets the gist; one of the girls puts away a phone with his own image on it. This is not to be recorded, apparently. Like anything Victor does here is private, personal.

Like he’s the one who needs protecting.

He spends some time getting used to the feel of the rink, notices the way Yuuri’s gravitated towards Takeshi Nishigori. The two of them are talking, and he feels Yuuri’s eyes follow him, catches, on a glance by, the way Yuuri’s expression has softened into something warm and delicate. Fond, almost.

It’s like looking at someone who is watching a dream.

Naturally, Victor ruins it immediately. He’s not a fairytale. He’s a real person of flesh and bone and blood and, last night, tears. How soft Yuuri looks right now, watching him skate, is irrelevant. “The little piggy can’t enter the rink until he drops some body fat,” he coos, and he sends Yuuri off to Minako’s dance studio. He’s known Minako for less than a day, but she’s made of the same stuff as his mother. Victor knows instinctively that Yuuri will come back from each of those sessions refined, that these are strong women who chip away at imperfections until only diamond remains.

By the end of the day there’s a routine coming together in Victor’s mind, little details about Hasetsu that he could learn to live with. He’s taken a bike ride by the ocean already, which helps him feel more at home; someone has told him about a place that Yuuri likes to go when he’s working out; he’s got a schedule of rink times ironed out with the Nishigoris, who are like everyone else in this town, as far as Victor can tell: entirely too accommodating, and, like him, a little bit in love with
Yuuri Katsuki. He gets directed to a market and a bookstore and this time when he sleeps his loneliness feels a little bit less like an anvil.

He gets breakfast with Toshiya again, as part of what is beginning to form the framework of life in Hasetsu. Toshiya is reading the newspaper. Victor is reading his new book. Japanese for beginners. He already speaks three languages; why not a fourth? Yuuri emerges slightly earlier this morning, and without the prompting of his father, glances at Victor as though it’s still a little bit surprising that he’s here. Victor fips pages in the dictionary so that he can try out the new word for *diet*, which earns him a delightfully sour look and a rumble of Japanese that doesn’t really make it fully past Yuuri’s lips.

“Pardon?” Victor asks.

“Nothing,” says Yuuri, and Victor tries not to study his hands -- tries and fails -- while Yuuri fiddles in the kitchen, makes tea, puts together rice and natto. After that, breakfast is silent until the finish, when Toshiya tells them both to have a good day.

Yuuri stands outside where it smells like wet earth from melting snow and springtime, looks up at Victor, waits to hear whatever crazy ideas Victor has for whipping him back into shape. Being looked at is something Victor has grown used to, the kind of thing he remembers disliking once, sometime before he became a celebrity. Now it’s part of what it means to be Victor Nikiforov, to always be in the angle of someone’s gaze. There is something different about Yuuri’s eyes, though. Yuuri is not trying to cut him open, not trying to lift him up or press him down. Victor thinks he could be looked at this way -- without any expectation -- for a long time, except he’s made a promise to help Yuuri win the Grand Prix Finals. Victor has made half-remembered promises to a lot of people, including Yuri Plisetsky, but this one he intends to keep. He asks Yuuri to show him someplace beautiful, which is what makes Yuuri’s brow furrow, and what places him at the top of some climbing outdoor stairs as Yuuri races up to join him.

Here the cherry blossoms are giving way to the green of the trees, and the snow’s almost all melted away. The sea sparkles at a distance, Hasetsu wrapped around it like a blanket, *like a lover*, Victor’s mind supplies. The conversation is unsalvageable from there, but he finds out Yuuri doesn’t have a girlfriend now and may not have had one in the past, either. *No comment*, Yuuri protests, like he’s the press, and so Victor decides to volunteer some of the same information on his own:

“Let’s talk about me!” He’s still pretending to be cheerful. His cheeks hurt. “My first girlfriend was - -”

Yuuri flails. This is apparently not on the list of things he wants to hear. “Stop!”

Victor feels no closer to that spark of connection they had, that one time, and in his head he mentally clocks the number of months between now and the Grand Prix one more time. Makkachin barks at him, and his attention wanders. “Yuuri, what’s that castle over there?”

“Oh.” Yuuri seems relieved to redirect the focus somewhere else, away from the two of them. This is something he can talk about. “That’s Hasetsu Castle. Inside is ninja house.”

Finally, something interesting. Victor’s eyes light up. “Really? Ninjas?!”

That habit Saga implanted in Victor once flares to life: the one that has learned to go and see, to rush headlong from one experience to the next because time is short and life is precious. He makes Yuuri take him there, drags him into a photo. Unapologetically hashtags the whole experience on Instagram, reveals where he is and who he’s with for the whole world to see without a second thought.
Yuuri resists for a moment, and then he doesn’t: he’s swept into orbit, inevitable, like gravity.

Like so much of what will become their story someday, that one post changes everything: it sends a swarm of press towards Yu-Topia, and another towards Ice Castle Hasetsu, where Victor hesitates for just one moment before he engages them. It’s the nature of journalists to want answers, he supposes. He just wishes they’d wait until he had them himself.

Something about it crystallizes his presence in Hasetsu for Yuuri, though. For a week, Victor’s the most novel thing in Hasetsu, and there are people after him wherever he goes. Someone puts it down on paper: *Five-time world champion Victor Nikiforov taking break from Grand Prix Series to coach local skater Katsuki Yuuri.* Yuuri’s response to this is to redouble his efforts: he hurls himself without complaint into the workout regimen Victor’s designed, hides for hours from the press in Minako’s studio.

Underneath his inability to articulate anything about himself to Victor in this handful of days there is something else that Victor can detect: the part of Yuuri that could be a champion, the part that has fought harder to be where he is than Victor ever has. Katsuki Yuuri has fallen ten thousand times. Victor is watching him get up ten thousand and one.

Yakov calls him. It’s the first phone call Victor has gotten from Yakov, and so he answers it, unwitting, unknowing, only to have Yakov blasting into his ear about how Yuri Plisetsky has run away from his dormitory in St. Petersburg, flown himself to Japan, taken the train to Hasetsu, and will any minute be showing up to do God knows what to Victor because apparently stupidity is a transferrable disease.

“Well,” whistles Victor, because he’s a little bit impressed, “you have to admit the kid’s resourceful.”

“If you don’t get him back here, and soon,” Yakov growls, “I am going to start leaking embarrassing stories about your childhood to the press.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“Don’t think I won’t talk about the time Lilia walked in on you masturbating, Vitya,” Yakov nearly shouts, and Victor can almost imagine droplets of spit landing on his face. Victor does not have time to process all the nuance of that threat, the use of his nickname peppered with pure fury. Also: he’d completely forgotten about that one time and now he’s reliving it, ready to die in teenage shame all over again. It doesn’t matter: the line’s gone dead. Yakov’s hung up.
This is why he doesn’t stop skating when he hears Yuri’s familiar voice, why he’s hardly surprised when he turns around after Plisetsky’s trademark scream of introduction. “I’m surprised Yakov let you come,” Victor says, with his kindest smile. Now that Yuri has decided that alleycat is the vibe he wants to portray, it always makes him bristle. This bristle is different, though: he’s practically trembling with rage. Victor knows this face. He’s been on the receiving end of it so many times from so many different people now that it’s best to get the apology out of the way up front.

“Judging from that look, I’m guessing I forgot some promise I made.”

Evidently he once promised to give Yuri Plisetsky a terrific senior debut. Who knew? Plisetsky, obviously. Yuuri stands beside him, patient, while Yuri insists that a promise is a promise. “Let’s go back to Russia,” he shouts, and though it’s small, hardly even a tell, Victor hears the sharp intake of Yuuri’s breath: the first blow Yuri has actually landed in all of his gruff and bluster since he first raged into the rink.

It’s so tiny. But it’s so important. His leaving is not something Yuuri Katsuki wants.

Victor considers this, turning over the facts. In his mind a solution begins to form: something that will allow Yuri Plisetsky to emerge with the program he is due, his pride mostly still intact when he returns to Yakov, which is an inevitability that the teenager needs to come to terms with. It will also ease Yuuri back into competing, on home ice, in front of a friendly crowd.

And: it will force Yuuri to demonstrate in a way that Victor can understand that this is something he wants after all. “Tomorrow,” Victor says, his mind made up, “I’ll choreograph a program for both of you, to the same music I’m using in my short program.”

In the contest that emerges afterwards, even with its raised stakes, it never once occurs to Victor that Yuuri, who has already skated a clean, if not flawless edition of Stammi Vicino, might possibly lose.

Together they escort a still furious Plisetsky back to Yu-Topia, where most of the family palms off
his insults (including a particularly savage *It's not like you care what I think* that comes from Yuuri himself, delivered with a shrug and a smile). After a private bath, he becomes slightly more reasonable, and the way he subsequently inhales a bowl of katsudon is probably indecent. Later, Victor feels like he may be apologizing to Hiroko: Yuri’s about to punch through a growth spurt, everyone can tell, and because of it he eats like a vacuum.

Mari Katsuki blithely gives him a nickname and then drags Yuuri off to clean the room Yuri’s going to use. It’s a little bit endearing to watch, the way Yuuri’s been helping out at home, doing all the things Victor always avoided doing because he was on the way to the top. Domestic. Normal. Before Plisetsky can catch him in a swoon, Victor looks over at him and grins in a way that’s sure to raise the boy’s hackles again. “Good for you, Yurio.”

Yuri has the decency to wait until the family’s vacated the room at least to eye Victor skeptically. “I don’t get it. Halfway around the world for a booty call?”

Victor is pretty sure that these are big words from a small, angry bean. The idea of Yuri Plisetsky, whose molecular composition right now is only rage and hormones, having any practical understanding of what he’s just suggested, is positively ludicrous. Besides, Victor doesn’t like it, the idea that what he’s doing here might have no other meaning, something beyond sex. “Still sulking because you got beaten in a dance-off?”

“Shut up. He’s not that special. You know, I caught him crying in a toilet once, back in Sochi. Pathetic.” Yuri is doing that thing he does with his words, flinging daggers, trying to watch for carnage.

Victor doesn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing that he’s landed any. Yuri will need years of practice before he can get on Victor’s plane. “We’re not going to discuss Sochi here,” he says instead, in a tone that bodes no argument.

“But -- you -- why --”

“I don’t answer to you,” Victor reminds him, and then he deploys the threat he wouldn’t even have in his arsenal, if Yuri himself hadn’t put it there. “If you want this program, you’ll remember that.”

Yuri tries out several new, inventive swears in Russian, but Victor punches a hard reset on the whole conversation and makes the blonde tell him the whole story of his escape from St. Petersburg instead. Plisetsky’s asleep by the time Mari comes back to let him know his room is ready, without Yuuri in tow. *Where is he?* She sends him off to Minako’s, who pours him a drink while she explains Yuuri’s anxiety, his practice routines, and then sends him onwards to the dance studio. It’s also empty. Victor finds himself back at Ice Castle Hasetsu, standing next to the Nishigoris from the office while they watch Yuuri skate.

He’s not really practicing. What he’s doing is easy and simple and repetitive: the backward entry into certain kinds of jumps, for instance, or an easy spread eagle.

“It always made me think he really loved skating,” Yuuko says, as Victor watches Yuuri glide across the ice. *He’s not good at putting himself out there,* Takeshi explains.

There’s a softness to him like this that Victor wants to gather and protect.

“I don’t want this to become the end for him.”

“Me, neither.”

He leaves without disturbing Yuuri in the first place. Best to let this reintroduction to the rink happen...
Nothing that happens the morning he demonstrates the music to his two pupils is a surprise: Yuuri wants to skate Agape, and Yuri wants to skate Eros. Neither could be more ill-suited for each program, but neither can see it. Victor chides them for lacking self-awareness and then Yuri goes and proves his point, insisting that he’s going to win, and then Victor will have to come back to Russia to coach him.

Victor’s happiness in this equation is irrelevant to Yuri Plisetsky, who has his blinders on: he’s fifteen and what he wants is the only thing that matters in the world. “Sure,” Victor agrees without agreeing, because someone this selfish, in his mind, couldn’t possibly successfully skate a program about love. Yuri is smirking like the battle’s already won. This will be a necessarily lesson for him, then. Victor turns to look at Yuuri, curious. He wants to know what it is Yuuri’s going to want from Victor if he wins.

In Victor’s experience, everybody has a demand.

Yuuri’s answer is so quiet at first that it’s almost inaudible, but it doesn’t matter. It rattles through him, gathers strength like a rolling ball falling downhill, and beneath what Yuri Plisetsky will later insist is the most ridiculous thing he’s ever heard, what Victor hears is the simple essence of the gamble:

All Yuuri wants is his presence.

“Great,” he says, probably the first truly heartfelt thing that’s been out of his mouth since arrival. It falls out of his mouth like a punched-out benediction, and not for the first time Victor is struck by how he can feel so known by someone who is such a stranger. “That’s what I like too.”
Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delay! laptop trouble interfered :):
It’s scary — Yakov or maybe even Lilia levels of scary — how efficient the Nishigori clan is when it comes to arranging for the Onsen on Ice competition. Victor isn’t sure who photoshops posters together, but they emerge soon: something that makes him look uncomfortably like the puppet master of surprisingly limber shots of both Katsuki and Plisetsky. He’s pretty sure all of those image uses are unlicensed. He’s also pretty sure he’s going to be getting a phone call from somebody in the ISU any day now. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission. His apologetic airhead act should get him through that conversation, whenever it arrives.

It’s a little adorable how into it Yuuko’s triplets are, though, these three enthusiastic girls who are coming up into that unintentionally savage phase Victor has already had a chance to witness in his own sister. In spite of it, he likes this age, with children. They’re enthusiastic and imaginative. And it’s perhaps early enough still that the world hasn’t come in and given them baggage, unconscious ticks like his tendency to mask and deflect, or Yuuri’s increasingly apparent anxiety. They make him think of Sofia, and not because they’re anything like her. If anything, they’re more like their father: he’s got a brash, bold quality that Victor imagines must’ve been actual hell before he grew up, before parenthood forced him to be responsible. They’re mischievous, interfering little hellions.

Victor loves it.

His breakfast routine is law, by now: he and Toshiya are the first ones awake, and the kitchen comes to life in a slow trickle: first Yuuri, and eventually Yurochka, too. Yuuri gives a bit of a start when he goes to the kitchen, reaches for a mug, and then sees Victor using it. Something softens in his face, but there’s no chance for either of them to remark on it, because Yuri Plisetsky has grumbled his way into their midst looking for food. Like any teenager, he’s an absolute fucking gremlin before he’s been fed, and then because of the way he’s choosing to handle puberty the dial really only goes down to 9 after a meal.
Not for the first time, Victor considers telling him to go home. He’s an interloper here on something he doesn’t see, and because he can’t see it, he doesn’t understand either. Except Yuuri has more patience, somehow, is oddly hospitable, seems unexpectedly capable at shaking off Yurio’s gruff and bluster. Victor renews his determination to let this idea of his play out, something he’s going to have to do on a daily basis now that Yurio’s determined to charge his way into every possible private moment and ruin it, every bit the teenage bull unleashed in a china shop.

Victor rides the bicycle again (it’s a woman’s bike, he realizes, probably Mari’s) and makes his two charges jog. Yuuri still has some pounds to use and Yuri, well. Yuri’s punishing Victor just by being here, and this feels like a way to even out the score.

In the last twenty-four hours all of his ideas have crystallized: the choreography concepts Victor was already considering, before he even left St. Petersburg; the dichotomy steadily taking shape in his musings in the journal Vasily gave him; his own personal playlist. Victor’s been listening to On Love in both of its arrangements ever since he left the Grand Prix Finals, which is a tidbit he’ll happily keep to himself for now. It’s not enough to create good programs; he wants to create great programs, programs that unearth something new about Yuri Plisetsky and Yuuri Katsuki. Hypocrite, he imagines Alena accusing him, because he’s purposefully writing sequences that will get under their skin, things he doesn’t remember witnessing either of them skate, emotional narratives that they’re both pretending not to understand.

It isn’t that Victor hasn’t put his own sincere emotions out on the ice before; he has.

But it’s been a while.

Skating at worlds with a longing that only Stammi Vicino, Non Te Ne Andare could possibly express was perhaps the closest he’s been to it in years, and even then, Victor knows in his heart that program still sits incomplete, that there’s some part of it that isn’t finished yet.

He demonstrates Agape first. Agape is the sort of term that’s been thrown around in the Orthodox churches Victor’s floated through his whole life; in the church it’s considered the highest form of love there is. Maybe Yuri knows this, maybe he doesn’t; the self-sacrifice of Christ isn’t exactly something Victor was ready to contemplate when he was fifteen, and anyway it’s not the primary point. He wouldn’t say he’s a believer, certainly not the way Babushka is, but it’s an unconditional kind of love, self-sacrificing, uncalculating.

Yuri stays by the rinkside while Victor skates the Agape program’s long, clean lines; it’s sweeping, gentle arcs. There’s a purity to the program that Victor can’t pretend to possess himself, which is probably why it never formalized as an idea that he might commit fully to skating.

Except here he is in Hasetsu, Japan, setting his career on fire to try to tell Yuuri Katsuki that he loves him.

Victor looks over at Yuri, still leaning against the boards, and flashes what’s probably becoming his teacher-smile. It doesn’t fit on his face just yet. He’s still learning, too. “Kind of like that,” he says.

If Yuri Plisetsky ever makes it to the real meat of this program, maybe it’ll occur to him how selfish he’s being simply by being here, by trying to forcibly rip Victor away from this flight of fancy to pack him back onto a plane and away to St. Petersburg. If Yuri uncovers real Agape, it won’t actually matter who wins Onsen on Ice. Real Agape will be selfless enough to let Victor go.

“Yeah,” Yurio mutters, from where he’s been standing this whole time, and any idea of that happening immediately sails out the window. “I got it.”
Victor wants to rip him to pieces for it, but Yuuri’s right there, sputtering in disbelief, and they’ve been joined by Yuuko Nishigori, who does not need to see Victor murder a small, angry, inconvenient child. Yurio proceeds to more or less insult her, another one of those angry slights that Yuuri handles with surprising, polite savvy. Victor wouldn’t call it graceful, not really, but there’s a gentle charm to how Yuuri handles Plisetsky that he himself doesn’t possess.

“Okay, Yuuri.” Victor likes to say his name, says it maybe too often. “You’re next. Let’s go!” Yuuri snaps to attention as Victor strikes up the starting pose for Eros and then tosses his head towards his small audience. Yuuko audibly gasps in surprise, leaving Yuuri and Yurochka to handle her, and Victor launches himself into the first step sequence, with the Spanish-influence elements, its little intricacies.

The creature in his heart sees Yuuri step out onto the ice for a closer look and it hums in approval. If, in this exact moment, Victor Nikiforov gave a damn about coaching Yuri Plisetsky, he would stop and make it a teachable moment. This is something you say you want, he might say, but you wouldn’t even step out on the rink for it.

Except this moment isn’t about Yuri Plisetsky. This is about Katsuki Yuuri, who keeps monitoring Victor, who keeps edging closer the same way Victor did in Sochi, things he’s seen from Christophe’s photos: the way he’s in the background of the dance-off, a surprised passerby, and then an interested observer next to Mila, and finally, a moon sucked into orbit. Look all you want, Victor wants to say, and for a moment, because it’s fitting of the theme, he transports himself back to a hotel in Sochi. This is their dance, the one Yuuri keeps refusing to acknowledge; this is Yuuri’s twist of hips and arc of spine. It is also Yuuri’s flamenco. This is every thought that flashed through Victor’s mind when Yuuri’s fingers curled into his shirt, when Yuuri pressed their bodies together. It is a promise, too: that if Victor Nikiforov ever has a chance to repeat that experience with sober Katsuki Yuuri, he’s going to throw them both under a Hokusai-style tidal wave of pleasure.
And then he’s going to do it again.

Yuuri has met him at center ice by the time he’s done demonstrating, has instinctively been able to anticipate Victor’s lines as he skates, and they’re standing only a handful of feet apart when Victor finishes. To the thing in Victor’s heart, it’s still too far. “How was that?”

It was very Eros.

Yuuri looks a little bit flustered, and that, too, is not nearly enough. Victor is looking at that thing Yuuri has: the spirit that frantically works to assemble walls around him, the malevolent creature that makes Victor climb fences and wander hedge mazes. Like he’s the only one who does that, he can hear Alena scoff, and he realizes he owes her a call, even if he’ll spend the vast majority of it giving penance for his abrupt departure.

For the time being, Victor ignores Plisetsky and Nishigori, still at the edge of the rink. It’s the Eros program he really wants to work on. Any jumps he assigns to Yuri, Yakov may well change later. He dives right in, pretends for a moment that the skating’s the objective: “… which quads can you land?”

Yuuri can land the toe loop. “I can land the Salchow in practice, but in competition, I …” He hesitates. Victor recalls watching the Stammi Vicino video with its downgrades. The jumps are not the reason why he’s here, but Yuuri’s quick to try to reassure him nonetheless.

What Yuuri says is this: “Um, I think I can do it if I try! So, um …”

For the first time, what Victor hears is something fighting back against every excuse he might have to leave. Stay close to me, Yuuri once skated, the way nobody else ever could. Don’t ever leave.

“No, you can practice the basics.” Victor can feel Yuri’s eyes on them both from the boards, starts a timer in his head of seconds until Plisetsky’s next fit of inappropriate shouting. Yuri Plisetsky is a factory that manufactures illogical rage, and above his head is a permanent signal: zero days since last incident.

“I’ll teach Yurio first.” Best to get it over with. Victor’s given advice, but he’s not great at it, and whatever he’s pretending now, the reality is he’s never coached before. He probably shouldn’t be using a fifteen year old as a warm-up, but that same fifteen year old should never have been allowed on a plane, and here they all are. Yuuri blinks and Victor senses his disappointment. “I won’t teach you anything you can’t do right now,” he explains quietly. “How many times have you messed up during a competition? You have the skill to win. Why can’t you make it happen?”

Don’t you dare lose this, he thinks. Does Yuuri understand what he’ll be sending Victor back to, if he does? There’s an apartment in St. Petersburg that is familiar but empty. There’s the fact that Victor doesn’t know what his own program might be, if he got told to skate it tomorrow. There’s his terrible disinterest in returning to a cycle of competitions where the outcomes are all already nearly assured: it takes a very bad day on his part and an almost flawless one from his competitor to knock Victor off the top of the podium. He no longer wants any of it. It’s the sort of thing Christophe always spends the first half of the season complaining about, but to Victor this feels permanent: if something doesn’t change, this disinterest will persist forever.

Yuuri looks down, tapping his fingers together, and Victor feels an unfamiliar protective instinct flare up, sudden and powerful as a blizzard. He wants to blanket Yuuri in that sort of pure softness, too; the urge to do so, to keep him hidden and safe, does battle against the desire to show him off, to make the world see what he sees. “Well … that’s probably because …” There are a lot of things Victor would intercept to keep Yuuri from harm, but he does not know how to intercept Yuuri for
Yuuri. He waits until the truth spills out: “I lack confidence.”

Hard to believe from someone Victor has pictures of doing pole dancing with Christophe Giacometti, but there it is nonetheless. It’s probably the first true and personal thing Yuuri’s actually told him. The first marker in the maze. “Right.” Victor skates closer. “My job is to make you feel confident in yourself.” Yuuri doesn’t flee this time; instead, he stands frozen still as Victor touches his chin and then brushes his lower lip.

It’s another one of those lover’s touches, the sort of thing he ought to consider stopping, and yet:

What he wants to do, very much, is kiss Yuuri’s mouth; feel the slightly-parted lips against his own and swallow down the exhale of surprise that he feels against his fingers now. Yuuri’s blush has spread nearly to his ears, and he’s dangerously close to losing his glasses. “No one in the whole wide world knows your true eros, Yuuri,” Victor breathes. “It may be an alluring side of you that you yourself are unaware of.” All signs point to it being enabled by alcohol, in fact, something Victor has no room to judge him for. Victor understands the siren-song that comes out of the bottom of a bottle perfectly. “… Can you show me what it is soon?”

Please, he wants to beg, but he’s too proud for that sort of thing and there are people watching, interlopers on these feelings Victor is going to have to learn how to live with as he makes a zoo of himself and catalogues all of his urges in neat little rooms with iron bars. Please show me.

The Yurio disaster countdown clock chooses this exact moment to hit zero. Because of course.
“Hey, Victor! Aren’t you teaching me first?”

“Right,” Victor says, agreeably, pretending, because once again: murder is not an option. He glances back to Yuuri just the one time. “So, Yuuri,” he murmurs. “Think long and hard about what Eros is to you.”
Then he looks at Yuri Plisetsky, who definitely does not know what he’s gotten himself into, does not know about the beast Victor is currently nurturing inside of his ribcage. He wants spectacular. Victor is going to give it to him. Then he’s going to learn to be careful what he wishes for.

They go over Agape over and over and over again. There’s no denying that Yuri Plisetsky’s a prodigy, that there may come a day when he’s better than Victor is. That day is not today. The way he skates reminds Victor of that one Korean skater, the one whose technicals are all pretty decent but whose programs are constructed like they’re math equations.

Yuri’s making good progress in picking up the gist of the thing. It’s clear he doesn’t love the style of the program, that if Victor would let him he’d have stolen the Eros sequence by now. To an untrained eye he’s passably good at mimicking what Victor has laid out for the Agape program.

Except: it’s skating that lacks joy. It doesn’t resonate. Everything is just wrong enough that the overall effect is disastrously bad, and after a few hours Yuri’s bent over his skates, sucking in air. “Stop, stop!” You ought to work on your endurance, Victor thinks. Victor isn’t even winded. Instead he puts on a thoughtful air, taps his chin. “Hmm, something isn’t right here.”

Between deep, gasping breaths, Plisetsky gives out one of his trademark growls. I’m doing it like you showed me, he accuses, trying to shift the blame onto Victor. “Aren’t I?”

It’s just another one of those things that real love doesn’t do. Victor tells him as much. Love is as absent from this program as it has been from his life, which might be one thing if Yuri was able to convey longing, produce something poignant. That’s not what he’s doing. He’s skating Agape with the same grasping, scrambling reach with which he’s come for Victor here in Hasetsu. “The way you currently are, your greed is too obvious …” It’s careless. He’s also much too eager to show off his newly acquired quads, to demonstrate the way he can stretch just a little further than wherever he thinks the rest of the field is. If Yuri skates the way Seung-gil Lee does, he will only ever get a Seung-gil Lee result. “It’s good to have confidence, but this program isn’t where you should show it off.”

Yuri, again, tries to imply that this is behavior Victor has modeled for him. You’re the one who’s skated with complete confidence this entire time. Rather than laugh in his face, Victor elects to give him a pointed, blank stare, to let the sheer ridiculousness of that argument wash over them both. As expected, the teen realizes this is not the hill he needs to die on. Surrenders just a little bit.

“Well, what’s agape to you, then, Victor?!”

Victor thinks of Vasily, and the way Vasily says people always show up in his office, looking for answers. Everyone just wants to be told what to do. The truth is not so simple. “It’s a feeling, of course, so I could never explain it in words.” It’s a little bit of a cop-out answer. There are people he could try to explain it in words to. He could try with Vasily, with his father. Maybe a day is coming where he can say these things to Yuuri. He certainly can’t explain it to Yuri Plisetsky. Instead he lets the beast swoop in for the kill. Afternoon light is streaming in through the windows, and so Victor tilts his head up, basks in its golden glow, tries really hard to not resent Yuri for a wasted day that he wanted to spend doing more than trying to absent-mindedly keep an eye on Yuri’s compulsories out of the corner of his eye. “Do you bother thinking about that when you skate?”

Do you feel anything, or are you too busy chasing me?

Yuri looks fucking gutted, which makes today’s session over. “You’re funny, Yurio.” Victor hums. What he means is you’ll never catch me like this. If they were in St. Petersburg, he’d have the option of finding a church, of revisiting the Easter traditions. Some more practical way to convey the original thesis. Here, he’s going to have to improvise. “Well, maybe we need a temple.”
“A temple?!”

At the end of the day, when they’re all back at Yu-Topia, Victor realizes he should probably feel bad that he got Yuri into a situation where he was hit by a monk.

He doesn’t. Victor can be petty. If anything, it’s vastly improved his mood.

On the rise of that upswing, he decides to prod at Yuuri’s Eros one more time.

Besides, he still needs to pay Yakov back for that original phone call.

_I want to post a picture from the baths, take one for me?_  

“Sorry,” says Yuuri, who has gone from exhausted to rule-enforcing innkeeper’s son in just a handful of seconds (or, in Victor’s mind, savagely _disinterested_)— “we don’t let people take pictures in the baths.” It only gets worse at dinner: Victor has had a conversation with Hiroko, has both of his students on a proper competitive diet. He, on the other hand, is wolfing down delightful homestyle classics and pointedly ignoring his broccoli like he’s a five year old again. Yuri Plisetsky looks like he may already be asleep on the table, and Yuuri Katsuki looks like he’s going to be there shortly.

“I’ve got it,” Yuuri shouts suddenly, and for a moment, he’s given Victor hope. “Pork cutlet bowls! That’s what Eros is to me!”

_Savage._

Plisetsky wakes up long enough to prove himself useful, whispering: _seriously_, and when Yuuri flees
the onsen again for a furious run under the moonlight, Victor does not stop him.

The next morning, when it finally is his turn to train with Yuuri, Victor adopts a *fuck my life* attitude towards his current circumstances and comes up with all sorts of ridiculous shit to say while Yuuri skates. It’s perhaps 30% actual coaching, 20% inside joke with Christophe, and 50% pure saltiness; combined in this ratio the words that come out of his mouth are things like *think of the pork cutlet bowl!* or *Try to imagine entangling more of the egg.*

He is *never* telling his mother about this phase of his life.

Still, there’s something interesting about being on this side of the ice. It isn’t that he hasn’t watched other people skate for years; he has. The eyes of a competitor are very different than the eyes of a coach. Victor the skater watches Yuuri and Yuri skate and sees weaknesses, recognizes the places where he’d outperform. Victor the coach sees the changes that are necessary to compensate, catches himself thinking of ways to play to even Yuri Plisetsky’s strengths. The choreography is coming together.

The expression … well. There’s a long way to go.

Days pass like this. Outside of his morning session with Yuuri and his afternoons with Plisetsky, Victor finds time for himself by sending both of them to the gym. Nishigori tells him that Yuuri’s doing other training, too; a lot of running and agility work, the kind of thing that reinforces Victor’s original decision to put all of his jumps into the program’s second half. He suspects Yuri’s free time is being spent glued to his phone, not racing up the stairs to the viewpoint that overlooks the glittering bay. On his own time Victor maps the city out, gets a feel for it. He won’t admit to actual discomfort around his hosts; they’re *too kind.* It’s the sort of thing he’s only safe explaining to Mariya or to Alena, to women who have knives for eyes. His mother, in particular, knows the landscape of dissatisfaction the way he does, knows how it feels to imagine never belonging.

These long bicycle rides and these small personal discoveries begin to ease that sense of disquiet. He’s found a place that serves baklava, for instance, a complete oddity here; he’s got a favorite ramen shop and a little park that he likes. Little secrets that begin to make the place belong to him, and him to it.

This is how he locates the waterfall. Sending the younger of his charges back to temple for a beating doesn’t feel like a viable long-term solution. Agape is not something Victor can help Yuri discover.
Victor has never been particularly moved by landscapes, but in the absence of a cathedral he makes due with this space. On face value, it’s Yuri who needs to go there, who needs to stand somewhere holy and absorb the otherworldly, selfless energy that Victor can’t describe for him. Except Yuuri hasn’t discovered his Eros, either, no matter what stupid shit Victor has said to him today about breaded pork or chopped onions.

Besides, there’s something earnest about the way Yuuri tries to do what he says regardless of how Victor has said it ever since The Katsudon Incident. Victor knows without being present that he’ll stand under that water, hands pressed together, eyes closed, and try, and try, and try.

Yuri Plisetsky needs to watch someone do that. Needs to see it for himself.

The ramen is delicious, but the sake’s too easy to drink. Once upon a time he wrote a confession about the oblivion that could be found in the bottom of a bottle, and Victor, who’s got too many years of experience pretending to be happy while he’s absolutely fucking miserable stays out until nearly dawn, long after both Yuri and Yuuri give up and go back to Yu-Topia.

There’s a single question that he can’t shake: if he loses, will it be your fault?

He’s still a little hungover when he shows up to Hasetsu Ice Castle late the following morning, catches the two of them talking together as though they’re almost rinkmates. It’s nearly something he can picture between Yuri and Mila, back home, and it almost makes him smile, though they scatter away from each other the moment he points it out.

It’s what looks to be a very good day for Yuri Plisetsky and a very bad one for Victor Nikiforov:

Yuri has found Agape.

Yuuri is still lost.
Victor is almost entirely through his first beer before it begins to turn a corner: the woman Yuuri always calls Minako-sensei is back. He doesn’t notice the honorific because he doesn’t understand it; hasn’t been here long enough to realize that it’s strange, the way Yuuri never gives him one. He’s Victor, not Victor-san, not Nikiforov-san, not even Victor-sensei. It’s another one of those ways Yuuri has of telling him to be himself, lost in translation.

Minako wants to know about costumes. That, at least, Victor has a firm grip on. He’s mailed all of his here. It’s another one of those signals Yuuri is oblivious to; if he loses, Victor’s things will all have to go back into their boxes, get sent all the way back to St. Petersburg. Victor is halfway unpacked in the room he’s been given: Russian dolls and his own books litter a bookshelf; he’s hung a picture up that features his mother in a long, traditional dress. Victor has slowly been taking more things out of boxes, not fewer, and he’s made no moves to repack any of the costumes they’re unearthing.

Yuuri is sitting in the middle of all of it without realizing any of this. He’s too busy holding up one costume after another, citing when and where Victor wore them.

What happens next makes Victor think long and hard later about the fairytale about the Princess and the Pea. Yuuri is looking with wonder and delight at a costume Victor hasn’t thought about for years, and just looking at it now puts him in a very strange place.

Back then he’d fancied himself in love with a boy. Must be strangely exciting to watch the stoic squirm.

Victor improvises, and while his brain whirls attempting to reconcile past and present he can only state the obvious; something Yuuri probably already knows about him, given the way Yuuri’s been cataloguing practically every costume in this room, performance by performance. “I had long hair at the time,” he says while he manufactures a soft smile to cover for himself, to hide with. It’s true, but there’s something truer still that he wants to offer: “… so my costume suggested both male and female genders at once.”

“That’s right,” Yuuri breathes, and his fingers curl in a way that Victor remembers and envies. Because it’s a gesture made of both delicacy and possessiveness. It also embodies both. He pulls the Uninvited costume closer, cradles it gently, and then he smiles in a way that’s more beautiful than Victor remembers, his eyes bright with happiness in a way Victor hasn’t seen since he’s arrived. “I choose this one.”

This one is mine, Victor hears. Under the soft glow of that smile, the thing in his chest is falling down the stairs. He wants to say back: all of this is yours.

Yuri Plisetsky also chooses something pale and gossamer and angelic. Appropriate, an objective Victor might think. Objective Victor left the building so long ago that he’s currently passing the asteroid belt, on his way to orbiting Jupiter.

Right before he falls asleep, reality hits Victor in sickle and hammer force: Yuuri is going to skate in that costume tomorrow, is going to wear that part of him, that portion of his life, like a second skin. It makes Victor’s dreams very difficult, and not just because he knows the way the fabric will stretch a little bit, now that it’s meant for Yuuri’s frame.

What is it about Yuuri that makes him so adept at drifting into these moments of Victor’s peak weaknesses, makes him attracted to all of Victor’s hidden dark?

Why is it that the idea of him lingers and flickers, recast against those moments like the tiny sparkle
of a firefly, like fairy magic?

I don’t think you unworthy

I need a moment to deliberate

In the morning, locals pour into the Ice Castle for the Onsen on Ice. Because it feels terribly strange to go into a skating exhibition without a costume of his own, Victor has one, a traditional yukata he’s gotten Hiroko and Mari to help him with. It’s also a little bit easier to play pretend with this one, to adopt the mask of happy, vapid coach, like he’s got no skin in this game. The Victor Nikiforov he lets everyone see, the one prancing around with a megawatt smile, singing the praises of Hasetsu, doesn’t have a care in the world.

That Victor couldn’t possibly be torn apart by the outcome of this event.

There’s a sportscaster Victor dimly recognizes who’s conducting interviews. He creeps up on them late, just in time to hear Yuri Plisetsky say that they don’t need two Yuri’s.

“I’ll kill him,” Plisetsky says. It is the least Agape thing Yuri can possibly say, and Victor swallows down that bad taste that’s been in his mouth ever since Yuri arrived and demanded he return to Russia. Yuri’s got the bow and arrow drawn, but his ideas about who it is he’ll kill if he wins here are all wrong.

Victor doesn’t have the time to let it register on an emotional level, because Hisashi Morooka is introducing him and insulting him simultaneously:

“Last but not least, let’s hear from Victor Nikiforov, who’s switched to coaching out of the blue.”

Out of the blue. How could four words be so true at face value and so completely, utterly false?

He opts for cheerful, for vapid. It’s the safe choice. “Hi! Hasetsu is a great place. Come and visit at least once!” Yuuri and Yuri both turn on him, then, and Yuri’s throwing his daggers in the wrong place again when he tells Victor his attitude makes today’s face off look cheap.

You don’t know how expensive it is, Victor wants to scream, but Yuuri’s got that earnest look again,
the one that makes him a little bit weak, making him promise he’ll grant the wish of whoever wins.

Victor would get Yuuri Katsuki the moon if he asked for it, but he never asks.

He changes clothes while they warm up, stands in a corner deeply alone, lost in his thoughts. It falls to Yuuko to tell Yuri it’s time. Victor nearly forgets to follow them both.

What follows is a series of jumps executed so cleanly that Victor has his face pressed into his hands before he knows quite what he’s doing. Yuri’s almost falling apart at the end of the program; you can read it in his face, the way the spirals beat him, but it doesn’t matter. Victor remembers the program Yuuri skated the day before in practice and his heart sinks.

Shatters.

Still he pretends. He summons back a smile, ignores his own howls of protest, and tells Yurio the truth: it’s the best program he’s ever skated. “Go on,” Victor reminds him. “Greet the audience.”

Perhaps he’ll beg him later, get down on his knees, crawl. You have to let me stay here. You have to let me finish this.

Except as soon as the idea enters his head, Victor knows he won’t do it. Yuuri Katsuki, who is so kind that he’s standing a few feet away, clapping gently for this boy he’s allowed into his home, for this child he’s allowed to interrupt everything that ought to be his, will want him to keep his promise.

Besides, the angry thing that has made its home in Victor’s heart and which throws tantrums everywhere in his bloodstream — it wants to be fought for. It wants to be won.

Victor blinks and Yuuri is transformed, too: gone is the smiling, clapping, sweet thing. Yuuri has his head in his hands, his gaze transfixed on his feet. Victor’s moving before he realizes it, slowly and without the urgency he feels. By the time he gets there, Yuuri’s mumbling to himself in Japanese.

Fight for me, rumbles the beast.


Yuuri jolts in front of him in a flash of pure, unadulterated panic, puts his hands over his face and tries to breathe. Victor stands toe to toe with him and as Yuuri catches his breath he sees it again: the part that doesn’t let go. “I’m …” Yuuri hesitates. Yuuri changes. Victor is inches away when it happens. “I’m going to become a super tasty pork cutlet bowl,” Yuuri says. It’s what Yuuri says next that makes Victor’s breath catch in his throat. “So please keep your eyes on me and only me.”

Then Yuuri hugs him. Promise. Victor has tried for weeks now to be this close. Yuuri uses some type of gel to slick his hair back and Victor can smell it. Yuuri’s nose is pressed into his shoulder. Yuuri’s arms are completely curled around his shoulders.

Delicate. Possessive. “Promise!” He echoes again.

Victor’s world is changing while this happens. Yuuri’s in skates, which makes them more or less the same height, and it’s so natural to tilt his chin against Yuuri’s shoulder. “Of course,” he says quietly. It’s such an easy promise to make. The easiest he’s ever made. Victor isn’t making it flippantly, either; this isn’t him standing in the arena, looking at a young Yuri Plisetsky, promising him a debut. Of course, he says, because watching Yuuri dance in Sochi and watching Yuuri skate Stammi vicino, non te ne andare were both as easy as breathing. “I love pork cutlet bowls.”

What I love is you.
Yuuri’s skate begins and from the first snap of his head Victor’s fears evaporate.

Someone has whistled under their breath. That someone is Victor.

The skate begins in earnest.

Someone has rewritten the story. That someone is Yuuri.

The difference is subtle. The difference is everything.

Yuri Plisetsky leaves, and Victor Nikiforov is too bewitched to stop him.

The crowd erupting in approval is nothing compared to the volume of the roar in Victor’s heart. “Yuuri,” he shouts, and soon he’s enveloped Yuuri into a hug at the entry gate of the rink. This is also Yuuri’s best performance so far, Victor knows that, briefly says as much.

Yakov didn’t raise him for years to just leave everything there. What was with your triple axel out of the spread eagle? That was the worst, so far. I know you had Yurio teach you the quad Salchow in secret, but what was that?

He’s saying all this because he’s still Yuuri’s coach. Tomorrow he will wake up and he will still be Yuuri’s coach. He will be Yuuri’s coach the day after tomorrow and the day after that.

So what he’s really saying is thank you.

Yuri leaves without saying goodbye, which isn’t particularly sporting, and it leaves the second spot on the podium empty when Yuuri goes to collect his first win of the season. Victor stands next to him. Look, he wants to shout at the crowds. Look at this thing we’re going to make. Morooka is back, and because this moment isn’t about him, Victor resists the urge to needle him about the output of his decision to come and coach, out of the blue. “Katsuki Yuri has won the hot springs on ice event. A word please.”

Victor watches for a moment as Yuuri wrestles with his own anxiety, and then puts an arm around his shoulders, braces him against his own doubts, his terror. What Yuuri says is:

“I’m going to try and win the next Grand Prix Final with Victor! Thank you for your continued support!”
Minako-sensei is bawling.

The tip of Victor’s nose is warm. He squeezes Yuuri just a little bit closer.

*Your coach, still. Yours.*
Dinner after the Onsen on Ice is katsudon. Yuuri eats it like he’s having a religious experience, which may as well be a religious experience for Victor, though he’s busy pretending to be unaffected and fooling everyone in the room except for Minako. Minako’s feeding Victor beer, which isn’t unfamiliar territory for him, so he ought to be a little more in control of their conversation. Unfortunately, Minako drinks like she dances: with devastating efficacy.

“He hasn’t slept, you know,” she tells him while she refills their glasses, and Victor glances over towards Yuuri, who’s scraping at the bottom of his bowl with a pair of chopsticks. Yuuri looks soft and adorable and happy, but he also has tell-tale bags under his eyes, and looks like he’s going to faceplant on the table any moment now. “Not really.”

Victor thinks about the way the Eros story got rewritten, somehow, out there on the ice, and he glances towards Minako, who momentarily receives the benefit of his full attention, even if alcohol is making all of the edges of the world a little bit blurred at the seams. “What did you do?”

“What did he do,” she corrects him gently. “He wanted me to teach him how to dance more effeminate. We redid his movements to be more like a woman’s …”

“Ah.” Victor glances back at Yuuri, contemplative. Not for the first time, he wants to protect Yuuri from himself: from whatever it is that has made him practice for so many extra hours, the thing that sends him to complete all-nighters at the rink or at Minako’s studio. Because Minako’s fixed him in a piercing stare, Victor relays the story he’d originally told, about the town, about the playboy. He chose the woman. In the morning he’ll revise his frame for the tale accordingly. For now, he’s thinking about that moment at the edge of the rink, at the brink of Yuuri’s terror. What he’s
remembering is being swallowed up in Yuuri’s arms, drawn into a bear hug. *Watch me and only me.*

Victor decides that to say more would be to unveil even more than he already has, and he might be tipsy but he’s not drunk enough to confess. Instead, he puts on his coach voice. “Alright,” he hums, flashing his charmer’s smile. *They all think I’m the playboy.* It’s not wrong, but it’s not right either. “Long day for everyone’s favorite piggy,” he declares, because if Minako keeps feeding him beer he’s going to wind up neatly dissected on top of the table. It’s already late in the evening: the Katsuki family knows how to celebrate, and the whole town was pulling for Yuuri to win. Besides, the past 24 hours have taken their toll on Victor, too, hurling him from one end of the emotional spectrum to another. “Time for bed.”

This time he doesn’t make any attempt to convince Yuuri to share a room with him; he just walks him back to his door, says *I’m proud of you* and *goodnight* and then goes to bed himself in the room that Yuuri has just proved is his own for the foreseeable future. Makkachin is curled up at the end of the bed, already asleep, when Victor calls Paris. He lets Sofia tell him about school and listens to his father ramble on about the upcoming season before Mariya takes the phone. “Vitya,” she murmurs, in that toneless way of hers, an asking that never comes out as a question.

It all comes out in one breath: *oh mama, it was so close, but he won, he won …*

It takes a very long time and one cold shower to actually put him to sleep; once he lays down all he can see is Yuuri’s spread eagle in that costume, Yuuri’s hands above his head for that sequence where he claps, the soft wave of Yuuri’s arms.

Victor dreams of Sochi again, except this time Yuuri is skating through the banquet in the Eros costume (it’s his now, it may have never been Victor’s) while Victor tries to catch up, always a few steps behind, never quite within reach.

The dream is forgotten in the clear light of daybreak. In the morning, Victor has breakfast with Toshiya and the poodle cup, without any sign of Yuuri. Victor decides to let him sleep in, figures he’ll go ahead and get to the rink alone. He’s about to do just that when Toshiya sets down his newspaper.

“You never packed,” Toshiya notes absently, and this time he picks up Victor’s plate, goes to the kitchen to rinse it off.

Victor hesitates in the doorway and waits for the question. *Why didn’t you?* It doesn’t come. Still, this is Yuuri’s father, someone who probably loves Yuuri more than he does. “I wanted him to win,”
Victor says, without looking back. It’s a fact on its face, but the truth is in his expression itself, and that’s why he doesn’t turn to finish the conversation where Toshiya can see it. *I needed him to win.*

He gets maybe a solid hour of practice in by himself, exorcises the last remnants of the terror he’d felt after watching Plisetsky perform. What’s left is the stark relief of the morning and the memory of Yuuri’s program. It transforms Victor’s skating into something bubbly and effervescent; he doesn’t have a program to practice yet, and so he’s just having fun, letting himself skate through some of the things he’d like to see Yuuri try, now that they need to compose a long program together.

Yuuri bursts through the doors and out onto the ice in his tennis shoes, completely out of breath, and Victor holds back his laugh. “Good morning, Yuuri!” He chirps. “Only aeroflot has kept me waiting as long as you have!” Yuuri wilts into a deep bow of apology; he always seems to do that — apologize, like a bad habit or a tic he can’t get rid of — and Victor claps and makes a dog joke before he gets serious. “Resting,” he says, because Yuuri hasn’t told him yet about his all-nighter, he had to get that information from Minako, “is part of work too.”

They revisit the choreography of the Eros program side by side, and Victor makes adjustments using what he’s learned from Minako, makes his own skating more feminine to match so that Yuuri’s got something to model. They do this until Yuuri takes a particularly nasty fall. “You tend to flub your jumps when something is on your mind,” Victor observes, which may be saying the obvious. He knows Yuuri well enough by now to know that something is *always* on Yuuri’s mind.

It’s that fact which has him reconsidering what they’ve already discussed for the free program, in terms of jump composition, when they’re back at the onsen that night. “Maybe we should nix having three different quads in your free program.” Yuuri protests, which is a nice surprise: he’s putting up a fight. Now that he’s set his eyes on the idea of the Grand Prix Finals, he’s clinging to what he thinks he’ll need to win there, and says as much. *I need those!*

“Oh?” Victor lets himself imagine a free program skate packed with the kind of program complexity he’s put into the Eros sequences. A perfect score there could make the technical components less relevant, and he says as much, only to find the idea rewarded by stubborn silence. When Victor looks up from his stretch, Yuuri’s got his head on his arms at the edge of the hot
springs, has retreated back into himself. “Yuuri, do you know why I decided to become your coach?” There’s no answer, and the puzzle of Sochi still hangs between them. He draws closer, kneels at the edge and reaches for Yuuri’s hands. This time there’s no flinch; Yuuri lets Victor draw him up, halfway out of the water. Yuuri’s muscles are back; the adorable but inadvisable softness of his body has been chiseled away by hours of workouts. It’s the body Victor remembers from Sochi, twined around a pole, but Victor can’t talk about that. “I was drawn to you because of music.” Words don’t do it justice, which is why Sergei is a musician and not a poet. Victor sympathizes and tries to explain anyway, the music of Yuuri’s body, the way every part of him is an instrument. He watches the way Yuuri’s blush spreads, blossoms over his nose and his cheeks and the tips of his ears. “I want to create a high-difficulty program to make the most of that.” Only I can do that.

It’s too much to be standing here, holding hands, watching Yuuri turn redder and redder, so Victor pulls him the rest of the way out of the water, pretends to be celebratory. “And the short program validated it!”

Because Yuuri is objectively terrible at remembering to take care of himself, and Victor is objectively terrific at finding new ways to punish himself for his current circumstances, he decides to help Yuuri stretch. Better to do it now than to fall into bed and wake up with aches and cramps, the athlete side of him thinks. Still, the athlete side of him is very quiet. There is another part of Victor, louder, which is thinking about how he’s got his fingers on Yuuri’s ankle, how …

He needs to find something else to talk about. Literally anything else will do. “Perhaps you should produce your next free program,” Victor says before he’s really thought about it. Now that the words are out of his mouth he can think about them, considers what it would be like to work on a program together with Yuuri so that Minako’s not sneaking him information about how Yuuri’s actually interpreting their work together over a pile of beers. It’d be one way into his head, past the little walls he keeps up. Yuuri tells him that his past coaches have always chosen his music, and Victor wrenches his leg a little bit higher, deeper into the stretch, ignores the subsequent protests of ow ow ow because Yuuri is letting him twist him around like a fucking pretzel and life, at present, is glorious. “Isn’t it more fun to do it yourself?” He asks. He’s preferred to do so ever since he made the switch over from Lilia, all those years ago. Yuuri tries the same protest — but my previous coach — which Victor isn’t going to let linger as an excuse.

He’s Yuuri’s coach now. “Who was your previous coach again?”

There’s a mutter of some sort back from the onsen, which ends both of their torment: Victor stops folding Yuuri into inventive new shapes, and by doing so, he also stops playing with actual fire, burning nobody but himself, from the inside out.

They’re back inside when he makes Yuuri call Celestino. Victor putters around the locker room pretending not to eavesdrop, but Celestino’s got a booming voice and he can hear everything. This is fine, Victor tells himself, until he hears Yuuri start to apologize, catches the tell-tale waver of his voice. Victor intercepts, puts the speakerphone on, pretends to be the stupid person he isn’t, and introduces himself even though he knows damn well that Celestino Cialdini knows who he is. Still, there’s a bit of pleasure in saying the words: “I’m his coach, Victor!”

“You’re playing at being a coach in Japan?” Cialdini’s incredulity stings, reminds Victor of the Onsen on Ice sportscaster talking about this out of the blue decision he’s made. “Cut it out already.” Victor pretends like it doesn’t irritate him every time someone points that out, with less and less success every time. Changes the subject. “Why didn’t you let Yuuri choose his program music?”

They’re out of one dangerous territory and on to another. Celestino tells him the story: Yuri only ever
brought him one piece, composed by an acquaintance. He calls it not bad, which is immensely far away from a ringing endorsement, but worse than that, he remembers the exact circumstances, the entire conversation. “I asked him if he could picture himself winning, using that music,” Celestino explains. What he says next is so clear in Victor’s mind that he can practically see Yuuri saying it. *Please choose the music for me after all, Coach.*

Except Yuuri *never* calls him Coach.

“Yuuri never had confidence in himself,” Celestino says, while they’re both listening. “I told him time and time again to trust himself more, but …”

Victor manages a slight smile. “Okay,” he murmurs, because he doesn’t need this conversation to continue in front of Yuuri like this. “Thanks.” Then he gives the phone back, lets Yuuri finish the call. He absently files the way Yuuri’s promised to redeem himself; it’s good to hear Yuuri defend the goal of the Grand Prix Finals so many times in so many ways, but there’s a bigger issue that Victor needs to start addressing.

If he doesn’t get Yuuri to start being honest with him, and soon, this season will produce the same results as every season Yuuri’s had before it. “Yuuri,” he says, a little flat, unable to conjure the smile or the wink he might usually use to soften his criticism. “Can I hear this music he mentioned?” Yuuri stammers, and Victor preempts any excuse. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m your coach, aren’t I?”

“Right. Sorry.”

But the next day, when he does hear it, he realizes why Celestino turned it down. It’s an underwhelming piece with no emotional hooks, the sort of thing that might’ve been in Victor’s piano etude books as a child. Clean and pretty without being thrilling.

Victor’s commissioned music before, so he can’t help but wonder what it is Yuuri must’ve said to his music major friend to achieve this result.

*You should think of other possibilities.*

There’s countless amounts of music Victor could suggest for Yuuri, but he doesn’t do it: it’d defeat the entire purpose of this exercise. Better to leave Yuuri in his room trying to figure it out, battling through it. Victor can still feel his anxious energy the next day when Yuuri leaves for a run, spends their time apart catching up with his friends.
Alena is particularly interested in this part of his endeavor, and insists they facetime so that Victor can catch her up on his time in Hasetsu. Like always, she doesn’t care about the skating itself; she zeroes in on all the other, little things. “Huh,” she murmurs, when Victor explains the Onsen on Ice gambit and Yuuri’s choice for his prize, and then she reaches for the chameleon dig that’s been between them for years. “Have you decided which Victor Nikiforov he’ll be spending all that time with?”

“The ordinary one,” Victor quips on the phone, because he wants it, finally, the thing she’s been giving him shit about for years: wants so badly to figure out how to just be himself around another person. “The one who has terrible friends who nag him on the phone when they should be offering sympathy and kindness …”

“Tch,” she snorts. “Go curl up on your pile of gold medals and cry.”

Time passes. Yuuri’s no closer to his music, still hasn’t arrived at a narrative theme. Victor is getting impatient. “Why can’t you trust your own decisions?” Even in the midst of whirling depression, Victor’s been able to put together a functional skater. He can be the worst person on earth and still throw down a winning program; on the days where he’d like to never get out of bed he’s still in the rink, producing quadruple flips.

He begins to bend the rule he’d made about leaving this up to Yuuri in the middle of one of their practices, while Yuuri is tired and frustrated and clinging to the edge of the boards. It’s not a good moment for either of them. Sometimes even Victor gets bought into his own mythology, forgets and eschews that he’s still just a human. “How about trying to remember something?” A lover, perhaps? He’s so tired of waiting. He knows as soon as he’s suggested it that he’s failing some kind of test again, and Yuuri’s having a meltdown in front of him for it, has lashed out at him for the first time.

Then the apologies are firing again. That tic. Victor hates it. He’d rather let Yuuri dig into him with his actual anger than deal with this. “S-s-sorry! That was directed at me — I just —“

He thinks back to the way Yuuri’s deflected this topic every single time. Victor has things he hates about himself, too, and it’s his viciousness that takes the wheel. “Oh, right. You’ve never had one?”
Yuuri’s face falls and Victor sees it immediately: every wall between them suddenly reconstructed. Four times as strong as before.

Victor is a general trying to siege a city. All he has to throw at the walls is himself. He does it over and over and over again, and the walls still hold. let’s go somewhere. No. Let’s take a bath? No. Share a room?

Yuuri closes his door without an answer. Victor spends a sleepless night with his dog.

In the morning, Victor has a standoff with Yuuri’s door. He’s never once charged past it when Yuuri’s retreated here, and he’s not sure it’ll be better if he does so now.

All he knows is that he’s incapable of letting this fester for longer than it already has.

His smile muscles hurt already but he smiles anyway, perhaps the falsest of his efforts to date. “Good morning, Yuuri. Let’s go to the ocean.”

“O-okay.”

Something about the ocean has always been deeply reassuring to Victor. He’s traveled all over the world and yet everywhere he goes it’s the same sea in different clothes. The same waves. He and Yuuri sit next to each other but apart, separated by Makkachin, and Victor counts the incoming tides for a while in silence. It’s an overcast day, full of clouds that haven’t yet decided what they’re going to be, the sort that won’t just go ahead and storm. He sympathizes.

It’s the cawing of seagulls that captures Victor’s attention finally, and he reaches out for Makkachin while they fly overhead, following the arc of the birds rather than linger overlong on the way Yuuri’s drawn his knees up to his chest, folded in on himself. Always trying to disappear. Victor exhales and tells him about how the seagulls remind him of St. Petersburg. “… I never thought I’d leave that city, so I never used to notice the seagulls’ cries.” What he means is I get homesick, I’m lonely. What he says is: “Do you ever have times like that?”

Yuuri doesn’t look back at him, his eyes fixed on the sand, but he more than repays Victor for this
momentary vulnerability. “… There was a girl in Detroit,” he murmurs, “who was really pushy and … kept talking to me.” He hasn’t moved, face still hidden in his knees, and if there were more people here, or more seagulls, it’d be hard to hear him. Victor sits absolutely still. “One time, a rinkmate got into an accident. I was really worried, waiting at the hospital with that girl. She hugged me to comfort me, and I shoved her away without thinking about it.”

_I shoved her away._ Victor thinks about the walls Yuuri builds, the way for every brick he dismantles there’s another one at the ready. An endless supply of _something_ meant to keep him out. “Wow,” he murmurs carefully, although he’s not really that surprised. He’s seen for himself how Yuuri gets about touch. “Why?”

“I didn’t want her to think I was feeling unsettled.” But this isn’t all. “I felt like she’d intruded on my feelings, tried to come into my heart, and I hated it … That’s when I realized that Minako-sensei, Nishigori, Yuuko-chan, my family … none of them have ever treated me like a weak person.” Yuuri somehow looks more downcast than before, and for half a second Victor almost sympathizes with this strange girl a world away. He wants to reach out. Instead he curls his fingers into Makkachin’s fur, copes with a surrogate. “No matter how weak I am.”

Victor considers his therapy sessions with Vasily; the way the old man always let him sling words like that into the air, allowed them to linger. It’s only this that leaves him still holding his breath, lets him wait for Yuuri to finish.

“… They all had faith that I’d keep growing as a person, and they never stepped over the line.” There it is, a confession. Yuuri’s telling him there is a line, is warning him how sturdy it is, how well-guarded the chambers of his heart are when it comes to interlopers. Victor recasts the previous day in the stormy, muted light of this conversation, and concludes that his sin hadn’t been reaching for Yuuri’s heart in the first place. Instead it had been the flippancy he’d used to refer to previous attempts.

Yuuri takes relationships seriously. Perhaps more seriously than Victor ever has. “Yuuri,” he replies quietly, gently even, which is a foreign thing for Victor, “you’re not weak. And everyone else knows it, too.” If anything, Victor thinks, Yuuri’s quite strong — strong enough to wrestle his nerves, his fears, and his determined streak of introversion to arrive in the top ten figure skaters in all of the world. If figure skating was a sport that played out in front of no audience, or maybe even a smaller one, he thinks, Yuuri might even be one of the very best.

Victor decides he’s done fighting with the line. Yuuri owns the creature that builds up his walls. Yuuri can tell him the rules. “What do you want me to be to you?” He asks.

_A father figure?_

“No.”

_A brother, then? A friend?_

Yuuri makes a noncommittal noise.

“Then, your boyfriend, I guess.” Victor quips, certain already of the reaction he’s going to receive. Nevermind that this is exactly what _he_ wants. “I’ll try my best.”

Predictably, Yuuri erupts into arm-waving and a whole chorus of rejection, and Victor is nearly smiling when he stands up and stares back at him, adamant. “I want you to stay who you are, Victor!” Victor who hardly knows who he is. It’s almost laughable. He’s been so ready to transform himself into whatever Yuuri needs or wants that the idea is ludicrous. Alena is laughing at him a
world away. Still, Yuuri seems to have some idea, some picture of who Victor really is. He continues: “I’ve always looked up to you. I ignored you because I didn’t want you to see my shortcomings.” The wind has picked up, pushing the clouds further inland, and it ruffles Yuuri’s hair. Victor wishes he was zephyr. Then Yuuri makes him a promise, and it has nothing to do with winning the Grand Prix. It’s like everything Yuuri does: at once tremendously simple and terribly complicated, all at the same time. “I’ll make it up to you with my skating!”

“Okay.” Victor holds a hand out, lets Yuuri help him up. “I won’t let you off easy, then,” he murmurs, which is a promise, too. “That’s my way of showing my love.”

My love. Yuuri’s hand is still in his, and neither of them flinches. On the horizon there’s a blue sky.

Later, when he understands more about language, when he’s fluent in Japanese and he understands the subtleties of honorifics and nouns, he’ll realize this is the precise moment when Yuuri started speaking to him like an equal, like a friend.

The next day Yuuri runs up the stairs of the Hasetsu Ice Castle and tells Victor that his friend is going to redo the composition for his long skate. The part of Victor that is narrow and mean and like his mother almost says hopefully she makes something a little more inspiring this time. The part of Victor that comes from his father looks into Yuuri’s face and knows to trust what he sees there. “Okay,” he agrees again. “I look forward to it.”

“Until she’s done, um …” Yuuri proves that he intends to keep his promise. “Please teach me all the jumps you can do!”

Thirteen quadruple flips later, Victor Nikiforov thinks he might be dying. Yuuri Katsuki seems to be doing just fine, even though he’s had spectacular falls ten times, under-rotations twice, and most recently: a quad flip that barely qualifies as a quad flip and only because he saved it with a three-point landing with one hand. “Victor, please let me do that one more time!”

“Hasn’t it been tens of thousands of times?” There’s snow all over his skates, which Victor leans over to clean up.

“I’ve thought this for a while,” Victor hums, “but you have pretty good stamina.” He means it innocently, but as soon as the words are out of his mouth his mind’s in the gutter. Now is not the time to reconsider Sochi for what is also the thousandth time.

“Well, I have that, at least,” Yuuri agrees, but Victor doesn’t hear him; Victor’s completely lost track of the conversation. What else has Yuuri told him? He rattles off the first fact that comes into his mind. “You said you get hungry when you’re nervous in competition, too,” he says, like an idiot, and then he works back towards the original facts: strength. Stamina. He was talking about those things. “You haven’t suffered any major injuries, and you’re younger than I am …”

This is the exact moment where Yuuri touches the whorl in Victor’s hair, precisely where Sergei Nikiforov has a thin spot that Victor’s terrified he’s inherited. If he didn’t feel old before, outskated by his own charge, he definitely feels it now, and reaches to cover the back of his head.

Yuuri is already instituting his default protocols for this sort of situation: profuse, pinwheel apologies. “S-sorry! I couldn’t help it!”

“Is it getting that thin?”

Yuuri screaming no no no everything’s okay at him doesn’t feel in the slightest bit reassuring, but it is terribly funny, and so Victor lets himself collapse to the ice. “I’m hurt,” he mumbles. “I can’t recover.”

Apology defcon 5 is not working, so Yuuri advances to the next levels: (4) bowing, (3) pleading. “Please get up, your clothes will get wet,” eventually does the trick, but not before Victor’s shaking with a laughter that he eventually sees Yuuri catch. They stay like that for a long time, the only two people in the entire arena who are in on the joke.

Victor is well and thoroughly exhausted by the time they get back to the Onsen; he feels like he’s been through one of Yakov’s grumpy days and goes to bed early. He’s been asleep for an hour, maybe two, when his door slides open and Yuuri bursts into Victor’s room, jumping on Makkachin’s tail in his hurry to climb up onto the bed. Victor soothes her indignant yelp as Yuuri keeps his apology song relatively brief. “Oops, sorry! The music for the free program’s done.”

Still half-asleep, and not at all convinced that he’s not still dreaming, Victor sits up. Yuuri has never come into his room like this, and Yuuri has certainly never straddled him bearing a laptop and earbuds that he’s already putting on.

The soft intricacy of piano is too real to be from a dream. Victor sits up and blinks away sleep, though for the instant his eyes are closed he can already picture the plaintive reaches Yuuri will make as the opening moves of this program, the arc of his skates.

He says nothing, just smiles and nods, and Yuuri’s face is a mirror of his own, growing more delighted by the passing second because he knows, too. They both do.

This is the music. This is the right music.

The next morning Victor goes to the rink early to listen to the piece over and over, taking down minutes and seconds to set Yuuri’s jump sequence to. Yuuri catches him deliberating, settles in alongside him to tweak the list. “If you want more impact,” Victor suggests, “maybe the last jump can be a quadruple toe loop?” It’s the easiest of the quads, one Yuuri doesn’t have to think about too much; not like the Salchow or the Flip, which he still hasn’t proven he can land repeatedly without
making some type of mistake.

“Huh?” Yuuri’s surprise isn’t unjustified. A triple would be a much safer choice, and an easier triple, too: not the axel, which is three and a half rotations of menace (not at all unlike the triplet bearing the name, Victor thinks). “For the last one?”

“With your stamina, I think you can pull it off.” Just for fun, though, Victor leans over, adopts an air of idle challenge. “You’d rather not?”

Yuuri’s promised him. The determination comes humming back to life. “I’ll do it!”

“Okay.” This is a pattern they’re developing, something Victor’s starting to understand: a call he makes in the form of a question, followed by Yuuri’s answer, his own acquiescence. He drifts away to take off his jacket, to get ready for another grueling day. “Oh, right. Yuuri, did you change the musical theme?” They’ve been talking about the way Victor organizes his seasons around a central theme, something to connect the two programs in his head.

What Yuuri says is “oh, umm…” but what Victor has learned to hear is yes.

“What is it?”

Yuuri looks over at him, and doesn’t flinch. “The theme,” he says, “is ‘on my love.'”


It’s not until a little later, watching Yuuri rehearse the opening that Victor realizes what he has on his hands, what they’ve managed to do. This program, he realizes, could set records. It could put him into the history books for the first time as a coach, as a choreographer for someone else. But if anyone else ever gets to see Yuuri skate it the way he does, then, well …

It’s perfect. You’re perfect.
It’s Minako who gets the notification about Grand Prix assignments. It isn’t that Victor has forgotten the date; he’s just been resolved to treat it like any other day. That proves to be a miscalculation: back at the onsen, the Katsuki family crack confetti over their son and provide everyone with drinks. Victor watches the triplets attempt to educate the assembled friends and family on the Grand Prix series itself — he can’t understand a word, it’s all in Japanese — but they’re adorable and spirited and it’s safe to say he gets the gist of things. Victor’s already reviewed the assignments on his phone. Cup of China and the Rostelecom Cup. He gathers from all the babbling that Yuuri is good friends with one of the Cup of China skaters, Chulanont.

Yakov and Yura will be at Rostelecom, which is a looming homecoming for Victor that he doesn’t want to think too long or too hard about. He talks to the dog instead. “You’ll be minding the house during the season, Makkachin,” Victor murmurs, rewarded with one big sloppy poodle kiss.

Nishigori moves the conversation back into English in an attempt to include him again, though he’s directing his commentary at Yuuri. “I bet if you show up with Victor as your coach, they’ll think you stole him from the sport!” He’s getting terrific side-eye from Minako. Sometimes Takeshi Nishigori is the perfect example of the idiom people have about bulls and china shops. Maybe skating fans worldwide hate you now, someone chimes in, though Victor’s not paying attention anymore: he’s idly monitoring Yuuri’s panic levels, and leans an arm against his shoulder to be reassuring.

Let them, he wants to say. Anyone who’s too stupid to love Yuuri on his own merits doesn’t deserve him. But that’s not what his body language says, and it’s body language that he and Yuuri are learning how to speak to each other. It says: don’t worry, I’m here.

“Sorry,” Yuuko protests. “We’re on your side, Yuuri-kun!” Minako insists she is, too, proudly displaying her big Katsuki Yuuri banner.

“First up is the Cup of China!”

This prompts a murmur of protest from the triplets and the conversation devolves once again. Victor’s picking up words of Japanese here and there (he can say things like good morning, and introduce himself, and he’s a champ at ordering beer and ramen) but this is impossible to follow. Yuuri’s tracking towards miserable again, speaking in a somber tone that even Nishigori mimics somewhat thoughtfully. Sou ka is something Victor understands, though he’s got no idea what it is Takeshi might be going I see about.

He leans in a little closer. “What?”

For once, Yuuri doesn’t apologize. He translates. “Oh, we’re talking about domestic competitions,” he says, and from there Victor pieces together the rest. Yuuri’s got a local contest to win in September, his first debut back into an actually approved exhibition.

“It’ll be his comeback competition,” Yuuko cheers, which is something Takeshi echoes:

“Domestic competitions should be a cakewalk for you!”

Whatever it is the triplets have to say about this involves someone named Minami-kun and the word Fukuoka, which is enough to make Yuuri look thoughtful all over again.

It’s Toshiya who re-centers him. “Good, good. We can cheer you on this year, too!”

“Otou-san.” Dad. Victor hears the exact moment Yuuri goes from depressed to touched, and later, though he doesn’t understand what Toshiya says next, hears it again, in exasperation. “Dad!”

Another week flies by on the same cadence: breakfast, time running to and from the temple, time
spent at the rink. Every day Victor watches Yuuri unlace his skates and rub at the blisters on his feet, and every following day he comes back, earnest, determined, ready to take on more.

“Yuuri,” Victor says, one day, because Mari’s reminded him that they’ve got entry forms to fill out later, things the JSF needs before the upcoming championship that Victor can’t possibly hope to read. “You haven’t named the piece. What’ll it be?”

Yuuri skates over and uncaps a sharpie. His hesitation is brief.

YUURI ON ICE.

There’s an unfurling of who Yuuri is in this program, the kind of transformation that reminds Victor of caterpillars and butterflies. It’s not that Yuuri wasn’t beautiful to begin with. It’s that the metamorphosis is underway, and the cocoon is falling off. It’s strange and sometimes it’s painful but it doesn’t change what has always been there, this whole time.

The song is Yuuri. The program is Yuuri.

Victor is becoming Yuuri’s, as steadily as the piano arpeggios of the piece build, as sure as the waves on the Hasetsu beach.

“Yeah,” he hums, “Perfect.”
It takes four hours to get from Hasetsu to Okayama, a journey that mostly happens by train. Victor doesn’t love trains. Back when he’d first begun to travel they’d been idyllic, a way to see all of Europe as it flew past naive eyes. Somewhere along the way he got famous, and by now he’s accumulated so many miles flying all over the world to skate that there’s nearly always a first-class upgrade with his name on it. Victor gets to go through those lines at airports that are reserved for important people in a hurry. He gets from point A to point B swiftly, these days.

Time spent on a train occupies some other type of liminal space. There’s not a whole lot to do other than watch a country he doesn’t understand fly past the windows, or, perhaps more accurately, watch Yuuri watch a country he doesn’t understand fly past the windows. Minako and Takeshi are sitting with them at one of those tables for four, engaging in what sounds like small talk with Yuuri in Japanese. Every so often either Minako or Yuuri catch themselves, move the whole conversation back into English, but it’s something that only lasts for a little while before someone invariably says something Victor can’t understand.

And anyway, Yuuri’s hardly participating; he’s got a thoughtful look, leaning up against the window, one earbud in and one out. Minako looks between him and Victor, looks at Takeshi, and then, like the evil saint she is, makes up an excuse on the spot about wanting to go to the dining car for beers.

Victor manages to count to ten entire telephone posts, flashing by alongside the train, before he says something. “What are you thinking about?”

For a moment Yuuri says nothing, and Victor wonders whether he’s being ignored or simply wasn’t
heard. Then he says:

“… I hadn’t been home in years, when I came back. I just … How can I still be homesick, when I’m right here?”

“Sou,” hums Victor, trying the strange word out, and Yuuri corrects him gently, with a swift look that could almost be read as fond. Sou ka. “Sou ka,” he murmurs, and continues after he’s gotten an affirmative nod. “My parents moved to Paris when I was still pretty young —“

“I remember,” Yuuri says, and Victor battles conflicting forces: it’s at once tremendously flattering, like watching Yuuri go through all of his old costumes with such strange reverence; and yet terribly unfair, because Yuuri seems to have the complete set of encyclopedias when it comes to Victor Nikiforov, and all Victor has is one haggard notebook, and only its first set of pages, at that.

“Right,” Victor says, and he pretends to ignore the way Yuuri blushes and fixes his gaze back outside of the train. “I moved in with my Grandmother, and then Yakov, and … I was still in St. Petersburg, but it wasn’t really home. Then I’d go visit Paris, and that wasn’t really home either. You don’t feel at home now, either?”

“It’s …” Neither one of them is particularly good with words, Victor’s realizing. In completely opposite ways. Two sides of some same underlying syndrome, two different ways to hide. “Surreal,” Yuuri says carefully, and Victor watches as his fingers furl and unfurl, a signal fire that he can’t decode. For once, he says nothing. He waits. He counts eight more telephone poles. “I used to think I had to leave to compete the way I wanted to, to be good enough, and now…” He glances back at Victor.

“Now here we are.” They’ve talked about it, choreographing Yuuri’s program. It’s the entire narrative story of the free skate, carrying him away on a wonderful series of piano cascades into the revelation of family, of support. Victor himself is in Yuuri’s long program, a change the whole watching world is going to be able to hear and see. It’s a better representation of himself than what he’d ever have considered putting forward on his own.

“Aa.”

This is one of those complicated moments, tenuous, so Victor stretches his legs out a little bit into the aisle and tilts his head against Yuuri’s shoulder. Yuuri lets him. “What are you listening to?”

Yuuri offers him the unused earbud without another word. Victor isn’t sure what he was expecting, and so by that definition anything would be a surprise. It’s Hozier crooning in his ear:

\[
\textit{When my time comes around, lay me gently in the cold dark earth. No grave can hold my body down, I’ll crawl home to her.}\n\]

They sit like that, just listening, breathing, and watching the rest of the way to Okayama.

Victor hates trains a little less by the time they arrive.
It has been a very long time since Victor has had to participate in a competition anything like the Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship. It’s not ISU sanctioned, so he doesn’t know very many people here, which is both a blessing and a curse. This is the trial grounds for the JSF, a world which Victor knows very little about. Everyone around him speaks Japanese until they see him, and then they speak star-struck English. It occurs to him that he’s been spoiled by Hasetsu, where Yuuri’s the hometown hero, the local celebrity; where Victor gets to live his life in relative privacy, or, if not perfect solitude, a kind of retreat he hasn’t been able to achieve in Europe for years. Here everyone’s a skater, though, and they tremble around him as he cuts through the crowd. It’s as though Victor were some god stalking the earth, deigning to interact with mere mortals.

He wonders if anyone would believe the real truth of it. He’s been mortal for some time.

Yuuri doesn’t have long to linger in the dismay of his draw results before they’re swept into interviews, and that’s where some of Victor’s habits simply take over. He’s used to listening to Yakov talk him up, used to protecting and maintaining the distance that is his legacy: all those championships, all those gold medals. He does it passably well: to be charming and convincing is a habit Victor relies on often. He knows what people think of his smile. He uses it here. “We’ve timed him to peak at the Grand Prix Final, so this isn’t a problem. He should be able to take it easy and earn a personal best score today.”

It earns him a severe, quiet scolding from Yuuri, and even though it’s in English, Victor can’t quite keep up. Something about last year’s Nationals. Mistakes were apparently made. What he hears at the end was purely because I was mentally weak. Victor realizes then and there that he and Yuuri’s anxiety are doomed to do battle like this all season long. He hopes Yuuri’s anxiety realizes how stubborn Russians can be: for every time Yuuri tries to cut himself down, Victor is going to be there to prop him right back up.

He uses the airhead act to get them all out of the moment: himself, the reporters, and most importantly, Yuuri. “Wow.” Victor continues to use it well into practice, bouncing around the Makkachin box of tissues from rinkside because Yuuri looks tense. “Makkachin’s cheering for you, too,” he promises.

“Oh, yeah.” Yuuri seems distant. “Real cute.”

“Try to be happier,” pouts Victor, but it’s not very effective when spoken from behind a dog full of tissues. Then again, neither is this warmup. Eros is not meant to be performed in the distant, mechanical way Yuuri is skating right now. His stiff posture as he glides around the rink is nearly the most noticeable thing on it; nearly, because there’s a tiny skater following Yuuri’s every move, and
this kid has hair that is the closest approximation to a candle’s burning wick that Victor has ever seen.

Victor isn’t as dumb as he seems, sometimes; he knows this foxpup-in-kid’s-clothing is Kenjiro Minami, knows Minami won last year’s Nationals in the middle of Yuuri’s meltdown. In spite of Yuuri’s accusation, he recalls the whole story.

Minami looks like he might die of happiness if Yuuri would only turn and acknowledge him once.

Victor watches and waits. That moment never comes.

Stay put, he tells Yuuri later, and takes his bag to go change. What he puts on is a French staple: it’s Dior, classic black-and-white. Victor feels the same way he’d feels zipping up his costume. For the next few days, these suits are going to be his armor, the final dressings of a persona he intends to express to a watching world. In the same way that the right costume can emphasize a program’s theme, he intends to let the suit speak for him. He’s tired of being told by everyone else that he’s not taking coaching seriously, of listening to other people characterize this monumental decision he’s made as something flippant, something he might revert at any moment.

He studies himself in the bathroom mirror for a long moment, and then he straightens his tie and walks back out, rejoins a waiting world that always holds its breath for what Victor Nikiforov might do next.

Yuuri’s been looking for him. The women’s singles skaters are here suspiciously early for their warm-up sessions after the men’s short, and Victor feels it, the way their gazes and giggles follow him. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” he apologizes mildly, although he’s probably not as sorry as he should be.

“Why did you change clothes?” The little voice that suggests that Yuuri’s irritated over the positive
reception Victor’s suit is receiving while Victor is standing in it probably belongs to wishful thinking.

“Today’s competition is my grand debut as a coach, you know,” Victor hums. This is for you. “It’s only fitting.”

Yuuri facepalms a little bit as Victor follows him to the arena. He takes Yuuri’s jacket. Yuuri’s due for the warm-up and then he’s skating first. Yuuri’s still radiating stress, and so Victor babbles at him, trying to come up with some fresh tradition they can use to take the pressure off of this moment. “What should we do for your send-off?” Yuuri finishes his last stretches, takes off his skate guards. “I’ve been thinking about …”

The guards are suddenly in his hands. Yuuri is gone. So much for forming new traditions.

He spends six minutes in a bit of a sulk, because however sendoffs are meant to be done, that wasn’t it. There’s an announcement in Japanese overhead about the warmup period being over; Victor doesn’t understand a word, but he’s been in this situation hundreds of times and he knows what it means. Yuuri comes back rinkside for some water, pretending that he’s still cool as a cucumber. Victor doesn’t fall for his blank expression: he reads the tension in Yuuri’s shoulders, underneath Eros-costume mesh. “Yuuri. Turn around.”

“Huh?”

*Stubborn.* Pot meets kettle. Victor huffs. “Turn around, okay?”

“Um, like this?”

Yuuri turns, facing back to the rink. For a brief millisecond, all Victor can think about is how someone else, Minako maybe, probably helped him into his costume. Victor knows that costume intimately, and he knows the graceful bend of Yuuri’s back, too.

This man is going to be the death of him someday, but Victor reaches forward to hug him anyway, drapes his arms over Yuuri’s shoulders and leans in close. Yuuri jumps out of his skin — Victor’s used to that — and every camera in the arena flashes. These eruptions from the press are familiar for Victor. So is the curl of possessiveness in his chest, the strange feeling he’s learning to live with. *Yuuri.* He remembers the way Yuuri re-wrote the narrative. Yuuri’s the beautiful woman, now, scorning the playboy. “Seduce me with all you have,” Victor murmurs, his words pitched low. He’ll play the part he’s been given.

Everyone is watching them, but these words, this gamble, it’s just for Yuuri.

When he talks about being enthralled he’s really talking about something that’s already happened. He knows the outcomes Yuuri is capable of creating.

After all, he’s standing here.

“R-right.”

Every time Yuuri turns to look at him at the start of this skate, Victor knows he’s in for something special. This time isn’t different; Yuuri’s completely fixed his triple axel coming out of the spread eagle, and it’s every bit as gorgeous as Victor imagined when he first drafted this choreography, coming out of fitful, Sochi fever dreams. The quad salchow is over-rotated, almost enough to make Victor chuckle. Of course. Yuuri tries so hard that he tries too hard. Still, he manages to stay on his feet, and the last jump is a clean quad-double where a quad-triple should have been.

Nearby, Kenjirou Minami is losing his damn mind, producing a shout that’s way too big for his small
frame. Victor is not quite as impressed, and he waits until Yuuri skates over to give him feedback while it’s still fresh. “The first half was great,” he explains. There’s a step sequence he recalls being particularly fond of. “… But you were too focused on jumps in the second.” They both know Yuuri let the salchow get to him. When Yuuri makes mistakes while he skates it’s like seeing someone drop a pebble into a pond. What gets noticed is the ripples.

_Hai_, says Yuuri, which Victor’s gotten used to. He tucks Makkachin-the-box-of-tissues neatly under his arm. “I don’t really like that kind of thing,” Victor adds, matter-of-factly. _Hai_, Yuuri repeats, and while they’re standing there, his score gets announced. It’s a 94.36, which is a personal best, puts him near scores Victor himself has gotten before.

It also tells Victor that the JSF judges are significantly kinder than the ISU ones are. Yuuri’s got a dazed look on his face, the sort that suggests that either he might settle for only this, or that he’s incapable of realizing just how much of a national favorite he is, how much everyone around him wants him to see that he is actually a top-tier skater. Both ideas are unacceptable. “I thought you would’ve scored in the hundreds,” Victor quips. “Since you weren’t under pressure.”

It brings Yuuri back to earth, at least. “Right, you’ve scored above a hundred points to break the world record multiple times.”

Yes. He has. But this isn’t about what Victor’s done. It’s about what Yuuri can do. “About tomorrow’s free skate …” He might be hiding behind the tissue box, letting the image of his dog deliver the message. _Coward_, he hears, like Alena’s standing right nearby. “Lower the difficulty of the jumps and focus on the performance.”

“Huh?” There it is again, that stubborn streak.

“You’ve never nailed them during practice, have you?”

“But!”

Victor tries to reason with him. Yakov would be so proud to hear his own suggestions falling off of Victor’s lips: it’s early in the season. Yuuri can build up victories getting the non-jump components right, creating confidence and momentum going into the Grand Prix Final. Victor finally realizes how Yakov must feel all the time, too, because he sees how none of it sinks in.

He resorts to something else Yakov would do, too. “Can’t you listen to your coach?” Yakov would have shouted it. Victor is asking. Everything Victor does around Yuuri is ultimately all part of the same question:

_don’t you love me?_

Both Yuuri and Victor are spared an answer by the waiting press, expecting interviews. Morooka is kind enough to conduct these in English. Victor steps in again to make his point. _Skate something you know will stay under your feet. “Of course you’ll see Yuuri be perfect.”_

While they’ve all been talking, the other skaters have finished, and Kenjiro Minami, who Victor is still not convinced isn’t a juvenile fox wearing human skin launches into a conversation with Yuuri. Victor understands exactly two words of it: _Lohengrin_ and Yuuri’s off-hand apology. It’d be funny, watching Yuuri be more of a celebrity than he is, if it wasn’t so discouraging to witness the way Yuuri’s incapable of realizing that this poor child idolizes him. Victor gathers they’re discussing the costume, which might best be described as Sparkling Viking Noir, something right up Georgi’s alley. Something about it has embarrassed Yuuri, and that finally seems to set Minami off.
Yuuri, he wants to say, while Kenjirou Minami issues what looks to be a challenge at the same time that his eyes are sparkling with tears, you’ve kicked a puppy. Apologize.

He makes Yuuri explain it on the ride back to the hotel. “I skated a Lohengrin program once when I was in juniors,” is all he says. It's clear it isn't a program Yuuri remembers fondly, as though he's embarrassed of himself. He always is. Strangely blind to himself. “He must’ve tried something like it.”

Victor stares at him in the cab, trying to understand how Yuuri Katsuki could possibly be so clueless. He arrives at no satisfactory conclusions. The elevator at the hotel bears them to separate rooms on separate floors, where Victor digs through his things to fire off an email to Vasily, and then hunts through YouTube for this Lohengrin skate that’s apparently so mortifying.

He watches it and still doesn’t understand it. Yuuri himself skates in a costume Victor wore when he imagined himself heartsick over a selfish Spanish boy who had never been worth his time in the first place. Yuuri knows every program Victor’s ever skated. There are interviews that Victor’s found, things Yuuri’s said even to international sportscasters about how the skating of Victor Nikiforov inspires him.

Here the tables are turned and Yuuri can’t see it. He’s someone else’s hero, and all he can manage to conjure is shame.

In the morning there’s a response from Vasily. It’s a picture of the cupid from Botticelli’s Primavera, of note because this imagining of the god of love shows him as blind as justice. Vasily’s response is short and sweet.

Yes, he’s written back. We call it the human condition.

It’s a very Vasily answer.
Breakfast is a quiet affair, and it gives Victor no clues about whether or not Yuuri’s going to actually listen to him in today’s free skate. The morning goes by too quickly, and amidst the constant flurry of Japanese spoken around him, Victor hears a significant uptick of the word ‘quad’ from the other skaters. He’s spent the previous evening looking most of them up.

None of them are ready to regularly skate quads.

Victor spends the six minutes of Yuuri’s warmup watching him shun Minami and growing steadily angrier. He’s left his home, his family, his own career to be here, arguably all because Yuuri skated a single program in homage to him while trying to fall in love with skating all over again. Yes, there’s the matter of Sochi, the evening Victor keeps trying and failing to broach with him, but the fact of the matter is that without seeing Yuuri skate his own free program, Victor wouldn’t be here in Okayama, coaching at a contest he’s never even heard of before.

Victor knows three things about Minami Kenjirou: one: he has ridiculous, fluffy hair and strange canines; two: he’s the embodiment of adorable, inconsistent enthusiasm for the sport; three: he would step in front of a bullet for Katsuki Yuuri and then apologize for bleeding on him.

“Yuuri,” Victor huffs, disgruntled, when Yuuri comes back for his skate guards. Usually this is the point where Victor gives him last minute tips, makes idle observations about what he’s seen from the warm-up. Except Victor doesn’t want to be back for any more warm-ups if they’re going to be like this, if he has to watch Yuuri be in the position he himself is in, and choose unkindness every time. “How can someone who can’t motivate others motivate himself?” He slams the skate guards down. “I’m disappointed in you,” Victor says, and he takes the Makkachin tissue box with him to the stands, which is exactly what he’d do if real Makkachin were here too. *Get your own damn tissues* is petty and Victor knows it.

But he’s no saint.

When Minami steps out onto the ice, it’s clear that he’s super nervous. Victor watches as Yuuri
prepares to leave — they’d talked about finding somewhere quiet to stretch, someplace away from the crowd — and resigns himself to the fact that this is, apparently, how things are going to be.

Then he hears it. Yuuri Katsuki’s voice. Louder than all the others.

“GANBATTE, MINAMI-KUN!” It’s a force. Victor glances over and studies Yuuri’s face.

He means it. For this, all is forgiven. “GANBATTE.”

In the center of the rink where he’s about to skate, Minami’s eyes are positively sparkling, and he launches into a jazzy little program with fun footwork, the kind of thing that’s always a crowd pleaser. Victor glances back and forth from the puppy on ice to Yuuri, sees the way Yuuri’s gotten invested in his skating, is glad to see him land his triple axel and the subsequent quadruple toe loop. Good. In fact, Yuuri’s a little late to leave for his own stretches, and only seems to depart when he’s reached the same conclusions Victor has already drawn: Minami has the talent to compete in the seniors; a little more rigor, a little more focus, and maybe someday soon he’ll find his way there.

Yuuri comes back and this time he’s the one in armor, isolated from the whole world by a pair of earbuds. It’s incredible: Victor knows exactly how fragile Yuuri’s mien is, and yet right now he’s got an expression made of cold steel.

It’s Paris-ready-runway-gorgeous, and Victor Nikiforov would know.

Yuuri walks right past Minami, only to turn around and wallop him on the back, and then he proceeds directly to Victor without so much as a word, stripping out of his jacket. Victor folds it over his arm like nothing about this experience is ruining him, like his voice isn’t about to betray the fact that his heart has relocated into his throat. “The costume’s great,” he says, which is true. It’s a perfect shade of deep, royal blue, and it fits wonderfully. The fleur-de-lis design that rises on Yuuri’s back is lovely, the mesh dark and fine enough to not be especially revealing. Truer still is what he tells Yuuri next: you look so beautiful in it.

Not handsome, not gorgeous, not even Eros-style sexy. Beautiful. Katsuki Yuuri is beautiful.

Victor brushes back Yuuri’s hair, stiffer than it usually is now that it’s been swept back with styling gel. “Your lips are chapped,” he says gently, reaching into his pocket for some lipgloss. Sweeping a finger over Yuuri’s lips — Yuuri who lets him do this, who doesn’t balk in the least — is one of life’s little glorious pleasures. Behind Yuuri, Minami’s staring like he can’t quite believe what he’s seen. Victor’s pretty sure he’s not the only one thinking about what it’d be like to lean in and steal a short, soft kiss.

For all of his light banter yesterday about what to do for a send-off, Victor has no last words of advice, no reminders about the quads. What he has are his hands and the flawed fullness of his heart, and these he gives Yuuri by sweeping him into another hug, forehead to shoulder, hand curled around the back of Yuuri’s neck.

Yuuri hugs him back. Behind them, a very red Kenjirou Minami wishes him luck and then it’s time, time to skate Yuri on Ice.

The opening of this program is deceptively gentle. Yuuri makes the longing and the struggle of his time alone seem more nostalgic than it is. Victor understands loneliness well, knows pain and heartache, holds his breath for the first jump coming out of that era.

It’s supposed to be a quad triple, something Yuuri’s had no trouble with at all in practice. It’s a quad double for no reason whatsoever: everything about the quad was just right, more than enough
momentum to carry him through the subsequent triple. *He’s changing the jump elements?* Perhaps, Victor thinks, he’ll add a triple back in during the second half.

Or perhaps he intends to jump all of the quads.

Victor’s brow furrows. That’s the exact opposite of what he’d told Yuuri to do, and he’s coming to that conclusion right as the program enters its bridge. *This is the part that expresses when I showed up as your coach, right?* Yuuri looks like he didn’t like that at all, and where Victor is hoping he’ll do a triple salchow, Yuuri throws down a quadruple, too stubborn to settle. Victor hides behind tissue-Makkachin for a moment.

*So he did revert the program to having three kinds of quads.*

That same step-out lingered in the short program, and so he wants to see any echoes of it gone before it can influence the rest of Yuuri’s skate. *Shake it off.* His next spin is delightful, beautifully centered, and Yuuri proceeds directly into a perfect triple loop. The second half is coming up. Victor has the elements memorized. Outside spread eagle. The ina bauer that he loves to see Yuuri do. *Skate like you’re the most beautiful person ice right now.*

Because he is.

The triple axel comes up, and it’s shaky but Yuuri saves it, sinks deep into the edges of his skates. Victor exhales a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. The triple flip is a little wobbly, too, but the audience is as enthralled as Victor is, captivated, bewitched.

Even with these little technical errors, what’s happening here is reminding Victor of everything he loves about the way Yuuri skates, the way he becomes one with his music. Yuuri’s quad, single, triple combo is flawed, too; yet it’s partially the flaws that have made this skate so endearing. Yuuri skates with such fervent, earnest hope that Victor can’t help but root for him whole-heartedly. The next combination is clean. It’s that edge of feverish desperation that makes him wish so much for success.

The realization that he couldn’t look away if he tried hits Victor like a train as Yuuri completes his last footwork sequence, moving all the way from one end of the ice to the other. It’s beautiful. It’s thrilling. It sweeps Yuuri into his final jump, and then directly into the wall with a heavy *thunk* that makes Victor squeeze the Makkachin-box closer. *I told you to make the last jump a triple for the surefire points.* He ought to be angry, but he isn’t. He’s effervescent. He’s delighted. *It’s surprising that he could be so rebellious towards his coach.* Had Celestino, the assigner of program music, ever put up with this sort of behavior? *I wonder who he takes after …*

Hiroko and Toshiya are both such polite, gentle souls. Yuuri is at center ice with his arm extended towards Victor, and that’s when he realizes it. “Oh,” Victor breathes. Underneath everything, they are made of the same stuff. *It’s me!*

Yakov would launch into an instant lecture, which is what Yuuri seems to think he’s going to get. Victor listens to the approval radiating from the crowd and realizes he can’t do it. There were flaws, and they were real, and they can watch the video later and discuss it all over practice.

It would be inauthentic to do it now, when what he really wants is to sweep Yuuri into his arms. *I love you* are three words he’s not ready to say and Yuuri’s probably not ready to hear but Victor still has his hands. The moment he holds them open, Yuuri bolts across the ice for him, and at the last minute Victor notices his nosebleed and remembers he’s in Dior.
“Oops,” he says, as he steps out of the way. Another moment he'll happily spend his lifetime living down. “Watch the nosebleed.”

Still, the nosebleed is something easily addressed with two twists of tissue, and Yuuri’s score of 165.20 carries him to a total score of 259.56 and the kind of first place finish Takeshi had predicted. Minami is a distant second. Victor can’t stop hugging him, and what’s coming out of his mouth is half enthusiastic babble, half savage critique. It’s a miracle Yuuri managed to score so high after so many mistakes in his jumps, something offset by a whole lot of PCS. “You can score higher,” he promises, because he’s sure of it, “so don’t feel down, Yuuri.”

“Yuuri-kun.” They turn around, and for a second Victor’s hand brushes Yuuri’s — unintended for once, and for that reason it strikes Victor more, because for all that he’s been picking on Yuuri before letting him go they still almost stayed connected through touch. The voice belongs to Kenjirou Minami who bows and rambles off something Victor doesn’t understand, except for the words Grand Prix. The last gesture he recognizes. Please give me your autograph! The other skaters want it, too, and haven’t even asked for his.

It’s a nice change.

Minako and Takeshi rush in to take turns scolding and praising Yuuri while Victor watches, standing aside and a little aloof. Near the end of their conversation, Yuuri switches back to English, a courtesy he recognizes is meant to include him.

“Anyway,” Yuuri hums. “That was the most fun I’ve ever had while skating.”

The celebration of this first victory is too short, though; there’s a train to catch, and they’re not all going to the same place. Yuuri is traveling onwards to a meeting for JSF, and Victor is Hasetsu-bound with Minako and Takeshi.

Victor hugs him one last time in the train station before they split up, on two different platforms headed in two different directions, and it’s thirty-five minutes into the train ride back to Hasetsu when Minako catches him chuckling to himself.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” says Victor, who’s come to realize that he just thought of travel in this direction as homeward, and who reaches for his phone where he’s begun to construct a new playlist similar to the one they listened to on the ride in.
Back at Yu-Topia, Hiroko and Toshiya change the channel to local news, which is broadcasting part of the JSF meeting in honor of the city’s hometown hero. Victor doesn’t understand a word of it, but they seem to be working through all of the senior skaters, inviting them to show a word and then talk about it.

All he knows is there’s an audible reaction from the waiting press when Yuuri shows his card, and surprise around him from the Hasetsu crowd. Minako, Yuuko, and Takeshi are at once both riveted and irritated, and Victor can feel Mari’s eyes on his back when he hears Yuuri says his name.

Takeshi says, “So we …” and Yuuko finishes his sentence: “… were abstract.”

Minako looks irritable. *After all this time we’ve supported him!*

Victor has the sense that he should say something, but he has no idea what, and so he does what he always does: he smiles and smiles and smiles. “When you come back, we’re burning that tie, Yuuri.” On the television, Yuuri is waving and smiling too. “Let’s buy a new one before the Cup of China.”

“That’s all you want?” (Okay. It’s not his best reaction. For one thing, Victor’s presence here is not exactly subtle. Subtle is not something he does well unless it suits him out on the ice. Even then what he’s usually aiming for is *poignant*. Toshiya and Hiroko are being overly tolerant of his residency in their banquet room. Toshiya’s read him accurately more than once. Still, it’s more than a little offensive, the idea that he came all this way only to fumble and crush the one thing he wants. Mari has never questioned him — really, none of the Katsukis have — and yet here she is now, an exhale of smoke pooling in front of her face. Mari’s the calm, matter-of-fact Katsuki, and now here she is, calmly giving him the shovel talk.

*“If you ever break my brother’s heart,” she says finally, “nobody is going to find your body.”*

“Victor, come help me with dinner.” Mari isn’t asking. He follows her into the kitchen, dutifully accepts a knife and the task that’s been given to him — chopping onions — and Mari lights up a cigarette before she says anything to him at all.

“**What?**” Okay. It’s not his best reaction. For one thing, Victor’s presence here is not exactly subtle. Subtle is not something he does well unless it suits him out on the ice. Even then what he’s usually aiming for is *poignant*. Toshiya and Hiroko are being overly tolerant of his residency in their banquet room. Toshiya’s read him accurately more than once. Still, it’s more than a little offensive, the idea that he came all this way only to fumble and crush the one thing he wants. Mari has never questioned him — really, none of the Katsukis have — and yet here she is now, an exhale of smoke pooling in front of her face. Mari’s the calm, matter-of-fact Katsuki, and now here she is, calmly giving him the shovel talk.
The shovel talk.

He thinks back to what he’s just watched in the press conference, Yuuri’s speech, his name. Victor needs to stop thinking of hope as fragile hope, tenuous, because just this realization has breathed life into the creature in his chest. The steps it takes are anything but weak or delicate. This feeling could move mountains. “What did he say?”

Mari studies him for a second that stretches almost too long. Then she shrugs. “I’ll take those onions now,” she says. “Ask him yourself when he gets home.”

This is why Victor is the only one still awake when Yuuri Katsuki arrives at Yu-Topia, fresh off of the last train. He’s only sort-of still in his suit; the hideous tie is gone, his collar loosened, and he’s taken his formal jacket off, replaced it with the familiar brown monstrosity that Victor knows best. “Victor? Why are you still awake?” They’ve been around each other long enough by now; Victor knows Yuuri tends to stay up late, and Yuuri knows Victor tends to get up early.

So alike, so different. Victor stands up to help him with his bag, guides him into a waiting futon. “Will you tell me what you said at the press conference?”

“Oh.” Yuuri blushes and fiddles with his hands, rubbing at the lines in his palms. Victor waits for three whole seconds before he reaches over to curl a hand around both of Yuuri’s. “Please.”

Yuuri stills. Yuuri doesn’t look at him. For a moment the only sound is the two of them breathing and Makkachin’s quiet dog-snores from where she’s curled up, not terribly far off. “It was … what we’ve talked about with my free skate,” he says carefully, perhaps too carefully. “About how for a long time I felt pretty alone, even though everyone here has been supporting me.” Victor watches as Yuuri sucks in a breath and closes his eyes, his lashes long and lovely on the high, soft curve of his cheekbones. “The word I wrote was love,” he admits finally. “But I didn’t mean romantic love, or platonic love …”

“Yuuri …” It’s hard, Victor knows, for Yuuri to open up and admit anything. So he says nothing else except that name, like a wish, and he squeezes Yuuri’s hand a little bit, to encourage him, before he realizes he should probably let go.

Except Yuuri doesn’t let him do that. Yuuri catches his wrist before Victor can draw back, and for a moment they’re just two men sitting there in the dark, holding hands, palm to palm. Then he opens
his eyes and looks back over at Victor. “I told them that before you came I knew people cared about me, but I couldn’t really see it. I don’t think I felt it. And …” And, spoken like this is a devastating word. Yuuri seems to be steeling himself for something, staring at Victor like he’s going to find the strength for it someplace deep beneath Victor’s skin. Whatever it is he wants he can have. He can dig it out of Victor’s bone marrow, if he wants.

“I told them that for the first time there’s someone in my life that I want to hold onto,” Yuuri almost whispers. “I told them that person was you.” Suddenly he has the look he can get sometimes. It’s always there, little flickers of determination and resolve, but Victor’s seen the way sometimes gasoline hits the spark and suddenly there’s a whole bonfire in front of him composed of everything fierce and wonderful about Yuuri Katsuki’s heart. “There’s not a perfect word for that feeling,” he says, “but I told them I’ve decided to call it love.”

Victor sits for a second in stunned silence, wondering whether or not Yuuri can hear the drumming noise in his ears. After a moment, he asks: “Will you?”

Yuuri blinks at him, suddenly owlish behind his glasses. “Will I what?”

“Hold on,” Victor breathes. Stay close to me, don’t go away ...

“I want to,” Yuuri repeats, and when he squirms a little, Victor smiles self-deprecatingly in the dark and twists their hands, lifting Yuuri’s knuckles to his mouth for a single, quiet kiss.

Yuuri doesn’t flinch. The world around them is still and silent.

“That’s what I want, too.”

Their fingers stay linked.
There are only a few weeks between the Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship and Yuuri’s entry into the Cup of China, but they’re weeks that are different. One morning Yuuri wakes up and Victor’s brought out a second bicycle. For this kindness, he gets a short laugh and a shake of tousled hair, and the kind of still morning-sleepy smile Victor thinks it might be nice to wake up to for a long, long time. It’s okay, Victor. I like to run.

“Besides,” Yuuri says, as he gets a head start, “you promised not to go easy on me.”

“I did,” Victor allows easily, and he gets on the bicycle, picks up speed.

At the rink, he still puts Yuuri through his paces. They’re focusing on the quads in the long program today, and by the end of practice Victor’s ankle is positively aching with legacy hurt. That’s nothing new. What is new is what happens back at the onsen: they sit across from each other at the hot springs, but Yuuri pulls Victor’s foot up, rubs at the sore tendons around his ankle bone. It’s a very short distance to walk back into the house, but they do it with Victor’s arm around Yuuri’s shoulders.

In that time, Leo de la Iglesia takes first place at Skate America. It’s a surprise to see him placing over Otabek Altin, who Victor knows firsthand is a formidable opponent. Home field advantage, perhaps. The Skate Canada field is stronger, a harder draw for Plisetsky, who scowls from his place on the podium opposite Emil and just to the side of the hometown menace who thinks so highly of himself that he’s composed original songs about it. Georgi’s been assigned to Cup of China, which means Victor will see him there. Yakov, too.

Victor’d be lying if he said he wasn’t looking forward to it.
The night before they leave for China, Yuuri tweaks his back on his combination spin. It’s nothing serious, but he comes along without protest when Victor pulls him into his room, makes him lie down, and then spreads his fingers over Yuuri’s shoulders and down his spine. He’s terribly stiff at first, and so Victor devotes his attention more to the process of hunting down and defeating knots than to the other part of this reality: Katsuki Yuuri, in his bed, shirt strewn into the corner, pajama pants low on his hips because the elastic stretched in the offseason. Under his palms, Yuuri transforms: he makes cute little yelps of protest into the cross of his arms when Victor finds a particularly tight knot of muscle, and then he hums in sleepy contentment by the time it’s gone, half-asleep already. Victor, however, is something very far from sleep. Yuuri’s back is as gorgeous as the rest of him, and what Victor wants is to bend over and press his lips to the place that’s right between Yuuri’s shoulderblades.

He’d like to learn what other sounds he can chase out of Yuuri’s body.

He resists. He resists long enough to make Yuuri wake up and drink a glass of water, and then, after Yuuri’s really gone to sleep, with Makkachin curled around his feet as though his addition to Victor’s bed were natural and expected, Victor goes and takes a very long shower, uses gold medal discipline to school his mind out of a dozen different scenarios of how that could have gone very differently.

That process takes longer than actually getting off does: when it comes to his own body, Victor can be clinical, efficient. Yuuri’s the one that wakes up sleeping things in his chest, the force that has Victor Nikiforov dreaming again. What Victor wants is something more than just the heat of Yuuri’s body. He wants something audacious, built on contradiction: something comfortable and something incredible; something stronger precisely because it’s so delicate.

Ruminating on this with that listless feeling that always comes after, Victor climbs back into his own bed carefully and at a safe distance. One of the concepts that has gone into his notebook of ideas is this: love is the part that makes the gods mortal.

It’s rare for Yuuri to wake up earlier than he does, but this is one of those mornings, tentative fingers curled around Victor’s shoulder carefully shaking him into wakefulness. Victor. Victor. Wake up. He opens his eyes and looks at Yuuri, debating from the liminal space between waking and sleeping whether Yuuri is more beautiful at morning, noon, or night. Yuuri needs to brush his hair and his glasses are crooked. “Morning,” says and decides Victor. Morning because these are little flaws he only gets to see because they’re close now, because over the gulf between them the bridge is now built, and here he is, crossing.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep in here,” Yuuri admits, sheepish. “Was it okay?”

Come anytime. Victor sits up and ruffles his hair. It’s a little bit curlier, like this. Another one of those little things. “Perfect,” he says, and when Yuuri’s eyes widen, when a brief blush flares up over his cheeks, Victor can’t help but grin.

“Cut it out,” mumbles Yuuri, who pushes him back down with a soft whump of pillows and blankets. Everything is sweet, sweet death. “I’m going to go get my things and get ready now,” he huffs, and Victor’s chuckle follows him out of the room.

They make it through the send-off with Yuuri’s family and soon they’re at the airport. By sheer force of habit, Victor gravitates towards first class until Yuuri pulls him into the check in for coach, and the metaphor that’s been building in Victor’s thoughts gathers strength: he is, indeed, going to travel amongst mere mortals. He’s not sure if he should feel scorn or pity for the agent who checks them in: she looks him over because he’s strange and foreign and to Victor, that’s fine, but she doesn’t recognize Katsuki Yuuri. The first class lounge is unavailable to them. Yuuri paid a fee to check his
bags. The world is a travesty. Victor makes an absent note to have his business manager have a look at Yuuri’s accounts, complains about how cramped their seats are after they take off, begs for champagne.

Then Yuuri falls asleep against his shoulder and none of it matters.

He wakes up when they hit the runway in Beijing. The drive from the airport to the hotel is always a long one, and they don’t have a driver, either: they have a cabby who doesn’t speak English and doesn’t love that Yuuri’s Japanese. It’s a long way to spend weaving through traffic, paying tolls on ring roads; Beijing’s massive, a monument to human ambition. Yuuri watches the buildings go by and Victor watches Yuuri. “Have you been here before?”

“Just once.”

“Do any sightseeing?”

“Not really,” says Yuuri. Victor thinks about the Temple of Heaven, the Forbidden City. There’s a part of the Great Wall -- not at Badaling, where everyone goes -- that Saga took him to once. It’s less crowded with people, still high up in the mountains. They probably won’t have time to visit. Next time, Victor thinks, which is the sort of thing he’s started to let himself believe, little daydreams of next year or the year after. He’s getting way ahead of himself, he knows that. It’s one of the things that makes hope so dangerous.

Nonetheless, it’s something he thinks about all the way to the hotel, and after check-in, Victor looks at his watch, considers where they are. After a moment’s deliberation, he takes Yuuri to the Yonghe Lamasery. They wander through it shoulder-to-shoulder, watch other people light incense. Victor doesn’t share in Babushka’s orthodoxy and Yuuri’s not a Buddhist so much as he is loosely Shinto. Still, the way the smoke smells, the offerings people are making of fruit, the empty throne that ought to belong to the Dalai Lama; all of it is a certain kind of agape, and he can tell from the way Yuuri looks that he sees it, too. Understands that this place is special.

It was the right choice, bringing him here. Victor smiles and takes his hand and then leads them into
Beijing’s maze of hutongs, where he nearly gets lost three or four times trying to find the one restaurant he wants to take Yuuri to for lunch. The verdict? “It’s really good,” says Yuuri.

“If you like this, we’ll have to get hot pot tonight.” It’s been a magical little morning, but reality’s calling: they’re due at the rink in the afternoon for interviews and a little bit of practice. Victor gets them out of the alleys, emerging into the current century, and into a cab. Yuuri changes at the hotel and they walk the short distance to the arena, where Yuuri deposits one of his facemasks. There are others in his bag for tonight, safeguards against the Beijing pollution. It’s a city that always smells a little bit like chalk and smoke. Victor’s never worn a mask here but Yuuri is always more cautious. Yuuri takes every precaution.

Yuuri is halfway through answering an interview question about the power of love when Yakov and Georgi walk by. “Hey! Yakov.” Yakov seems hell-bent on ignoring him, so Victor grabs his coat. “Want to have Hot Pot with us?” Please come meet him, he’s asking. Yakov’s ignoring him, though, so determinedly that Georgi spares him a brief, warning look.

“Victor!” It isn’t Vitya, this time. Victor doesn’t know what he’s in for but the hurt comes quick and fast. “I want to throw up whenever I see you playing pretend coach,” Yakov says. “I’d prefer if you only talk to me when you’re ready to plead for your return to skating. Got it?”

It’s exquisite, this hurt. If he lets himself think about it for too long it will become unforgivable. This is all about Yuuri, though, not him, and so Victor doubles back, fetches his skater. “Yakov’s not interested,” he says, force-cheerfully, with the voice of a man who is about to drink himself into a table to cope. If there’s another way to deal with pain than to put on a smiling mask and then leap into oblivion, Victor Nikiforov doesn’t know it. “Let’s go.”

The hot pot place is a classic: pots built into the tables and men who come by to dance with long lengths of pre-cut noodle. Victor has ordered entirely too much food, probably because he wants to watch Yuuri try it, maybe because some part of himself, the part on lockdown, is still hoping that Georgi’s going to appear in the doorway, dragging a reluctant but nonetheless present Yakov along. “Vkusno!” He is trying to keep that Victor very far away from current proceedings. “You’re not eating the shrimp?”
Yuuri wants to avoid raw food, and Victor shouldn’t tempt him. He’s settling into a thoughtfulness that Victor empathizes with, is worried he got ahead of himself at the press conference. Victor’s about to say something reassuring when they’re interrupted by Phichit Chulanont, who says something about inviting Ciao Ciao. A look of vague discomfort flashes on Yuuri’s face, which is prompt enough for Victor.

“Why don’t you move over here,” he offers. “Celestino can sit next to Phichit when he shows up.”

Yuuri’s quick look of relief would be reward enough, but his presence next to him is even better, what with the bump of their knees under the table. Victor smiles to himself, listens to Phichit and Yuuri catch up, all little details about how things were in Detroit after Yuuri left, and what Celestino thinks about the weather in Bangkok. “Haaaaaates it,” Phichit confirms. “But it’s been so good to be home, you know?”

“Yeah.” Yuuri glances at Victor out of the corner of his eyes. “I know.”

When Cialdini does finally show, Victor makes another attempt at pawning off the shrimp onto someone else. When that doesn’t work, he changes strategies and orders the whole table a round. Yuuri drinks carefully, which is a shame, almost, because Victor would love to find out whether or not a repeat of Sochi is possible. It’s not the time to pressure him, though; one of them has to skate in the morning.

Victor, though. Victor doesn’t have to skate in the morning, so he looks at Celestino Cialdini, sizes him up, and then lies through his teeth. “I’ve heard Italians can’t hold their liquor,” he muses. “Is that true?”

Victor loses count of how many rounds in they are when he wins. He’s lost track of a lot of things, like where his shirt has gone and how many suspicious glances he’s gotten from the waitstaff. A few different phone calls have been made. He may have drunk texted Yakov in the span of that time, but he’s forgotten about it now if he has. What he’s noticing now is Yuuri’s blush, which is adorable, so cute that Victor needs to drape himself over Yuuri’s shoulders to inspect it up close. It deepens suddenly as he makes an apology in English.

“Sorry, Victor’s had way too much to drink --”

Victor almost protests but he’s got a better idea. “Let’s all go to a hot spring,” he says, ignoring Phichit Chulanont as he spends time switching between trying to shake Celestino out of an alcohol-induced snooze and snapchatting the entire event.

“Victor,” Yuuri says, helplessly.

“Hot spring,” Victor says. “Hasetsu Hot Springs. Great place.” He met the love of his life for a second time at the Hasetsu Hot Springs, didn’t he? Yes. He’d been in the Hot Springs, come to think of it, and drunk Victor, who is very far away from heartache and not even on the same continent as shame, fumbles with his belt.

“Hey! Don’t strip!”

He hears Guang Hong say something about things getting very racy, and then Yuuri’s shouting for help. When they’re all unceremoniously escorted out, Victor registers that he’s cold, registers that Yuuri’s trying to help him back into his clothes. That is the exact opposite of what Yuuri ought to be doing, and he’s about to say so when Yuuri fixes him with a steely look.

“Victor,” he says, very seriously, “you are going to put your pants on right now or I am going to
leave you here to walk back to the hotel alone."

The threat works.

By the time they’re back to their room -- a progression of its own, that, even with the two doubles --
the elated, euphoric high has left Victor entirely. He sits on the edge of his bed while Yuuri unties his
shoes, limp and useless. “He called me pretend-coach,” Victor says numbly. “Says I make him puke.”

“Victor?”

“No.” Why would Victor say that about Victor? “No,” he repeats, tongue heavy in his mouth. Yuuri
frowns at him, cracks open one of the water bottles on the nightstand. It takes three tries before he’s
able to force it into Victor’s hand, and even then he has to encourage Victor to drink. “Yakov.”

Victor is too busy fiddling with the label on the water bottle to notice the way Yuuri’s gaze hardens.

“Victor …”

“Wish you’d call me Vitya,” Victor mumbles. The paper won’t come off no matter how much he
fiddles with it, and he’s busy scowling at the water bottle for it when one of Yuuri’s hands curls over
his.

The other hand is on the nape of Victor’s neck, which is a lightning bolt down his spine that Victor’s
too drunk to process properly. Everything is happening both too quickly and too slowly. “Vitya,”
says Yuuri, trying it out.

“Da,” he hums, confirmation. “Just like that.”

“Vitya,” Yuuri repeats, and he tilts his forehead against Victor’s. He’s so close that Victor gets a little
lost in the dark of his eyes, doubled in his vision. “You are a wonderful coach.”

“Oh,” says Victor, and when the blooming gratitude in his chest becomes too big for his body,
Victor follows the flowering tendrils of it directly up into Yuuri’s mouth. Yuuri’s lips are soft and a
little bit chapped, so Victor licks them for him, tastes hot pot and tea, and he meets with surprisingly
little resistance when he tosses the bottle aside and pulls Yuuri into his lap, nuzzles into his neck.
What Victor thinks he’s saying is I’ve wanted to do that for so long, and what he’s actually saying is
Я так долго хотел это сделать, which is more or less the same thing.

Yuuri sweeps a hand through his hair, fond and unhurried. “Victor, you’re drunk,” he says, a little bit
breathlessly. Victor’s hands wander slowly. This is a marvel. So are Yuuri’s hipbones. “You need to
go to sleep.”

“Mmmn,” Victor protests into Yuuri’s shoulder. What he means is stay with me, please.

“Come on,” says Yuuri. “Pajamas, at least.”
Victor wakes up in the morning to the ringing of the hotel phone with Tropical Storm Hangover pulling a full on rager inside of his skull. His first instinct is to bury his head under his pillow and to try to shut the phone up, so he reaches over and hangs it up without delay. For a blessed five minutes he’s left alone with his headache, and then the phone rings again. This time he picks it up in an outrage, and spits an angry “WHAT” into the receiver.

“Mr. Nikiforov, sir, Mr. Katsuki requested we give you a wakeup call --”

“Oh.” Where is Yuuri, anyway? Victor sits up and the whole room tilts with him. There’s a folded piece of paper on the sidetable, along with a glass of water, a sprite, a banana, and three pills laid out in a row. “... Thanks,” he mumbles, and hangs up.

The note says Vitya. Victor’s memory comes back in flashes as he unfolds it, reaching up to tap a finger to his lips like some trace of Yuuri might still be there. He glances over at the room’s other bed, which is still flawlessly made, hasn’t been slept in.

He reads the note.

Stretches and a light workout at the gym, probably. The note, the hangover remedy, the front-desk phone call. All of it is so thoughtful that Victor smiles broadly, even if it splits his skull to do so, and he pulls the piece of paper to his chest. Then, because alcohol’s an old friend, and because Victor knows exactly what Yuuri means with this lineup that’s next to the bed, he forces down half of the banana and all of the sprite before he takes the three ibuprofen.

Then he marches himself into the bathroom, where his suit is neatly hanging in its bag on a hook over the door. Yuuri, again. He can tell because Yuuri’s costume is hanging behind it.

The Cup of China is waiting for them.
When Yuuri comes back, Victor’s showered and adopted his armor for the day. It’s Yves Saint Laurent this time, a little bit vintage, before the takeover of the line. The note is folded into his wallet and they don’t talk about it, not on its face. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better,” says Victor, which is true. It’ll be a grin and bear it sort of morning, but he’ll function, he’s been functioning for years. He stills when Yuuri walks by, leans over his chair, and hovers there for a moment, briefly indecisive. There’s not another kiss. Just the gentle pass of Yuuri’s fingers through his hair. “Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad,” Yuuri hums, and he steps into the bathroom to get ready, which would almost be the end of it except that he steps back out half-dressed in the Eros costume. “Would you mind?”

Victor doesn’t mind at all. There’s a subtle tremor in his fingers as he works the zipper up Yuuri’s back, and it doesn’t go unnoticed, judging by the way Yuuri turns his head just slightly. It’s harder to be bold in the cool light of morning, stone cold sober and fighting a headache, but Victor does it anyway; he leans over Yuuri’s shoulder, intent on pressing a kiss to his cheek. For good luck.

Except Yuuri’s shifted, just a little bit further, and so Victor lands right at the corner of his mouth, feels the soft twist of Yuuri’s mild smile. Another impulse strikes:

“Let me do your hair?”

When he gets around to checking his phone he’s got dozens of notifications, all more or less having something to do with a photo Phichit’s uploaded to Instagram. Victor lets Yuuri go and take issue with this with Phichit, Guang Hong, and Leo while he goes to talk to a couple of the ISU assistants.

He follows, Phichit too. Because he wants the original.

When Victor turns back around, it’s to witness Christophe Giacometti with his hand on Yuuri’s ass. The sudden, uncontrollable urge to rip off his best friend’s arm and then beat him with it can’t possibly be healthy. Hangover rage, Victor tells himself. Guess your master’s giving you very thorough training, purrs Christophe, which irritates Victor enough that he puts on the heart-shaped smile again, chirps hello. “Chris, how’s it going?”

He takes purposeful steps into the space Chris is sharing with Yuuri, ignores the way Christophe inspects his coaching credentials. “I’m not motivated without you.”

“You’re always like that at the start of a season.”

Behind Christophe is his coach, who chimes in, tells Victor that he’s telling the truth. “Come back to the fold.”
Two of the female skaters pass by, too; one of them’s from Russia, but she doesn’t train with Yakov. He’d remember her name if she did. “Victor! Are you really a coach now?” She laughs, tinkling, pitchy bells, and gives him the kind of look he’s been getting from members of both sexes for a decade. It sizes him up. Victor knows what comes next: a conspiratorial, playful smile, just a little harmless flirting. Somewhere along the way he picked up a playboy reputation, though it’s been a long time since those early years of his fame, when he rushed headlong through every open door just because there were doors and they were open.

“Just break up with him already.” He’s angrier than he should be about this, and he has to pretend to be polite. It’s one thing to disrespect him, to have compiled a media-glamorized outline of Victor’s life, to have made certain assumptions. It’s another thing entirely to insult Yuuri this way. He could give into the temptation to be angry about her choice of words, but Victor knows how that will go too. She’ll pretend she didn’t mean it that way, and he’ll have given away details that Yuuri ought to have a say in disclosing. “You know it won’t last,” says this girl, and Victor wonders if it would be too much to ruin her career. A single phone call to Lilia and there won’t be a decent choreographer in all of Russia willing to work with her. And as angry as he is with Yakov, he knows he can still call in a favor there, too. “Don’t you feel sorry for him?”

Behind him, Christophe’s talking bullshit about Yuuri’s grave sins. Victor counts to ten in his head and then counts to ten again. “The whole world is hoping for his return,” says Chris.

“No,” Victor says back to the pair of female skaters, plastering on his most saccharine smile. “I really don’t.” He doesn’t excuse himself and doesn’t say farewell, simply steps back so that he’s across from Yuuri. “Stretches,” he says, and he lets his hand linger on the small of Yuuri’s back as he walks the both of them away.

He is still much too hungover to put up with the entire world’s you’re not a real coach, Victor bullshit. The only opinion he needs is Yuuri’s, and he’s already got it.

Phichit Chulanont has the first draw. After a fourth in Skate America he needs a second or higher here to make it into the finals. Victor privately thinks it’s going to be a stretch, but he’d never tell Yuuri that, and won’t indicate as much to Phichit, either. Cialdini was bullish, the night before, but in
addition to having a pretty good expectation of where the TPS spread is, Victor also knows the field at Skate America was relatively weak. Yuuri watches his program from the back room, and it’s good but it isn’t Grand Prix Finals great, in Victor’s opinion. Still, it’s a personal best for Phichit: 86.75, and Victor can be happy for him because Yuuri seems happy for him, as happy as he can be, at least, from a pit of competition anxiety.

Up next is Guang-Hong, fresh-faced in the senior circuit and facing a hometown crowd that’s sure to favor him. Yuuri’s third to skate in this first group. Neither one of them is going to have time to watch. Yuuri is going to warm-up, and Victor is going to watch Yuuri. Victor follows Yuuri away from the television into a short hallway in the belly of the arena, watches in silence as he starts to jog back and forth. Yuuri’s wound up this morning, maybe for the same reasons Victor is. It’s impossible to tell when his walls are up, and so Victor watches, and says nothing. This is real, goddamnit, he wants to explain to the whole waiting world. The coaching is real. Yuuri’s comeback as a skater is real.

The love is real, too. Real. Real. Real.

So much of Victor’s life has been mirage. This is not that.

He watches and says nothing, but Christophe Giacometti doesn’t have half as much restraint. “Victor, is he alright?” Victor hushes him. But because Chris is also his friend, he admits the truth under his breath. I’ve never seen Yuuri like this.

They go through the motions but everything is different, and before Victor’s puzzled anything out they’re standing at the boards. “The time to seduce me by picturing pork cutlet bowls and women during your skate is over,” Victor murmurs, fighting a slight smile. His hangover’s clearing up, and here, with Yuuri’s hand under his, it’s easy to remember the warmth of last night’s kiss.

A little bit sloppy. Next time he’s going to do it sober. Victor caresses the valley between first and second knuckle, hums a little bit. “You can envision it just fine, can’t you?”

What happens next is one of Yuuri’s never-ending surprises: he laces their fingers together and leans forward, nose-to-nose with Victor. “Don’t ever take your eyes off me,” he demands, and then he leaves Victor there, torn between immediate obedience and the spark of a challenge.

Make me, Yuuri.

Victor’s still pondering what it is that’s flipped this switch in Yuuri when Yuuri throws a searing look over his shoulder in the opening flash of the Eros program, and Victor’s breath gets stuck in his throat.

It was useless to pretend there could be anything else he’d want to look at. Victor follows the wonderful intricacy of Yuuri’s step sequence, can’t help himself, it’s -- “Perfect!” -- exactly what he’d envisioned coming up with the program. The triple axel after the spread eagle might be his favorite of the season, such a gorgeous entry into such a complicated jump, and Yuuri’s made it look easy this time. The quad salchow cracks across the ice.

Victor thinks back to the Onsen on Ice, to the first time he saw Yuuri re-writing the narrative in front of him. This is different again. Oh, there’s still those effeminate graces Minako gifted the choreography, like a hint of an elevated arm or a subtle shift in Yuuri’s hips.

Yuuri performs his quad-triple combination like he owns the jumps. This is, unquestionably, the best he’s skated all season, like the ice simply belongs to him. Victor hasn’t been able to shout this is real all morning long. Yuuri is out there doing it for him.
Eros isn’t an idea anymore. Eros is a fact.

Yuuri finishes the program and Eros is right there where he started, embodied at center ice.

Victor can’t help himself, can’t stop the way exuberance boils out of his limbs, doesn’t fight the urge to jump or to cheer. Yuuri has just skated a short program with the highest technical difficulty in history.

This is real and this is mine.

It’s a new personal best for sure. It has to be. Flowers and plushies of all sorts are getting thrown onto the ice. Victor throws his arms open, because that was perfect, Yuuri! It falls to Christophe Giacometti, good friend, best friend, to remind Victor that here, in this arena, the kiss and cry is over there. There’s never been a more aptly named place: both are things that he wants to do. Victor settles for leaning over Yuuri, lets his breath ghost over the ridge of Yuuri’s ear.

There are cameras on them, waiting for the score, and so what Victor instigates is a highly coded conversation, something just like the skating, meant for just the two of them to decode. “Yuuri,” he purrs, “did it feel that great?”

Yuuri’s eyes flick backwards once, just briefly. Then he plays the game so flawlessly that Victor’s heart does quadruple flips. “Well,” says Yuuri, as polite as ever, “I was hoping everyone else felt great watching me.”

They both know who everyone else is. Yuuri’s score flashes on screen: 106.84, exactly what Victor knows he’s capable of. To celebrate, Victor pulls him into a hug, ruffles the hair he spent so much time styling this morning. “Yuuri,” he cheers, “Of course they’d feel great, watching a performance like that.” Victor says they, but what he means is me. “You’re the best student.”

The ice gets resurfaced for group two and they make their way to the back of the rink once more, this time to watch Georgi, Leo, and Christophe. Victor loops his arms around Yuuri, rests his chin on his shoulder, and proceeds to realize that he and Georgi Popovich need to have A Discussion, Stat.
Georgi looks like an actual fucking witch, has taken his glam rock obsession somewhere beyond the pale. Georgi has always been a little bit melodramatic, but this is … well. The word Victor keeps thinking of is new. This is new. He can’t help but feel a little bit sorry for Anya, who he knows is present, due to skate in the afternoon for the Ice Dance part of the competition.

At one point he’s sure Georgi is crying, which makes it even more surreal when Georgi makes it to the Kiss and Cry and scores a solid 98 points, makes finger guns about it, having successfully hexed his way into second place.


Leo de la Iglesia’s choreographed his own program. It’s got no quads, but he does everything well, plays to his strengths. Guang-Hong Ji is impressed when he leaps into third place, and soon they’re watching Christophe finish off the competition.

This probably is a good thing: if Chris wasn’t already performing last, Victor would feel no guilt whatsoever in suggesting the ice get resurfaced again anyways. Chris skates like he has something to prove, and because of that, he misses a few of his technical elements. Victor makes idle chatter about Chris’ bad habits, but what he’s really thinking about is all those years ago when Chris first came up into the seniors, what could have been but wasn’t. It’s all incredibly sexy, Christophe always is, but it doesn’t speak to him the way Yuuri’s skate did, and Victor knows it’s going to wind up reflecting in his score.

Christophe may have won the sex appeal award for the day, but he’s in fifth place with an 85.6, and it’s Katsuki Yuuri who has seduced Victor, body and soul, Katsuki Yuuri who finds himself in first place.

They’re packing up and on their way back to the hotel when he hears Yakov being interviewed.

*Finishing second is within my expectations for the Short Program. I won’t lose to a third-rate coach.*
Victor fires off a text and then swears that he’ll put it out of his mind.

It’s a short taxi ride back to the hotel, moments that stretch out with a strange sort of anticipation: their hands side by side in the middle of the back seat of the cab, the way their shoulders brush in an elevator that has plenty of room for more than two people. Victor’s carrying Yuuri’s bag so Yuuri’s the one who digs out a room key, and time stretches further: he holds the door open for Victor, who takes three steps inside: enough to set Yuuri’s bag down in the hallway wardrobe, and to kick off his shoes for the hotel’s house shoes. The door clicks behind them both, and that’s when Yuuri’s arm twine around his midsection, when he feels Yuuri turn his cheek against the back of his coat.

“Yuuri?”

“I … I just wanted to say thank you.”

Victor turns around slowly, tilts Yuuri’s chin up. This kiss is soft and unhurried, as natural and necessary as his own breath. For dinner, he takes Yuuri out to Shichahai. It’s a pretty part of central Beijing; the Forbidden City is closed at this hour and the Summer Palace is forever equally crowded with tourists, but this place retains its old, Imperial feel whilst also still being a district. Shops and bars and restaurants circle part of Houhai, making for a pretty picture at night when the water reflects their light. It’s maybe a little chilly to be getting a drink on a rooftop at this time of year, overlooking the lake, watching the breeze ruffle willows, eyeing trees that are at the end of their change for the season, but that’s what they do.

If anything it keeps the place less busy and buzzy than Victor suspects it would be in the summertime, and so he and Yuuri are able to claim a couch for themselves, something normally reserved for a table of four. He likes the way Yuuri fits under the curve of his arm. It’s just the one round of cocktails -- Victor’s not going to repeat last night’s mistakes -- but he keeps losing track of time. On the one hand, it feels like they have all the time in the world to sit here. On the other hand, time’s flying by. It’s already growing dark when he orders dinner.

The last bit of sun goes under the horizon. Yuuri, forever determined to see flaws in himself, forever ready to get up and do better, asks Victor about today’s skate. Victor’s not sure he has constructive feedback to give, and finding the right words to explain how he felt, once Yuuri finished, is difficult.
“You did …” He keeps trying, struggling around clunky English. They have so many different sounding words that mean so many of the same things and he still can’t say it. “You were wonderful today,” he finally murmurs, and he taps his fingers against his mouth because wonderful is not enough. “Those On Love arrangements … Eros always gets described as sexual love, but…” Victor is trying to say something about desire. Something important. “You made the program sensual in a way that wasn’t wholly physical,” he admits, and he shifts, idly brushes his fingers through the hair at the nape of Yuuri’s neck.

“It made me think of Cupid and Psyche, do you know that story?”

“Tell me anyway,” says Yuuri, who’s set his chopsticks down, who’s turned fully so that he can study Victor. His brown eyes are even darker in the twilight, expression soft and patient.

“It goes like this: there was once a young woman so beautiful that nearby mortals began to worship her instead of the goddess Venus, who instructed her son, Cupid, to get revenge. Unfortunately Cupid scratches himself with his own arrow by accident, and so even though he’s supposed to make Psyche fall in love with something hideous, he can’t make himself do it because he’s fallen for her.” Yuuri smiles a little bit, and even though he’s deflected his gaze back to the water, Victor can tell he’s listening. “… Psyche, on the other hand, is unmarried, and so her father consults the oracles and finds out that she’s destined to be married to something fierce and terrible, a power so strong that Zeus and the underworld fear it. Thinking of the worst, the match gets made, an offering that looks like a funeral procession because everyone fears the worst.” Maybe someday he’ll show Yuuri the notes he’s taken on this program, painstakingly translate all of the messy Cyrillic scrawl.

“Psyche gets transported to a magical copse, and her new husband only comes to her at night, sleeps with her, even -- and the whole time, she can’t see his face. In spite of this, she begins to appreciate him, but when she visits her family they insist she use a lantern and slay the beast. Of course, when she goes to try to follow their advice, the fierce creature that she’d been promised turns out to be the most beautiful being she’s ever seen, the God of Love himself. Just like Cupid, she clips herself on one of his arrows in surprise, and then spills some of the oil from the lamp on him. Unmasked in this way, and hurt, he flees, leaving Psyche to wander the earth looking for him and to eventually undergo a series of trials before they’re ever reunited. She nearly manages it, passes nearly every test but the last, which is when Cupid finds her and revives her, and then makes their case before Zeus, who gives her the ambrosia of the Gods, makes her immortal. Then they’re married for a second time, a proper wedding, my Grandmother might say.” Victor flashes a brief smile. “And live happily ever after.”

“You like fairy tales.” Yuuri reaches up for Victor’s hand, behind his shoulders, repositions them so that he can tangle their fingers together. The meal is over, forgotten. Someone’s coming to clear the plates and Victor barely notices.

“Yes.”

“Why did you think of it?”

“Two reasons,” Victor says carefully. “At face-value Agape would probably be the sort of love people describe as soulful, but you …” Idiot, he hears, in Alena’s voice. Always waiting for him to cut to the chase. To say what he means. “That story is about the union of body and soul,” he adds. “Watching you reminded me that real love desires both.” It’s usually Yuuri who blushes, but Victor can feel the way the tip of his nose is getting warm. “And …” The second aspect feels even more personal, something he’s been contemplating ever since that day on the beach. “Because you’ve given me permission to be myself,” he says, finally.

Katsuki Yuuri has unmasked him. There it is, the simple truth. He glances over and can’t help but
smile; Yuuri’s blush creeps all the way to his ears. “What were you thinking of?”

“I … I …” It’s a great irony that Victor has fallen in love with perhaps the only person who struggles more than he does to be one hundred percent direct about his emotional state. He waits for a moment, though, somehow intuitively knows that Yuuri will try to give him this, just like he knew to wait in the dark, back in Hasetsu, to beg: *what did you write on that board at the press conference. Tell me. Tell me please.* “All morning long, all everyone was saying is that I’m not good enough for you, that it’s a waste that you’re coaching me, that …” Victor feels his temper flare at even the reminder of these little lies, words spoken by people who cannot see what he sees when Yuuri skates and who therefore do not comprehend truth. He gives Yuuri’s hand a careful squeeze. “… that I don’t deserve it. I kept thinking about how they can keep laughing all they want, but … then, you haven’t done this because of anyone else, so I must be the only one, right?” Like always, he’s been rewarded for his patience; Yuuri’s gaze meets his and it has that hard gleam again, the sort of strength that makes diamonds. “Nobody else in the world, right?”

Victor can’t help it; he kisses Yuuri firmly and fully on the mouth this time, to hell with the possibility of any neighboring tourists or curious waiters.

The thing in his chest is a swan now. It takes flight.

“Nobody,” he confirms. It’s useless to pretend that he hasn’t had other people in his life; he knows Yuuri already knows all of that. Nobody else has danced into his life the way Yuuri did in Sochi; there’s nobody he’s ever wanted so clearly and so badly as he did the night after the Grand Prix Finals. In Victor’s life exposure always makes things more and more mundane. His attention wanes.

This is different. He wants Yuuri more now than ever and this conversation is why: Yuuri Katsuki has raised the lantern, seen him well and clearly for who he is, wants him to just be whatever *that is*. Victor isn’t like Cupid; whatever all the medals and the mythology of his career say, he’s not a god.

Yuuri scoots closer to him in the cab they take back to the hotel because it’s too far to walk; Beijing’s too big of a city, and it’s getting late anyhow. Yuuri who somehow has this incredible ability to look deep into the heart of what Victor is and say without speaking: *I see you.*
He hasn’t been this happy since walking into the Opening Ceremonies bearing the Russian flag. The cab is old and their driver is tired. It doesn’t matter. The veil between the mortal world and olympus is thin tonight; this is what paradise looks like.

Paradise is also a sloppy makeout session on the edge of the only bed they’ve slept in, all over-eager, wandering hands, until Victor forces himself to remember that Yuuri has to skate again tomorrow and that this isn’t the best use of his time if he still intends to be a world-class figure skater in the morning. “You need to rest,” he admits, even as Yuuri drizzles kisses down his throat. “And this …”

This is. Well. Victor’s like a teenager all over again, already straining his slacks, and as tempting as it is to find out if he’s allowed, now, to pepper kisses down the muscled plane of Yuuri’s abdomen, that’s an exploration better saved for tomorrow, when the whole competition is behind him, when his lack of control won’t accidentally ruin Yuuri’s entire Grand Prix.

Yuuri’s huff of disappointment tickles his throat, but he concedes. Victor chuckles as he wanders into the bathroom to take the first shower, tosses himself back on his elbows and finally remembers his phone. The battery’s low, he needs to charge it.

He has three texts from Yakov.

The old man sure knows exactly how to make something hurt. Victor makes a spectacular dive from the peak of his feelings to the valley of them, listening to the sound of running water and letting his thoughts wander to the conclusion of the afternoon’s skating.

*With my coach, Victor, I’ll win with the power of love!*

*Win, Victor had cooed, all pointless, bubbly smiles. Win!*

“Victor? Shower’s all yours, if you …”

“Oh, sorry.” He smiles, puts the phone on the charger. “Thanks …”

Yuuri lingers for a moment, looking between their two beds, hovers on the verge of a question.
Victor, selfishly, already knows the answer. “Please,” he says quietly. After Yakov’s messages the last thing he wants is to sleep alone. Maybe it's what he should be doing, but Victor's always been bad at heeding advice. Especially now.

Yuuri’s smile is such a soft, beautiful thing. “... Yeah,” he breathes. “Okay.”

When Victor comes out of the shower -- sooner than expected, nothing like Yakov’s voice in his head to kill the mood -- Yuuri’s already in bed, but he’s not asleep yet. That’s no surprise; Victor knows he’s a night owl, suspects he tends to stay awake working himself into a frenzy of anxiety.

From the pit of this downswing, Victor sympathizes fully.

He pauses briefly to text Yakov back and then sets the phone aside for good, slips into bed, cradles Yuuri in his arms. Two nights together have told him that Yuuri tends to wiggle close, something that previously has subtly annoyed Victor with other lovers and doesn’t phase him at all now. There’s a wild, strange place in his chest that Yuuri can move into forever if he wants.

He’s risking so much for this. If there’s a way to do it perfectly, he’d love to know.

He falls asleep letting the rise and fall of Yuuri’s breath sing him to sleep in the dark.

In the morning he wakes up to Yakov’s final words on the subject:
Chapter End Notes

sorry this took so long, omg! this is the chapter that made me write precious things, though. i gotta be honest yakov is kind of a dick in this episode and i have some thoughts about what he's done here but i'm sure it'll come up in comments or tumblr or something so stay tuned for that
There’s a false start on the second day of the Cup of China: Victor’s agreed to meet Yuuri at the rink, and when he does, it becomes wholly apparent how little Yuuri has slept. Victor’s response to this is swift: against Yuuri’s objections, he makes one of the ISF assistants hail them a cab, gets back to the hotel immediately. “Nap until this evening’s event starts,” he insists, leaning into Yuuri’s chest to prevent him from sitting up again in protest. He even gives Yuuri an excuse: “I always slept in until the last minute before competitions, too.”

Yuuri’s anxiety speaks in Yuuri’s voice:

“Did you set an alarm?”

Victor decides it’s not even worth the response; he reaches up, and tugs Yuuri’s sleeping mask over his eyes. Rest.

Hours later, and he’s not sure either one of them really slept. Yuuri looks, if possible, worse for wear and Victor? Victor keeps turning over Yakov’s words in his mind. Everything has to be about him, huh? Victor’s aware of his flaws; he has good intentions, of course, but he can’t pretend that ego and vanity don’t creep in from time to time, that he doesn’t enjoy the game that gets played with the press. Focus. “Yuuri. Were you unable to take a nap?” Yuuri’s answer is the least convincing thing Victor’s ever seen, so Victor promptly forbids Yuuri from performing any jumps during the six minute warm-up.

Yuuri protests. Predictably. Victor has a line ready for that, too. “That’s an order from your coach, Yuuri.”

Katsuki Yuuri promptly does a jump in the six minute warmup. Victor’s been tapping a finger on his
cheek, imagining the beat for Yuuri’s music when he sees it happen, the setup for it, the place the single ought to be, and then Yuuri, sprawled out on the ice.

Victor forgets, for a moment, that he’s done the same thing to Yakov Feltsman hundreds of time, and doubt creeps in. Perhaps he’s not a very good coach after all. Even Christophe is giving Yuuri worried side-eye as he haunts the ice, a mere spectre of what he was just the day before.

He has to say something. He has to do something. He tries:

“Well, it’s common for skaters to nail something they flubbed during practice!” He says the words. He hears himself say the words. They’re not the right words.

Victor winces and shuffles Yuuri back towards the locker rooms, watches him drift from one television to another like a lost, sad ghost. Guang Hong Ji is skating a mostly-clean program that’s a complete mismatch for his personality, too intense for someone so small-framed, with such an innocent face. Christophe is due to skate next, wearing a costume with full cutouts along both of his sides, because of course it does, but Victor’s preoccupied with Yuuri, whose stretches have deteriorated from half-hearted at their best to practically nonexistent at their worst. Before his eyes, in the battle against Yuuri’s anxiety, the enemy has nearly completed a full-city siege. Victor drags him away before the press has a chance to see him so paralyzed by fear. Under other circumstances, he’d like to be watching Christophe skate, but Yakov’s reminded him, more clearly and coldly than ever, that the only thing that matters as a coach is his ability to get Yuuri ready for his free skate, to not single-handedly take the career that Yuuri’s put into his hands and destroy it.

He gets them to the carpark, which felt like a good idea at the time, but now that he’s here Victor’s having a hard time coming up with a viable strategy.

“Victor,” Yuuri asks him numbly, “what are the current standings?”

Victor isn’t going to check. The question itself feels like a trap, a way to give Yuuri new and more sophisticated weapons to deploy against himself. “Okay, Yuuri,” he murmurs instead, scrambling to buy himself time. “First, let’s take deep breaths.”

There’s no way for them to see Phichit’s skate, to witness the history he makes as the first person from Thailand to ever land a quad. But they can hear it, still, a rumble that echoes across the concrete, the cheering of the crowd. Victor hears it, watches in almost slow-motion as Yuuri takes an earbud out to listen harder, sees the way he reacts and then time speeds up again because his hands are over Yuuri’s ears, and he’s feeling a desperation that he’ll be writing about later as nearly wholly unique to the rest of his life. “Don’t listen,” he half-shouts, half-begs.
The cheering subsides and there’s a telling pause which they both know means that the next skater is taking to the ice. Leo, Victor remembers, but only vaguely. Be kind to yourself, Yuuri, he begs, standing in total, dumbfounded silence. His father’s words. He needs the talent that Sergei has for saying something soft and soothing, but he’s probably still too much Mariya’s son, still too prone to calculating, to counting costs. It’d be one thing if Yuuri was Yura’s age, coming into the seniors for the first time, but this is not Yuuri’s first time on the GPF circuit, and so there’s no excuse of inexperience to justify this total paralysis. He smooths his thumbs over Yuuri’s cheekbones, stares, tries to will him to shake off his nerves, and all that happens is the slow flutter of Yuuri’s lashes as he closes his eyes.

“V-Victor?”

He has to find something to say. Yakov’s texts are beginning to make sense: all this time Victor has been playing at the role of Coach while aiming for the role of Lover, and if Yuuri fails here it will be all his fault because one of his most basic obligations is to ensure that Yuuri is prepared, familiar enough with his tics that he doesn’t accidentally destroy his own career.

Victor has no idea what to say.

Yuuri’s hands curl around his forearms. “It’s almost time,” he says, and he begins to walk past Victor towards the stairs. He hasn’t even finished stretching, Victor thinks to himself, from a pit of self-loathing he’s able to see with great clarity.

Skaters’ hearts are as fragile as glass.

“So fragile.”

“Huh?”

Victor rakes a hand through his hair. Says the thing he hates most. “If you struggle in the free skate and miss the podium,” he murmurs, and as he does so, he can’t help but realize that it’s been years since he so deliberately set out to hurt himself in this way, “I’ll take responsibility by resigning as your coach.”

Like his mother, he says all the wrong things. Yuuri stands there, wide-eyed and ruined, and Victor watches in horror as tears well up and then overflow, spilling over his cheeks. “W..why would you say something like that, like you’re trying to test me?”

Victor dimly realizes, and much too late, that he’s just broken the wrong heart. “Uh, sorry, Yuuri --”

His instinct is to touch, to comfort, to try to take everything back and so that’s what he does: “I wasn’t being serious --”

It’s a lie and they both know it. He’s prepared to take on the weight of this failure.

Yuuri doesn’t welcome him. “I’m used to being blamed for my own failures,” he hisses, through an impressive waterfall of tears. “But this time I’m anxious because my mistakes reflect on you, too.”

Oh, Victor realizes dimly, and if he could go back in time he’d probably berate drunk Victor for ever confessing to his argument with Yakov, for ever expressing how bothered he is that nobody except for Yuuri’s family and friends seem to believe that he could ever be a competent coach. “I’ve been wondering if you secretly want to quit!”
The last accusation Victor registers as a new and unique hurt and so he refutes it flatly:

“Of course I don’t.”

Yuuri shouts at him.

“I KNOW.”

Victor hesitates, studies Yuuri for a brief moment. If he didn’t know what the right things were before, he certainly doesn’t know now. He’s transported in time: he’s a teenager again, and every person who’s ever cried because of him is someone Victor Nikiforov has walked away from. “… I’m not good with people crying in front of me,” he admits quietly. “I don’t know what I should do. Should I just kiss you or something?”

That’s how it works in all the fairytales he read with his father, growing up. True love’s kiss.

“NO!” Yuuri shouts for a second time. Victor remembers that Mariya never believed in all that nonsense, recalls his father words about the shape of problems he needs to learn how to be willing to have. “Just have more faith than I do that I’ll win! You don’t have to say anything,” he adds, vehemently. “Just stand by me!”

Victor has never been so haunted by a declaration of anything as he is by this. No time passes, he knows, and yet he can hear it: their conversation at the beach, and then last night overlooking Houhai, and the opening notes of Stammi Vicino, Non te ne Andare.

“Okay,” he says, carefully, and then, because Victor only knows how to give comfort the way he receives it, he still steps forward, gently draws Yuuri into a hug that is both careful and fragile, and he tilts their foreheads together. “Can I kiss you now?”

“Maybe later.”

So Victor says nothing, finds tissues to clean up Yuuri’s tears, walks him back upstairs. He’s missed most of Georgi’s skate, will be apologizing later for having no valuable observations ready for one of his oldest friends.

I should have asked Yakov what to do as a coach in situations like this.

What precious little time they have left passes too quickly, and soon they’re back at the rinkside sendoff that Victor still hasn’t mastered. Yuuri blows his nose and when Victor reaches for the tissue he nearly drops it, panics and leans far over the edge of the rink to catch it. Yuuri pokes at the whorl of his hair and then briefly pats the top of it, something that Victor can’t decipher after everything else that they’ve gone through. It feels familiar, at least, fond and light, and for some strange reason he’s the one who feels better afterwards, even if he doesn’t realize it until Yuuri has already skated away, takes up his starting position.
Yuuri is smiling, though Victor can’t quite figure out why. The salchow’s landing cuts deeply into the ice, the kind of thing Victor knows firsthand is perfectly done, but also fought for, and when Yuuri comes up on the triple axel he’s never struggled with, he sweeps a hand across the ice to save the landing. An over-rotation, possibly, Victor will need the video to be sure, and the next combination is wobbly. Victor feels like he’s the one skating it, shakes himself out of his own concern, and it seems like Yuuri does the same because the next combination is flawlessly executed, sends him into the step sequence that Victor knows has no rival on the entirety of the GPF circuit, so beautiful that Victor could watch it over and over again in near-ecstasy every time Yuuri skates.

He’s coming up on his last jump, the toe loop, which kicks off from the backwards outside edge of the skate. Yuuri’s lean is different, though, and Victor dimly recognizes that he’s on his inside edge which means,

Which means --

He holds his breath, counts each flash of Yuuri’s face.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.
Sure enough, Yuuri comes down on his opposite foot, and Victor almost doesn’t even register his fall because he’s still processing the fact that Yuuri has just added a quadruple flip into the end of his program, the hardest thing anyone has ever tried to do at this point in a free skate. He’s nowhere close to being reconciled to this fact when the program ends and Yuuri’s back where he started, one arm beautifully extended in Victor’s direction.

Victor buries his face in his hands. The crowd’s come to life and it spurs him into action, sends him racing around to the other gate, the one that will sweep Yuuri into the kiss and cry.

He can barely hear Yuuri’s Victor, I did great, right? over the thrumming noise in his ears, the ocean-crashing-roar of his own heartbeat.

To say that Victor decides that later is now implies that he deliberates. He does not. He squares himself into the entry gate and then launches himself at the rink, twines his arm around Yuuri’s back and his head to brace him because they’re going to fall, almost certainly, and Yuuri’s precious to him, has to be protected. That’s all instinct, though. Need is the kiss itself, this thing that’s clawed its way through Victor’s chest into every possible extremity, a howling demand that can only be met by the softness of Yuuri’s lips.

The collision itself doesn't matter to Victor. He has been falling for quite some time.

A hundred cameras spring to life and Victor realizes that he’ll spend the rest of the season deflecting questions about their relationship, that it’s a distraction, that it’ll undercut his own reputation as a coach.

He also realizes he doesn’t care.

Sorry, Yakov.

He can’t be just the one thing or the other. He has to be both.

“That was the only thing I could think of to surprise you more than you’ve surprised me,” Victor mumbles, half-worried that he’s about to catch hell from Yuuri, Yuuri who is normally so private, who he probably owed the courtesy of a conversation before this kind of reveal.

“Really,” breathes Yuuri, around the soft brilliance of his smile, and Victor reluctantly heeds the pointed call of an ISF official, stands up with extreme care. Yuuri’s the one who helps him cross back over the treacherous surface of the ice, which his handmade Italian leather shoes were certainly not made for, and Victor leaves a hand on his back as they sit side by side and receive the final
scores. He’s unsurprised when Yuuri takes second place, but not anything like unhappy.

Far from.

After the medal ceremony they’re whisked into an interview.

Was that a kiss we just witnessed, out on the ice? One reporter asks.

Victor smiles his heart-shaped smile. “Now that Yuuri can do a quadruple flip, he’ll definitely win at the Rostelecom Cup, and advance to the Grand Prix Final.”

Yuuri looks at him askance, and a different reporter tries again. Can you tell us anything about your relationship?

“I’m looking forward to going to Russia as his coach,” quips Victor, who can’t help but radiate a happiness that’s so obvious that when he checks his phone later he’ll find he has forty-one new texts, at least eight of which are from the St. Petersburg college crowd, all dragging him for this fresh show of sentiment.
“They’re going to be like that for the rest of the season,” Yuuri observes through the elevator ride back to their room.

“I don’t care,” says Victor, and for this he’s rewarded with a push inside as soon as the door unlocks, backed up against the hallway with the firm press of Yuuri’s hands and the unforgiving heat of his mouth. Victor doesn’t process the way Yuuri’s kisses keep changing like the rest of him, hasn’t gotten out of his own head enough to consider that he’s not the only one learning to cope with new, bright feelings that keep threatening to burst out of his chest. All he knows is his overcoat has to go, and so he shrugs out of it and his blazer at the same time, leaves them both pooled on the floor around their feet.
It’s a long, thorough kiss.

“You should,” Yuuri argues, a bit petulant, against Victor’s mouth. After this hallway assault, it’s not particularly convincing, not when his hands are still firm on Victor’s chest, not when the space between them is best qualified as negligible.

“I don’t,” Victor repeats, and he plants his hands on Yuuri’s hips and crushes them both together a second time. There’s been a strange kind of tension building in him all day, and only now, brushing his thumbs over Yuuri’s hipbones, are his thoughts really beginning to unwind. He thinks maybe, just maybe, that this is Yuuri’s response to every deflection he made in the post-event interviews. Victor has unmistakably kissed him in front of a skating world that always holds its breath to see what Victor Nikiforov might do next, but he has also adamantly refused to let anyone else into that moment, to acknowledge questions about it, to explain himself. The kiss was for Yuuri, and Yuuri seems to have gotten its message. “... I am sorry, though, about the parking lot. And …”

“And?”

Victor is an Olympian, a five-time world champion, a living legend. Yuuri Katsuki makes him fumble with words, makes him flush and sometimes mumble. Now is one of those times. “And if you didn’t want everyone to know …” He won’t apologize for the kiss. He can’t. But he can admit that Yuuri is sensitive to boundaries, and that Victor’s just raced over one.

Yuuri chuckles, which is another surprise, and then he presses the soft balm of his laughter to the corner of Victor’s mouth.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was thinking about it yesterday, during my program. And then you …”

“We could make it a tradition,” Victor offers, flashing a swift, mischievous grin in the dark as he noses at Yuuri’s jawline, smells musk and sweat.

Yuuri looks at him with such fondness that Victor practically swoons. “Maybe later,” he teases, and Victor’s cut off from a response by the sound of the theme song from The King and the Skater erupting from Yuuri’s bag. “Phichit,” he mumbles, and moves to go answer before Victor can stop him. Tell him you’re busy. Tell him I’m going to die if you don’t stand here and kiss me some more. None of those things happen; a short, cheerful conversation follows, along with an I’ll check with Victor as though Victor isn’t standing right alongside. It wouldn’t fool Victor and from the sounds of things it doesn’t fool Phichit, either.

“He’s organizing karaoke after dinner,” Yuuri explains.

Victor is normally up for pretty much anything but he’s already been formulating other after dinner plans and none of them involve crowds. “No.”

“Vitya,” Yuuri says, which is the exact moment Victor Nikiforov resigns himself to fate, accepts that he’s got to go and be friends with these people now, “one of my best friends just won a gold medal.”

Victor sighs. Heavily. “I guess we’re going to karaoke.” Then he pauses, pouts, and bends over to retrieve his own phone from his overcoat. “I’m calling Georgi for back-up.”

Dinner is a boring ISF affair, and Victor decides not to push his luck with the federation any further today by seeing if he can get Yuuri drunk. He does push his luck when they go upstairs to change one more time, though his wandering hands get properly chastised for their insolence. You’re going to make us late. In spite of this, they’re not the last ones to assemble in the lobby: Phichit, Guang
Hong, and Leo de la Iglesia have clearly been waiting for everyone else; Georgi shows up shortly after Victor and Yuuri, and just as Phichit’s muttering something about how someone needs to call Christophe, the elevator opens to reveal him and the man Victor recognizes as both his choreographer and his live-in boyfriend, looking a little bit dazed.

Christophe looks smug as a cat, one hand shoved into Julian’s back pocket. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” he hums, not sorry in the slightest. “Jules’ fly got stuck, so.”

Victor glances briefly at Yuuri, as if to say, *see.*

“You are the worst person ,” Julian mutters.

“That’s not what you said --”

“Taxis!” Cheers Guang Hong, suddenly. “We have two of them.” He points out towards the driveway, where there are indeed two of the bigger cabs waiting, vans that Guang Hong must have called for because nobody else here speaks a word of Mandarin, as far as Victor’s aware, and most of the cabs in Beijing are sedans from what he's seen -- not that he's used to using them, previously, he's always hired a driver. “Get in.”

This is how Victor finds himself sharing a cab with Georgi, Yuuri, and Phichit, being proven wrong again because Phichit leans over to the driver and delivers the address in careful but evidently passable Chinese. Victor’s a bit of a polyglot, has been quietly accumulating phrases in Japanese, and this puts Phichit on roughly his level when it comes to languages, an accomplishment of its own. Speaking of:

“... Congratulations, by the way.” He knows Phichit’s accomplishments today are impressive, and he also knows that they’ll be irrelevant the moment Yuuri actually lands that quadruple flip.

Phichit seems to get even more cheerful, a feat Victor also wasn’t sure was possible. “Yuuri,” he says, “your world champion gold-medal coach-boyfriend-person who also happens to be Victor Nikiforov just congratulated me.” His phone is in hand, perpetually instagram-ready. “Is this even
real life?"

“I ask myself that same question every single day,” says Yuuri, deadpan, and Victor doesn’t have the time to gloat over his newfound status as coach-boyfriend-person because Georgi’s looking rather glum, watching as they peel out from the hotel and into the never-ending chaos that is any major road in Beijing at any hour of the day.

“I missed your skate,” he apologizes quietly, in Russian. He may not have seen the program but he’s seen the scores, knows something must have happened to knock Georgi off the podium. “What happened?”

“Anya happened,” Georgi admits, and as the car weaves through the suicide patterns of Beijing, conversations in the vehicle split in half: Yuuri and Phichit catching up, Victor and Georgi doing the same, each so long-overdue. It strikes Victor how easily this is done, how naturally things begin to assimilate. “... I thought about what you said, about being too intense about the whole thing, so I tried ... I tried to apologize, to make up for it, this time. I thought I -- it didn’t matter. She flashed a thumbs-down and then left. I shouldn’t have been looking at her.” Georgi exhales. “It was a distraction, and I fell.”

Victor sits in silence for a moment, considers the warning this has for him. Anya is a professional who ought to be above sabotaging a fellow Russian skater, no matter how she feels about Georgi’s choice to use his programs to process their breakup. Georgi is a professional, too, and …

*How will you feel, if this ends?*

He can’t help but glance at Yuuri briefly, and the word devastation comes to mind. He thinks about how his thoughts keep racing ahead of reality, the way he keeps making promises to himself about all the things he’s going to do the next time he’s in Beijing with Katsuki Yuuri, as though there’s going to be countless numbers of next times. Realizes Georgi spent most of last season in the same place, counting on the possibility of a forever that hasn’t come through for him. “... I’m sorry, Georgi,” he admits, and he’s apologizing for more than just today’s shitty outcome. He’s apologizing for the way he left St. Petersburg to race after fragile, fickle hope, for the way he’s never followed up on the last night they spent together, getting steadily drunker in his flat.

Georgi nods, accepting, and gives Victor a momentarily penetrating look. “You seem happier,” he says, after a moment, and Victor intuitively understands and forgives the hint of envy with which it’s spoken. “I’m glad about that,” Georgi admits, like the good friend he is. “You haven’t seemed happy in a long time.”

Victor will give him this much. Yuuri seems to have sensed the serious drift of their conversation, glancing at him from the corner of his eye. Victor finishes their conversation in Russian. “I don’t think I realized that I wasn’t,” he admits.

“I guess it’s the sort of thing you have to be shown,” Georgi says, which is perhaps the wisest thing Victor’s ever heard to come out of Georgi Popovich’s mouth.

“We’re here,” says Phichit, and Victor pays for the cab out of sheer habit before he realizes that he, Georgi, and Christophe have no side bets running on the Cup of China, that he hasn’t won anything, that he’s not obligated. It’s a strange observation, and a little bit punchy, the first time he’s felt out of place not competing.

It won’t be the last, but he doesn’t know that yet.
Yuuri takes his hand as they head into the karaoke bar -- bar is a misnomer, this is a karaoke complex, with multiple rooms and fancy lights and all kinds of features that Victor’s come to understand are common in Asia but also just a little bit senseless -- and he promptly forgets that momentary outsider feeling, that reminder that he’s no longer a competitor. Guang Hong leads the way, with Leo at his side, followed by a Christophe who’s got one lanky arm spread out over his boyfriend’s shoulders.

Christophe takes one look back at Victor, whose fingers are twined through Yuuri’s, and flashes a knowing, coyote smile. “Guang Hong,” he calls ahead, “can we get drinks?” Guang Hong is actually innocent enough to insist that he’s not old enough, but he still arranges bottle service because everyone else is, although it looks like Leo’s also muttering about how he really ought to abstain, too. “More for the Russians,” Christophe quips back, although he’s got a gleam in his eyes when he glances back that Victor knows must also include Yuuri.

He closes his eyes briefly, lets himself remember the arc of Yuuri’s back, the perfect curve of his ass, all things he’d be trying to investigate properly this time if it weren’t for Phichit Chulanont. It occurs to him that Christophe is probably trying to get Yuuri drunk, a phenomenon Victor hasn’t been able to achieve again since his arrival in Hasetsu. He’s torn again: split between a strange sort of protectiveness and the idea that Christophe is, for all his mayhem and madness, still a very good friend.

They’re led into a private room, the kind of place that is strangely luxurious, almost too swanky for its purpose, all cool purple lights and a big, U-shaped sofa. Christophe whistles and eyes Julian speculatively. The choreographer rolls his eyes, pretends like his life is suffering. It’s a hard sell, considering what they were up to just an hour ago by Christophe’s own admission. “You’re no fun, Jules.”

“Is there something wrong with the room?” Guang Hong wants to know, and Victor chokes on his own laughter.

“The room’s great,” he assures him, and watches the Chinese skater settle in at the controls, switching the menu over to English.
“Who wants to go first?”

“Georgi and I do.” The bottles have arrived; Victor owes him this. He pours the first round of shots, holds one out for his friend. There’s a brief clink and liquor burns his throat. “Anything Bowie,” he instructs Guang Hong, and as he passes a second microphone over to Georgi, he catches a brief, real smile.

“Going for a throwback, huh?”

“Just two old men, showing the youth how it’s done,” Victor confirms, as the television lights up, and plays the first chords of *Space Oddity*. Victor’s grown up in a musical household but doesn’t consider himself a musician; he’s the sort of person who can hold a pitch and who sings to himself when he drives, but he sounds average to his own ears and usually makes up for it by reaching back for his other, performer’s instincts. He’s been doing this with Georgi for over a decade, goofing off to the classics, air-guitaring as teenagers. For a couple minutes, they’re that young again. Victor sees the way Georgi’s gloom momentarily recedes as they make proper fools of themselves, catches the way Yuuri’s looking at him with such a warm light in his eyes that he can’t help but smile back.

Guang Hong’s up next, singing something in Chinese that Victor can’t even pretend to understand, even if Phichit makes a gamely effort to translate. He curls an arm around Yuuri’s shoulder and then leans over to eye Georgi. “On a scale of one to eleven, how mad is he, still?”

“Ask him yourself,” Georgi replies dryly, and pours a second glass.

Victor pouts. “That sounds like the worst idea.” He texts anyway.

“Are you guys going to kiss again?” Phichit asks suddenly, looking between Victor and Yuuri.

“That last post I made when we got hot pot got *so many likes*, you wouldn’t believe …”

“Phichit.” Yuuri’s voice has an edge of warning, and Victor can’t help but chuckle. He’s still mad about that, apparently. “You made the whole world think I was just fooling around --”

“You mean you weren’t?” Christophe sounds idly disappointed as he scrolls through the catalogue,
selects the next song, and he smirks when Yuuri buries his face in his hands. “Pity. Think Victor may have one-upped your friend today, though.”

“He always does,” Georgi chimes in, long-suffering. Victor shoves him, but it’s half-hearted, and he knows he’s in for it when Christophe takes the microphone and promises to show them all how it’s done. This consists of crooning *Wicked Game* in Julian’s direction and taking full advantage of the length of microphone cord in order to straddle the brunette’s lap. Guang Hong develops a full-face blush and resolutely sets his phone face-down on the table. Phichit, evidently shameless when it comes to social media, resolutely records the latter chorus even as Leo protests in the background, and Victor?

Victor feels Yuuri lean a little more fully into his chest and smiles to himself, content. Whatever complaints he may have had earlier about wanting Yuuri to himself have more or less evaporated; there’s an easy, bubbly sort of feeling in the air around him, the kind of thing he hasn’t felt since his college days, really. Christophe doesn’t leave Julian’s lap but he does relinquish the microphone to Leo, who sings his way through *Lean on Me* and who pulls Guang Hong into the chorus, arms slung over each other’s shoulders. They’re briefly interrupted by Phichit’s cheer as he programs another song, followed by Yuuri’s groan when he realizes it’s yet another part of the soundtrack from *The King and the Skater*.

“Yuuri, don’t you dare *blaspheme*.”

Yuuri leans over, whispers in Victor’s ear: “I have seen this movie forty-seven times,” he hisses. Victor puts two and two together and realizes Phichit is to blame.

Georgi downs another shot and retakes the stage, crooning his way through *Paint it Black*, and Phichit calls up the next song with a face that is pure innocence, and therefore dangerous, before he picks up two microphones. Victor’s not sure who he means the second one for until the song prompt flashes on the screen, and he hears Yuuri groan in audible betrayal.

It’s Beyoncé. The song is *Halo*.

Victor has never, not once, heard any pop music like this on Yuuri’s playlists, but apparently he has a few guilty pleasures that Phichit is perfectly happy to exploit like this. Even though Phichit’s doing the bulk of the work, every so often Yuuri takes up a verse and sings something like *you’re the only one that I want, and I’m addicted to your light*. Yuuri’s singing voice is all head-voice, a light tenor that’s a little bit airy, lacks the body or depth of the kinds of musicians Victor’s father spends his time with.

It doesn’t matter. He’s still *Yuuri*. Victor’s weak for it, smiling like an idiot while he gets crushed by his love for this man. He takes the tablet back, scrolls through page after page of songs. The English section is disappointingly thin, reads like a top-40 playlist from three years ago. Still.

He finds something that’s good enough, and he takes the stage.

*I’ve been roaming around, always looking down at all I see* …

Phichit’s recording again, something Victor doesn’t acknowledge until it’s done. “You can’t post that,” he says, resuming his place next to Yuuri and taking it upon himself to pour another round of drinks.

Phichit pouts. It’s adorable, and Victor has the sense he uses that face the same way Victor uses his smile sometimes, weaponizes it, but perhaps for that very reason, Victor’s immune to its charms.

“Why?”
“It wasn’t for you.” Still, Victor tilts his head slightly, smiles. “Send it to Yuuri.” Phichit contemplates for a second, and then makes a counteroffer:

“Give me your number, and I’ll text it to you both.”

In the end, it’s Georgi and Victor and Christophe who wind up the most drunk, although not unpleasantly so, nothing like their first night in Beijing. He vaguely recalls making a fool out of himself with Christophe to a Madonna song and singing the whole way through Bohemian Rhapsody with Georgi and Leo before the night is through. Phichit takes it upon himself to organize further spontaneous duets, perhaps only so that he can orchestrate a moment Victor could never have predicted, at once stranger and better than fiction:

He is in a karaoke bar in Beijing, China, singing along to a Taylor Swift song that he's learning how not to hate because Yuuri is there; Yuuri who shares a guilty pop-song obsession with Phichit, apparently, Yuuri who cradles Victor's face in his beautiful hands and harmonizes:

_I just want to know you better, know you better, know you better now_

“All my days I’ll know your face —”

Victor struggles to follow the words on the screen. He has the abiding sense that he's now in Phichit Chulanont's debt, somehow.

“ -- All I know since yesterday is everything has changed.”

Chapter End Notes

true story, fam: i've been to china and once i remembered my own crazy karaoke experiences from there, it was actually impossible not to pass them along.
tumblr post with song links / notes about karaoke:
https://handsingsweapon.tumblr.com/post/163338982591/show-chapter-archive
Yuuri falls asleep on Victor long before the taxi ever pulls back into their hotel in Beijing; the process of shuffling him out of the car, into the elevator, and back to their room is more adorable than it should be. “Pajamas, at least,” Victor reminds him, or rather, reminds the back of Yuuri’s neck as he catches him in the room and prevents an all-out faceplant into the bed they’re sharing. It’s probably alcohol making this funnier than it really is, but Victor can’t help it, he grins and nips an ear. He feels tremendously clever, using Yuuri’s own words against him, although the tables aren’t quite turned; he’s considerably tipsier than Yuuri is. “Remember?”

All he gets in return is a palm to the face as he watches a grumpy, sleepy Katsuki Yuuri go brush his teeth and change. Victor smiles to himself, follows suit. He can’t complain at all when they lay down together, when Yuuri turns into his chest and transforms Victor into his very own body pillow. There’s just one thing he’d like to know, now that everyone is gone and they’re isolated in the quiet and privacy of the hotel room, a question he can’t quite erase from his thoughts. “Yuuri?”

“Mm.”

“Am I really your coach-boyfriend-person?” Victor asks, using Phichit Chulanont’s words.
“You’re Victor,” Yuuri mutters in the direction of Victor’s sternum, already half-asleep. “Just … keep being …”

Right. Be Victor. He’s not sure he has any better an idea of what that means, but tonight even Victor’s own special cocktail of brain chemistry can’t manage to make him unhappy. Not when Yuuri looks like this, asleep, fully at ease with the world. “Sweet dreams,” he murmurs, in Russian, and he leans over to kiss Yuuri’s forehead, curls closer. Yuuranya.

They arrive back to Hasetsu to all the fanfare Victor’s come to expect for the town’s local hero: there are still posters of Yuuri in the train station, along with leftovers from the Onsen on Ice. Someone has arranged for a big reservation at a ramen shop, where Minako and Takeshi ply everyone with beers to celebrate. Even the waiter seems to know what’s going on: he comes by and pours for both Victor and Yuuri with a strangely pointed congratulations that Victor’s not sure is only referencing Yuuri’s silver medal.

The triplets have said something to Yuuri that’s made him turn bright red and sputter on his ramen. Minako practically howls laughter. Victor’s not in on the joke. He pats Yuuri on the shoulder, curious, and whispers: “What’d she say?”

“A-a -- nothing.”

“Yuuri.” Victor’s pretty sure he’s pouting. He is Victor Nikiforov, five-time champion, and if pouting gets his questions answered then pouting is what he’s going to do.

Yuuri looks at him for what feels like an eternity. “I’ll tell you after dinner,” he mutters. It might be something he’s hoping Victor will forget, but these sorts of memories are too saturated to simply slip from Victor’s memory. Everything feels a little more real than it has before, like he’d gotten in the habit of simply observing his own life instead of actually living it.

So of course Victor remembers after dinner, asks on the walk home, smiles and returns the wave of a fisherman packing up for the evening who has recognized them both. Yuuri fesses up: “Lutz said that the camera angle made it hard to tell if we were kissing. Loop wanted to know if we’d try a re-
creation at the Ice Castle.”

“I’m not opposed,” Victor teases gently. Yuuri’s smile is brief, gaze already thoughtful. “What about Axel?”

“Axel …” Yuuri trails off, looks overhead. There’s no stars to be seen, just hazy clouds that are too high in the sky to promise rain. “Axel is six years old,” he mumbles, like that’s any explanation. The next words come out in a jumble. “She thinks people who kiss are going to be together forever and that we should move in next door.”

It’s Victor’s turn to feel his face heat up. After this initial, flashpoint reaction, he has to consider it: he bought himself a one way ticket here without a return date. Now he’s been in Japan for months and he’s not really any closer to knowing what that means. It strikes him for the first time how far away he’d be from home, how Yuuri has yet to meet his parents or his sister.

Funny how a six year old can make something so complicated seem simple. “Maybe we will,” he murmurs with a half-smile, and then, because they’re already back at Yu-Topia, he darts forward to meet Makkachin, coos at her in Russian because she is the very best girl.

“Does next door have a yard?”


For once, Victor can’t tell if he is or he isn’t. He doesn’t have much time to consider it: instead he gets to witness a strange ritual of Yuuri unpacking his bag in the middle of the dining room, watches as he gathers his silver medal in both palms and then turns to offer it to Hiroko. Victor watches the way her already soft face transforms with something like joy, understands why Toshiya must’ve fallen in love with her once or maybe even still. It’s a quiet, gentle pride, a radiating happiness that envelops everything like a soft blanket. She stands on tiptoe to press a kiss to Yuuri’s cheek and then hands the medal to Toshiya, who walks over to a bulletin board and hangs it up to replace the one Yuuri collected at his qualifier. “Here,” says Mari, who takes that one and adds it to a cabinet dotted with a whole assortment of other skating odds-and-ends, relics of different moments in Yuuri’s career.

It’s a beautiful thing to witness. It makes Victor reconsider Yuuri’s free skate, has him thinking about how loved Yuuri is and how terrible it must have been to not have seen it for so long. Then he thinks about Georgi, too. It must be the sort of thing you have to be shown. He has a hand over his chest before he quite knows what to do with himself, touched, and Hiroko sees it and smiles. “What a long day,” she says, which Victor knows is a lie. She’s not fooling anyone. Hiroko tucks a hand into her husband’s sleeve and begins to lead him off. “I’m going to bed early.”

“Don’t stay up too late, kiddo,” quips Mari, and although the words are meant for Yuuri she fixes Victor with a pointed stare. “Goodnight, Victor.”

“Goodnight, Mari.”

Just like that, they’re alone.

Being alone in Beijing was one thing, but it’s quite another, Victor discovers, standing under the roof that Yuuri was raised in, the house his family occupies. The silence stretches between them until he reaches for their suitcases. Yuuri’s got more luggage than him. “Here, I’ll help you take these back.”

Victor leaves his suitcase by the door of his own room, and lets a lazy Makkachin in to go lay down. Then he proceeds down the hall, drapes Yuuri’s costume-bag over the back of his desk chair. It’s only the second time he’s been in Yuuri’s room, and the first time doesn’t really count, hovering just
over the threshold the morning before they went to the beach. Now that he’s inside, it’s like he’s taken a step backwards in time, like going back to his own childhood at Babushka’s place: twin bed, small desk. There’s a keyboard propped up in the corner, collecting dust, and as they stand there looking at each other, he can’t help but inquire.

“Do you play?”

“Huh?”

“Piano,” Victor clarifies. Points. Helpfully. “Do you play the piano?” He’s got a mental image of Yuuri bent over the keys with that focused expression he sometimes gets, all elegant wrists and graceful arms, so he’s praying for a yes.

“Sort of. I took lessons when I was little. I’m probably not very good now.”

“Me either.” Victor pauses. “Good. I mean. At the piano.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Yuuri murmurs. “Aren’t you good at everything?” Victor is halfway through rattling off a list of things he’s terrible at, like his science classes when he was younger, or how he’s horrible about remembering birthdays, before he ever realizes Yuuri’s teasing him.

“Youri,” Victor whines. It’s enough, though: enough for him to sweep into Yuuri’s personal space, to run his fingers along Yuuri’s ribs and into the soft parts of his waist. He’s learning now that Katsuki Yuuri is ticklish, that teasing like this can turn him into a squirming creature, bubbling up laughter. “That was unfair.” Yuuri tries to get him back, but it won’t work: Victor Nikiforov is ticklish on the skate-abused bottoms of his feet and the backs of his knees, and he’s got the advantage here, with Yuuri trapped in the loose circle of his arms.

“Victor! Stop!”

“Fine,” Victor says. Then he’s struck by a new whim, except the moment the idea enters his head the word whim no longer applies. His hands settle on Yuuri’s waist, anchored on his hipbones, and he tilts his head down to nose into Yuuri’s hair, lets his lips linger against Yuuri’s cheek. Yuuri stills and it feels like time does, too: like everything around them has been waiting, like even the air has held its breath until this strangely soft and no less inevitable collision.

It’s the first physically affectionate thing he’s done since leaving the hotel in the morning; Beijing’s airport is a stark, serious, over-policed affair, and everything in Hasetsu has felt strangely high-key, perhaps even more intimate than the privacy of a lone hotel room in another country because all of it is so familiar. Every place and every person here has been known to Yuuri for years. Victor’s the
foreign element, the odd thing trying to find a place for himself. “Dance with me?”

Yuuri obliges him with the softest of smiles. It’s nothing like Sochi, this, but Victor hums under his breath as they drift across the hardwood. Yuuri follows him effortlessly through a spin and into a gentle backbend. They’re close without being obscene; Victor recognizes little hints of ballroom training, probably Minako’s work, in the way Yuuri holds up his half of the frame, in the subtly professional resistance that sits in Yuuri’s hands so that he can read Victor’s lead. He wants to take Yuuri to a studio and do this, he realizes, wants to follow the reflected images of the two of them. We’d look good together, Victor thinks, and there’s a strange, feral kind of satisfaction in the thought: of course they would, they’d have to. The melody he’s making up changes, morphs into something recognizable without Victor really meaning it to do so, and he dips Yuuri a final time to the ending notes of Stammi Vicino. One of Yuuri’s hands is curled around Victor’s neck; the other one is gracefully extended back and away from his head. Victor wants to follow the arc of his body with kisses, but he doesn’t; he smiles in a way that’s artless and therefore genuine, and then gently pulls Yuuri upright.

Yuuri asks the question he’s been pondering ever since every other Katsuki made themselves scarce. “Where are you sleeping?”

“In my room,” Victor admits with a wry smile. “But I’ve been trying to figure out how to invite you for at least half an hour.”

Yuuri glances at the twin bed pushed up against the wall, his eyebrows raised. “You don’t think we’d fit?”

“We’d fit fine,” Victor chuckles. They really wouldn’t: it’d be uncomfortable and Yuuri would wake up crankier than he already tends to be, most mornings. “Makkachin’s a bed hog,” he adds, and he noses under Yuuri’s chin, presses his lips to the flutter of Yuuri’s pulse. “She needs at least half.”

“Oh, well.” Yuuri’s voice catches, gives him away. His hand slides up into Victor’s hair; his fingers curl. “If it’s for Makkachin.”

Victor kisses him. He means for it to be a soft kiss, fond, but Yuuri’s nails scrape lightly along the base of his skull, and Yuuri’s lips part, and Yuuri’s chest is still pressed against his. There is an inescapable gravity surrounding Katsuki Yuuri, coded just for Victor Nikiforov, and it’s so easy to get lost to it. Effortless. What’s more: Yuuri’s met him, once again, at this horizon, with heat and the lazy twining of their tongues and a quiet hum of satisfaction that Victor’s already addicted to. “You said,” Yuuri reminds him, against the bottom of Victor’s mouth, which he then has the audacity to nibble on, “your room.”

Victor decides that on his tombstone someone needs to inscribe the following: RIP, Victor Nikiforov: “He Did This To Himself.”

“My room,” Victor hums, in theory agreeing, but he hasn’t let Yuuri go yet, still traces the lower curve of his spine, ghosts his fingers along the waistband of his jeans.

“Can I get some of my things?” Yuuri prompts, with the subtle mischief which is a laugh, except it only lives in his eyes. Victor’s learning to see it, the way Yuuri makes these little jokes, from time to time.

“Yes,” he sighs. “Yes.” Convincing his hands that they’re not made to be glued to Yuuri’s ass is a momentary battle, but Victor wins it, he tells himself, with the years of discipline that it took to A) win two Olympic gold medals B) sacrifice his own emotional health at the altar of figure skating, piece by piece, for the better part of twenty years. “I’m going to go clean up,” he adds, because one
thing Victor is good at is temptation bundling: he’d like to stay with Yuuri, sure, but what he’d like more is for the rest of the evening to be interrupted by necessity, and if that means parting for long enough to get himself ready for bed, then so be it. He’s washed up and changed and even wrestled Makkachin out of the exact center of his bed long before Yuuri ever appears outside his door; in fact, Victor has time to examine his phone. His professional email has been bombarded with his business manager forwarding fresh requests for interviews; between your antics at the Cup of China and your upcoming return to Moscow, there’s enormous interest, reads one email, which Victor closes. His personal email is always more sparse, this time, there’s a short message from his mother, as clipped and curt as they always are:

He doesn’t have time to decode what his mother means -- Mariya always means more than one thing when she speaks -- because Yuuri’s in the doorway now, recently showered and wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. Yuuri hesitates there, and then moves around the bed in a way that seems almost rehearsed to plug his phone into a charger, to check the alarm. He sets his glasses down, and Victor catches a hint of determination and resolve in Yuuri’s expression. He watches as Yuuri sucks in a breath, turns the light off, and then climbs into bed over a sleeping Makkachin and -- oh -- over a reclining Victor.

Yuuri cups his chin, tilts his face up for a fierce kiss. Victor tastes toothpaste and only momentarily regrets his decision to do what he always does and sleep in his underwear, because for all intents and purposes he’s just been doused in gasoline and set on fire. Yuuri runs a hand down his chest and Victor struggles to catch up, palms around Yuuri’s waist as he presses their bodies together. What he wants to do is flip Yuuri over, press him into the mattress, but the blankets are in the way and it’d almost certainly wake up his poodle, so he breaks the kiss long enough to try to yank the sheets out from under Yuuri’s knees.

Yuuri complies just long enough for them to kick the covers out of the way, then crashes their lips back together, rakes his hand down the sensitive skin of Victor’s abdomen. Victor practically hisses for breath, has no time to arrive at the realization that he’s embarrassingly hard already because Yuuri -- Yuuri! -- is palming his briefs. Victor’s head hits the pillow, and he bites his lip to hold back a moan, looks up to study Yuuri’s face in the dark.

It almost, almost looks like the expression Yuuri gets sometimes just before he’s supposed to step out on the ice for a performance, which is the first thing that suggests to Victor that perhaps something about this entire experience isn’t quite what he’d like. It’s very hard to complain; Yuuri’s leaning over him, again, pressing a wet kiss to his collarbone, and Victor’s having a hard time even attempting to think. He tries to appease the part of himself that’s at war with slowing any of this down by sliding his hands under Yuuri’s shirt, along the muscles that have replaced the softness Victor remembers from early in the season, and when Yuuri sits up to get rid of the offending piece of clothing, Victor follows him upright, nibbles at his jaw. “Yuuri,” he says carefully, quietly. “How much of this have you done before?”
He could have predicted what he gets in return: Yuuri almost recoiling, and the familiar, dangerous twist of anxiety on his face. “I’m not a virgin, Victor,” he whispers vehemently in the dark, and then he gets defensive. “Do you want to tell me about everyone you’ve ever slept with?”

“If it’s what you want,” Victor says easily, utterly un-offended by the remark, “then yes.” There’s no point in pretending that he didn’t have wild years spent chasing after the way he feels right now, and he’s too far past it all to bother with shame. Yuuri blinks at him, and Victor watches as he begins to look worried, like he’s done something wrong perhaps, and he smooths his hands over Yuuri’s shoulders and down his back to be reassuring. Kisses him once, softly, right on the edge of his mouth. Yuuri doesn’t move, and so Victor considers his next words with care, even as his hands slide lower, over Yuuri’s waist and into the waistband of his awful sweatpants, clothes Victor is going to train him out of someday even if it takes the rest of his life to do it. “You’re in an awful hurry,” he says carefully, but also truthfully, “so I’m just trying to understand what it’s been like. For you. Previously.”

“I was in college,” Yuuri mutters, grumpy in spite of the blush building on his cheekbones. Victor drags his fingers across Yuuri’s abdomen, smirks subtly at the way his navel recedes in response. “Not a lot of privacy,” he huffs. Victor remembers what it was like to sneak around in that way, every encounter fast and furious; he probably shouldn’t be building a story around what little detail Yuuri is giving him but he is, nonetheless.

“Mm,” hums Victor, who slips a hand into Yuuri’s sweats and palms the rise of his boxers, utterly unapologetic about the squeak that escapes from Yuuri’s mouth when he does it. “Anything else?”

“... Usually drunk,” Yuuri huffs, and when Victor experiments a little, shifts their hips, he’s rewarded with a nearly involuntary rocking into his palm, a whine.

“I see,” says Victor, who licks a long, slow line up Yuuri’s throat. He remembers, but only briefly, a night in an Olympic dormitory years ago, stuck under someone else’s pistoning body, convinced it was what he really wanted. He has had his doubts, before, about whether the universe is kind, but they’ve gone now: of all the people in the world, Victor Nikiforov is going to be the one who teaches Katsuki Yuuri about foreplay. “Yuuri?”

“Hn...”

Victor nibbles on Yuuri’s earlobe. “I would very much like,” he murmurs, applying a maddeningly slow stroke to the firm outline of Yuuri’s dick, holding Yuuri’s hipbone as firmly as he can to anchor him in one place. “to take my time. Will you let me do that?”

It’s been so long since Sochi. He has months of waiting to make up for. Victor wants to put his mouth everywhere, to find all of the places that make Yuuri moan or gasp or laugh. I want to make you fall apart. I want to put you back together. When no response arrives, Victor experiments: sinks his teeth into the outside edge of Yuuri’s shoulder for no other reason than it was there and he wants, oh, God, he wants. “Yuuri?”

“Y-yes.”

Every nerve sings with purpose. Victor grins in the dark and turns them over, which wakes the dog up, of course it does; Victor doesn’t care. Makkachin jumping off of the bed in a huff to go find a corner to curl into is the best possible outcome at this exact moment. “Let’s get these off,” he hums, and tugs impatiently at Yuuri’s sweats. “You’ve got such beautiful legs, solnyshko. I want to see them.”

Yuuri kicks out of his sweats, hesitates for a moment, and then reaches for Victor’s shoulders, draws
them back together with one of those legs Victor’s just been praising. Victor considers complaining about it, except he’s been fantasizing about Yuuri’s thighs for months and right now he’s got one of them twined around his hips. It’s heaven. He indulges the pull and press of their bodies, leans in for the kiss Yuuri’s angling for. “What does that -- what does that mean?”

“Sun,” Victor murmurs, and trails kisses along Yuuri’s throat. “Russians like petnames.”

“Like -- like Vitya?” Yuuri asks, and he probably doesn’t mean to say it again with such emphasis, except that Victor’s just slowly rocked their hips together, scraped his nails down the space between their stomachs.

“Da,” he confirms idly, lips to a collarbone. “I have so many others,” Victor confesses, thinking through a list as he feathers kisses into Yuuri’s sternum.

Yuuri’s body arches so beautifully. Exquisite, zvezda moya. Victor dips further, feels Yuuri’s fingers twist in his hair. “What’s your -- what’s your favorite?”

“Yuuranya,” Victor replies, without question, and this time he slips his hand into Yuuri’s boxers, grins against his navel when Yuuri gasps in response. “Because I think it sounds beautiful,” he hums. Yuuri’s leg tightens against him, tries to hook them closer still. “Anything that refers to you ought to sound beautiful,” he adds, and this time, as he strokes, he presses a wet kiss into Yuuri’s belly button, sweeps his tongue into the hollow of it.

“Victor!” This is wonderfully rewarding, already. Victor grins in the dark. Twists his wrist a second time.

“Vitya,” he corrects, mischievous.

“V-vitya,” Yuuri confirms, gaze hooded, eyes dark. Then he seems to recall his original purpose. “You’re the beautiful one,” he says slowly, keening into Victor’s hand.

“Am I?” Victor kisses a hipbone, now, slides his free hand along Yuuri’s thigh to push his leg back down. Yuuri resists him until Victor pointedly hooks a finger into the elastic waistband of his boxers. “I don’t believe you,” he lies. Victor knows, objectively, that he’s good looking: the full-page spreads in magazines that aren’t even Russian are plenty of indication that he sells.

But he wants to hear it from Yuuri.

“You are,” Yuuri babbles, as Victor gets him out of his boxers, slides them down his legs. It’s dark in his room, just barely enough light to see Yuuri stretched out and naked, propped up on an elbow now that Victor’s far away from him. “I used to watch you all the time. I told Yuuko once that it wasn’t fair that someone could have hair that pretty.” Victor’s following the journey of Yuuri’s underwear all the way down to his ankles, tosses it somewhere, hopefully not at the dog, and Yuuri bends up to reach for him, to feather fingers through his bangs. “I never thought it’d be this soft,” he mumbles.

Skaters and dancers, Victor knows firsthand, have the ugliest feet and Yuuri’s are no different: there’s a prominent greenish tint above his ankle from where his skates have extra support against sprains and always rub a bruise, and he’s got callouses on the outsides of his toes, nevermind what the toenails themselves look like, battered from practice. Victor kisses the top of his foot, the inside of his ankle,lavishes the side of his knee with a lingering, wet kiss against bone and sinew. Yuuri sucks in a breath so hard and so fast that Victor chucksles in response, trailing fingers along Yuuri’s calves. “And your eyes, Vitya --” Yuuri’s cock is dark and heavy against his stomach, and he’s got a hand wandering down his chest like he’s about to take matters into his own hands, so Victor reaches up to
stop him, laces their fingers together. “They’re blue, I know everyone probably tells you, but they’re very different than I thought, when you’re really here --”


“Huh?”

“In some photoshoots,” he murmurs, and stops for a moment to bring their entwined fingers to his lips. There’s a whole process that involves preparing Victor Nikiforov for an interview spread: even makeup, sometimes, to hide the handful of freckles that barely dot his shoulders. Mascara. Contacts to make his eyes bluer-than-blue, in the same way that there’s been a mythology built around him for all these years, more-human-than-human.

“They … they change in different light,” Yuuri says, almost as though he hasn’t heard, although he squeezes Victor’s hand. “It’s like looking at the sea. You know it’s the same sea, every day, but it’s different, every time, which is maybe why you keep looking at the sea or why I can’t stop looking, but --” Victor ends his babbling with a kiss. This is perhaps the most poetic thing anyone has ever said to Victor, who has always loved the ocean and yet always taken his proximity to it for granted. It’s enough that he’s cut off his previous trajectory of kisses, that he has to swallow the rest of the compliment right off of Yuuri’s lips. Yuuri’s eager, hungry; uses his legs to drag them together again, untangles their fingers to try to get Victor out of his briefs. Victor tries and fails to resist, because:

“Vitya.” Yuuri pouts. “I want to see you.”

He strips because it’s completely and utterly beyond him to really deny Yuuri of anything.

They sit for a moment like that, chests heaving, just looking, and then Victor smiles. “I still think you’re beautiful,” he quips.

“Agree to disagree,” Yuuri replies, and in any other circumstance it would sound like he’s putting himself down, except for the subtle crinkle at the corners of his eyes, the same quiet sass Victor’s come to expect exactly when it’s least expected. Victor chuckles in the dark, too, and Yuuri’s gaze softens, lingers on his lips. “That, too.”

“What?”

Yuuri reaches for him again but Victor has other ideas, slips away from his hands so he can bend Yuuri’s other leg up, massage along his hamstring and then bend over to kiss the inside of his thigh, right back where he’d left off on the other knee. The whine of protest he gets in response is the exact definition of the word adorable, and so Victor sweeps his free hand back down Yuuri’s abdomen, takes Yuuri’s cock back into the loose circle of his fist, pulls his foreskin back to reveal a bead of precome that it’s very tempting to just lick away. He doesn’t. Yet.

“Y-your smile -- Vitya! -- when it’s genuine, it’s …” Victor’s peppering kisses up Yuuri’s thigh, and the way Yuuri’s breath catches on every other syllable is marvelous. So are Yuuri’s hands, tangled in his hair, and Yuuri finally catch onto him when Victor laves a long, wet kiss at the crease of his thigh. “V … Victor,” he stammers, helplessly, writhing, shifting his hips, “you don’t -- you don’t have to just --”

“Of course I don’t have to,” Victor purrs. It’s getting increasingly impossible to pretend he can still be patient at this point, what with all the heat pooling in his stomach and the neglected ache of his own cock. “I want to,” he says pointedly. Yuuri looks at him like he’s just spoken in some alien language that is neither English, Japanese, nor Russian; this is the precise moment when Victor Nikiforov realizes that nobody has ever given Katsuki Yuuri proper head. “Yuuranya,” he coos,
slowing his strokes until Yuuri’s back to needy little hisses of breath, “I’ve dreamt about you like this,” Victor confesses, dragging a hand down his own abdomen to finally touch himself while Yuuri stares. “Woken up hot and hungry -- are you sure you don’t want me to?”

Yuuri bites down on his lower lip, and Victor resists sitting back up to suck on it, instead. “Vitya.”

“Yes?”

“Please,” Yuuri half-begs, half-sobs, which is plenty: more than enough for Victor to lean over and press a kiss to the dark, swollen head of Yuuri’s dick. This time Yuuri clamps a hand over his mouth, bucks his hips, and Victor hums to himself briefly before he licks a long, wet stripe down Yuuri’s cock. He’s rewarded with the pull of Yuuri’s fingers in his hair, and unintelligible murmuring, muffled by Yuuri’s own fist.

Victor decides that he will call this evening a success at the exact moment when he’s gotten Yuuri to forget their surroundings enough that he forgets to try to keep quiet, and promptly takes Yuuri into his mouth, hollows out his cheeks. Yuuri’s dampened moan makes it impossible to ignore the needs of his own body; Victor steadies his weight on his own weakening knees, fucks into his own hand, strokes the base of Yuuri’s dick in time. He’s a quick learner, changes tactics when Yuuri’s breath hitches or when the pull of his hand in Victor’s hair gets particularly involuntary and insistent.

“Vitya,” Yuuri chokes on the syllables, arches his back, writhes and there’s no part of him that isn’t gorgeous, that Victor doesn’t desperately want. Victor pops off, replaces the heat of his mouth with his palm, mouths and licks at Yuuri’s balls until Yuuri gives up and fists a hand into the sheets. He’s almost begging, now; Victor can’t say he blames him, because he feels it too: that same tightness, the stretch of an elastic band, something that’s just about to break. *Onegai*, Yuuri mumbles, a word Victor’s heard before in other contexts, and can’t place here. He says it over and over again until Victor gets the point, takes him deeper into his mouth than before and nearly, god, deliciously, even, almost chokes on the involuntary snapping of his hips.

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“Me too,” thinks Victor, who looks up just in time to lock eyes with Yuuri; Yuuri who writhes because of him, who glistens with a thin sheen of sweat, whose eyes are alight with heat and need. This is the exact moment Victor comes into his own hand, and when Yuuri warns him a second time that he’s so -- so close -- Victor takes him into the back of his throat.

Yuuri keening his name while he orgasms is the best thing Victor’s ever heard. He pulls off with a wet pop, swallows, coughs. Then he makes the one joke he can’t not make:

“*Vkusno,*” Victor teases, in the dark, as Yuuri lies back, boneless. It’s really not; there’s no pretending like the taste isn’t what it is.

“You’re the worst,” Yuuri mutters, but they both know he doesn’t mean it. It almost sounds like something else.

“Just wait for the next lesson,” quips Victor, who kisses Yuuri’s thigh, and then his navel. It sounds like *I love you, too.* He wipes the mess in his hand off on his briefs, lets Yuuri pull him close, shivers as Yuuri’s fingers trace his back. It’s unusual to still be this keyed up and sensitive, but he is, somehow, and even though objectively he knows he should probably go do useful things like find a washcloth, get a glass of water, even, Victor feels disinclined to manage it.

Yuuri cradles him for what feels like forever, and then he’s the one who stirs, the one who rises pragmatic from this dream Victor is getting to occupy. “I’ll be back,” he promises, leaving Victor to
stumble around his room with legs that don’t seem to want to work for things like fresh underwear and the rest of Yuuri’s clothes.

They clean up like a couple who’ve been together for a long time, Victor realizes belatedly, without awkwardness or shame, and there’s no question of whether or not Yuuri’s spending the night because it’s Yuuri’s house they’re in to begin with.

“Does this mean we can start practice late,” Yuuri mumbles against his collarbone.

Victor smiles. “No.”

Sex, for Victor, has always been the kind of thing that relieves stress; for years the heady chase for endorphins was the sort of quick fix which Vasily always implied he might’ve been using in lieu of squarely addressing any of his unhappiness in the first place. He wakes up earlier than Yuuri, just like he always does; he showers, like always, he shaves. He skirts around looking Toshiya in the eye at breakfast, realizes he’s never going to figure out how to navigate the phase of I put your son’s dick in my mouth last night and I liked it, realizes that it’s even worse than he thought because this is a problem he wants to have indefinitely.

And yet.

He feels lanky and easy and at ease; he whistles while he rides the yellow bicycle up to the Ice Castle ahead of Yuuri. It’s only when Yuuri gets into his compulsory figures does Victor begin to have a clue that perhaps the bubbly, effervescent feeling he has, the lightness of all his limbs, is not something Yuuri shares.

The practice is an unmitigated disaster.

Yuuri falls on the salchow so often that Victor forbids him from even considering the Flip, tries instead to put them back on footwork. His step sequences lack all of their usual message; they’re preoccupied, he’s thinking entirely too much.

“Sorry,” Yuuri apologizes, which Victor hates, because Yuuri does it in a way sometimes that makes it sound like he’s apologizing for himself, for his own existence. There’s also the way he’s unnaturally short of breath, the way all the muscles in his face are tensed in defiance of the urge to cry. “I just -- this --”

“Hey, shh.” Victor glides to him, sweeps Yuuri into a hug. He desperately wants to ask what’s gotten into you, but takes the time to choose his words a little more carefully. “What are you so worried about?”
“Rostelecom,” Yuuri mumbles. “What if I … what happens if I don’t qualify, if …”

The mere possibility of that hasn’t once crossed Victor’s mind. He knows nearly every skater at the top of the senior circuit; he’s watched every other contest. There is no question in his mind that Katsuki Yuuri has the potential to be the single best skater of the year, to set records that even Victor has only previously idly contemplated while trying to raise the bar for himself.

“You’re going to qualify,” Victor says, trying and failing to avoid an all-too-vivid flashback of Yuuri in the parking lot, insisting that Victor just have faith in him through ugly, choked-up sobs. “You’re going to qualify and we’re going to Barcelona.” The triplets are probably around here somewhere, ready to pounce, but it’s not enough to stop Victor from leaning forward to press a kiss to Yuuri’s forehead. “When we get there, I’m going to buy you a decent tie, finally, because you’re going to need it …” Yuuri’s arms curl around Victor’s waist, and Victor feels the flex of his fingers somewhere between his own shoulderblades. He stands there for a good thirty seconds in silence, waits until Yuuri’s breaths slow.

“Let’s do something else for a while,” Victor decides, and he skates back over to the boombox propped up on the rink’s wall so that he can change out the music.

Yuuri stays where he is, waiting, until the track starts and Victor holds out a hand. He’s re-writing the *Stay Close to Me* program without realizing it already; changing it into a skate with room enough for two. “Dance with me?”

It becomes a new tradition, the way they close out every single practice from then on, and afterwards Victor fields a call from his mother, who’s irritable that he hasn’t responded to her email yet. “Your grandmother wants to come to Rostelecom,” she snaps. “I don’t care how many reporters are chasing you down for interviews over who you’re sleeping with now, or how prettily he skates, Vitya, send me your damn itinerary.” Talking to his mother on the phone is a bit like receiving an angry letter with a soft postscript: “Also, your sister says she loves you.”

“What was that all about?” Yuuri wants to know.

Victor winces. “I just want you to know,” he admits, “that I apologize in advance.”

“For what?”


Two more events fly by. In that time Christophe qualifies for the Grand Prix Final. So does Otabek Altin. Four spots remain, and they’ll be decided at Rostelecom.

They grow closer. Wake up tangled together more often than not.

Still: Yuuri’s anxiety increases.

What Victor is expecting at Moscow Sheremetyevo International Airport after he and Yuuri touch down: some photographers, perhaps even a reporter or two. What Victor is not expecting: his name, shouted in girlish glee, and the collision that is Sofia Nikiforova practically tackling him right after they exit customs. She’s getting tall, his baby sister, and he releases Yuuri’s hand to gasp in surprise, to heft her up in the air and twirl her in a big circle.

“We thought we’d surprise you,” says his father, standing patiently alongside his mother, who’s helping babushka stand up from one of the benches.
“I love surprises,” Victor breathes, and he settles Sofia’s weight into the crook of his arm, even if arguably she’s gotten much too big for him to carry around like this, these days. She’s lean and ballerina-built, probably lighter than she really should be, which has him briefly glancing towards their mother. Mariya’s face betrays nothing. Still, Yuuri’s standing nearby, had been, until this moment, swept under Victor’s arm. “Sofia, this is …”

His little sister makes a face that Victor can’t entirely decipher, wrinkling her nose. “Yuuri Katsuki,” she says, and then adds, in French: “I know, Vitya.”

“I’m sure you do, birdie,” he coos, and somehow he manages to get Yuuri through introductions with all of the rest of his family. His mother’s English is good but not great; his grandmother’s practically non-existent. Sergei’s probably the most fluent, and he smiles just like Victor does when Yuuri cautiously shakes his hand.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Yuuri.”

“Dad.” Victor complains, in Russian, which briefly makes Sergei’s smile grow.

“Let’s get you out of here, eh?”

His arm aches, his head whirls. He finally sets Sofia down. “We are only here for the first day,” his mother says stiffly around foreign-sounding words, with an accent that manages to sound strangely French and curiously Russian at the same time. “Sofia can tell you why.”

He looks at his sister, curious.

“I got cast in The Nutcracker,” she chirps in French, pleased with herself. “We’re starting rehearsal.”

“You’re not going to practice your English, Sofi?” Mariya chides in Russian.

His sister pouts. “I don’t want to,” she replies back, switching effortlessly to Victor’s mother tongue while still managing to eye Yuuri with an air of suspicion. Victor decides that this is a problem he will tackle later, when he’s still attempting to process everything going on around him: Yuuri, his parents, his sister, his grandmother -- all in one place.

Thinking in two or three different languages.

“Walk, Vitenka,” his Grandmother chides.

“We got a driver,” Sergei says helpfully.
Victor meekly takes Yuuri’s hand to anchor himself back to reality and follows, even as his sister
snatches up his free one and babbles all the way to the car. She’s playing one of the other children,
she says, and she knows it’s December but Mama’s not sure Victor’s going to be skating in
Nationals anyway, so won’t he come?

*Of course I will,* he replies back, pointedly answering all of her questions in English. A passenger
van is waiting for them, and everyone piles in.

“You skate well,” Mariya tells Yuuri in pointed, flat English. “You studied ballet, yes?”

“I did. My teacher, Minako --”

“Okukawa?” Mariya inquires, which surprises even Victor.

“Yes.”

“That explains it.”

His grandmother reaches across with her cane and pokes Victor in the knee with it. “Yes,
Babushka?”

“What are they talking about?”

“Mama thinks Yuuri’s a good dancer,” Victor translates for his grandmother, and smiles through his
pride in that simple fact.

“Oh,” mutters Evgeniya, who fixes Yuuri with a long, piercing stare. Then she says this: “Vitenka,
try and marry this one.”

Sergei bursts into laughter; Sofia sulks; Mariya chides her; Yuuri looks lost. The car ride is twenty-
nine minutes of pure and utter chaos, and the hotel is not much better when they arrive. The
appropriate word is *swarmed;* Victor gets swarmed by an eager, adoring press outside the lobby, all
of them throwing out some variation of the same old questions: *Victor, are you really done with
skating? Victor, how long have you been dating Yuuri Katsuki?*

He’s only just begun to grind his teeth in the lobby because some idiot photographer has snapped a
photo of his parents and his sister, and because none of the reporters are asking anything about
Yuuri’s *skating* when Yuuri reaches over and squeezes his elbow. “Spend time with your family,” he
says. “I’ll get us checked in and meet you later tonight.”

“Youuri --” He wants, so very badly, to keep them all together, but Victor’s very unaccustomed to
having all of the things that he loves together in one single place.

“Victor. It’ll be okay.” Yuuri is such a pragmatist whenever he has the luxury of being outside of the
problem. “Text me somewhere to meet you all for dinner, okay?”

Victor sighs but concedes, and then he wrangles his family into the hotel restaurant for a very late
lunch, where they talk long after the servers have all taken away their plates and after Victor’s
charged the bill. Sofia tells him all about school, and her work at the dance studio, and what it was
like to make it through the fall auditions. Every time he tries to tell her about Japan a new story about
life in Paris emerges. “She’s missed you,” Sergei says quietly, which has the simultaneous effect of
making Victor feel guilty and helping him realize that Sofia is, perhaps, a little bit jealous of just how
much of his time Katsuki Yuuri gets.

She’s nine years old, too young to understand the way his father does. He’ll have to find a way.
“Are you going to go back out there and take any interviews?” His mother inquires idly, which means: *Victor, you’re going to go back out there and take a damn interview.* Worse, she’s backed up in this effort by his grandmother, who reminds him that she didn’t survive Stalin just to see her grandson shirk his duties as the hero of Russia.

“Fine,” he grumbles, and even though it’s getting dark outside he fetches his sunglasses from his jacket, puts them on along with the persona that is *Victor Nikiforov*, the world’s best figure skater. He makes a waiter bring him a coffee, something to sip at while he battles against jetlag and bullshit, and then he walks back into the war.

*How do you feel about returning to Russia? When will you return to skating?*

“Until the Grand Prix Final is over, I won’t comment on any future plans.” *My grandmother and a set of six year old triplets think I need to settle down.* “Right now, I see a lot of potential in Katsuki Yuuri’s skating.” He says it the Japanese way on purpose, right as Yuri Plisetsky walks in. “I’d like you all to focus on Yuuri at the Rostelecom Cup,” Victor says, and he counts down, expectant, for the burst of teenage fury this remark is going to bring.

A reporter beats him to the punch. “If the skater Yuuri has that much charisma, don’t you want to face him as a fellow competitor?”

Does he?

Victor stops to consider it. Realization hits him like a ton of bricks: oh *gods, yes* He does. It’s not something to ponder here, though, and so he deflects. “Hey, it’s Yura!”

Yuri is not playing the role of teenage rage-monster fast enough for Victor’s purposes, and so as the press shifts in recognition of Plisetsky, resettles around them both, Victor hooks an arm around Yurochka’s shoulders and tugs him close. “Hey,” he says, cheerfully, “did you all see the short program I put together for Yura?”

That does it. Yuri swats the coffee out of his hand, scowls at him. “Quit acting like you’re still the
They all sneak out separately to meet at one of Victor’s favorite restaurants in Moscow, a place called the Chestnaya Kukhnya, before it closes. Victor has not realized how much he’s missed sour cream and cabbage until exactly this moment, but jet lag’s too vicious for him to enjoy it properly. Yuuri’s less affected, admits that he snuck in a nap in their room. “I ran into Yurio, too.”

“Yeah? How’d that go?” Victor will never get tired of Yuuri’s smile, but he’s conscious of the way three other pairs of eyes watch him watch Yuuri.

“About how you’d expect,” Yuuri murmurs. “He says he’s going to make you stay in Russia.”

“Ohhhh,” Sofia hums, speaking English for the very first time. “Will you, if Yuuri loses?”

This is dangerous ground, and Victor’s almost too tired to tread it without stepping on a landmine. “Yuuri’s not going to lose, birdie,” Victor tells her gently. To soften the blow, he adds: “I bet if you behave yourself, though, Mama will consider letting you come and see us after he skates in Barcelona. Would you like that?”

Sofia debates, torn between her instinctive dislike of this man who’s stolen her brother’s heart and the promise of seeing him again soon. “Yes,” she decides, and immediately fixes her pout on Mariya. “Can I? Please?”

“Like Vitya says,” Mariya says archly. “If you behave.”

Sergei catches both Evgeniya and his son looking like they’re about to doze off in their chairs and signals for the check. “Vitenka has a long day tomorrow, and so does Yuuri, and it’s very late for little ducklings who are usually in bed by now,” he says, cheerful. “Let’s get everyone home for some rest, okay?”

Okay, Sofia agrees, but that doesn’t stop her from squeezing Victor tight in the elevator when they part ways at floor six and leave Victor and Yuuri headed for floor nine. They have a premium suite Victor knows Yuuri probably didn’t reserve; it’s because of his influence, no doubt, practically the
same room he’s always stayed in whenever he’s been in town.

“Your mother is beautiful. So is your sister. And you look just like your dad when he smiles…”

“They can be a lot,” Victor murmurs, stepping behind Yuuri to wrap him in his arms. In front of them the curtains are still open and Moscow twinkles, autumn-cold, dark. “... I’m glad they got to meet you,” he adds, and presses his lips to Yuuri’s shoulder, leaves his chin there. Yuuri says nothing, but after a moment more he turns, presses his lips to Victor’s, slow and searching.

“Don’t you miss them? Being in Japan?”

“I grew up with Yakov mostly,” Victor reminds him. They’ve been a long-distance family for quite some time, and while the bridges between them mended as he came into adulthood it hasn’t changed his habits: his love for his parents, for his sister, it’s always happened at a little bit of distance. Yuuri cradles his face, studies him like he’s not entirely convinced. “What I mean is that I’m used to missing them,” he tries to explain. “That sounds worse than it is, I promise. They always came to watch me skate, so I guess I should’ve expected that they’d come here.” Vasily has told him before that it’s a characteristic of depression to be a little bit blind to the ways he’s actually cherished, and this might be one of those little ways that Victor hasn’t been paying very much attention to his own life.

“My father was the first person I told, when I decided to come and coach you.” I love you, Victor wants to say, but instead his body betrays him, reminds him that he’s endured a ten hour flight today. At least this time he got them upgraded; for all of his complaining about Aeroflot, that commercial he appeared in that one time never fails to come in handy. Victor tries and fails to stifle his yawn; Yuuri ruffles his hair. “… because he’s more of a dreamer, I figured he’d support me,” Victor hums, letting his eyes drift shut. He loves it when Yuuri plays with his hair, like this, can’t help the way he leans in for more. “… Mama’s more pragmatic …”

“Are you going to fall asleep standing like this?”

“Maybe,” Victor admits.

“Come on. Time for bed.”
The following morning, Seung-gil Lee skates the most technically sound, artless mambo that Victor’s ever seen, even if he only sees pieces of it from televisions in the back of the arena. It’s meant to be sexy, he supposes, all speed and polish, but it’s hard to believe that Seung-gil really feels this program, and he’s well behind Yuuri’s score from the Cup of China. Emil is due up next; a Czech skater who’s on track to keep up with him in the race for more jumps, and Victor ponders this fact as he walks alongside Yuuri.

John Jacob Whatever His Name Is is clapping, shouts at them both for applause. “Sorry,” Yuuri apologizes. “I didn’t catch that.”

The Canadian saunters up to them. “Victor did the same jump at last year’s exhibition,” he points out, breezing right past Yuuri to hover closer to Victor’s face than Victor would really prefer at this precise moment. “I want to see that again!”

“I don’t recall,” Victor lies perfectly and tonelessly. Of course he recalls. It’s just that Yuuri has a warm-up to finish, and he’s got no patience for talking to idiots. By the time they’re rinkside, Michele Crispino is finishing up his program. Yuuri strips out of his JSF jacket; Victor tightens his laces, the kind of thing he’d never have let another person do because the feel and the fit of the skates are just that important. It’s touching that trust lives between them in this way: that Yuuri knows Victor will take care of him, that Victor knows Yuuri will speak up if the laces aren’t just right.

Mickey takes second place and the crowd stirs to life because Yuuri takes the ice. It’s Victor’s name they chant, though; like they’ve always done every time he skates on home ice. Victor. Victor. Victor. Victor would rather hear Yuuri’s name, but this is also another kind of love, and so he turns to acknowledge it, laughs and waves as Yuuri skates back to him.

Then Yuuri grabs an entire fistful of his Etro tie, and yanks him close. “The performance has already begun, Victor.”

Victor is reasonably sure he’s never been this turned on in his entire life, and that is saying something, considering that Katsuki Yuuri is also responsible for the memorable incident which currently sits in second place. “You’re right.”
“Don’t worry,” says Yuuri. “I’ll show my love to the whole of Russia.”

Please do, Victor thinks. Yuuri blows him a kiss from center ice and then launches himself into the Eros program with more fervor than ever before. His salchow is amazing, his combination flawless, and as he swings into his closing pose, the crowd rises to acknowledge what Victor already knows: the man in front of them is amazing, completely deserving of the standing ovation he receives. Yuuri gathers a few of the stuffed cushions thrown onto the ice for him, skates up to a sour-faced Yuri Plisetsky.

“Out of my way, pig,” says Plisetsky, and before Victor can decide whether or not he wants to admire Yuri’s newfound determination or murder him, Yuuri’s made the decision for him.

“Th-this is Yurio’s real agape,” he mutters, shocked, and then turns to look at Victor with wide eyes. Victor reads what he finds there for what it is: enthusiasm, and the coin of his feelings, thrown up in the air, settles on the same side.

Yuri’s come to make this a contest. Good.

From the sound of the crowd, Yuri’s got a whole crew of howling teenage fans. Their voices and the rest of the audience’s mingle when Yuuri beats his previous personal best and sails easily ahead of Seung-gil into first place. Feeling extra mischievous because he’s practically home, because so many of these fans are his fans, Victor kneels in the kiss and cry, and kisses Yuuri’s skate.

“Yurio!” Yuuri sounds so happy. “Davai!” Davai, in Russian. Yuri looks like a cat who’s just been thrown into a bathtub. Victor decides to make it worse.

“Yurio,” he echoes, “Ganbatte!”

Yuri practically shakes with rage as he sails away from Yakov and into his starting position. Victor leads Yuuri back into the wings of the arena, catching glimpses of his performance on the television. The camera angle swings wide once, revealing Yakov and Lilia, standing apart and unbowed, and he wonders for a moment and a moment only about whether or not the broken thing between them -- whatever it was that he was too preoccupied to even notice -- will ever mend. He won’t get time to ponder the thought; Yuuri has interviews to give when Plisetsky’s score comes through.

Yuri is in second place. Yuuri has surprised himself again. Jay-whoever will close out the short program with the most obnoxious song Victor’s ever had the pleasure of ignoring on the radio dozens of times, but Yuuri won’t watch, even if it hurts Victor someplace deep inside to watch a performance this manic and egoist. It’s a fucking ugly program, and his costume’s this horrific lilac thing, and the judges in Russia are clearly giving too much favor to his quadruple lutz when they put him into first place.

Yuuri hasn’t noticed, Victor realizes, because Yuuri is on the phone, wearing an expression of shock that immediately morphs into determination. “Victor,” he says. “Go back to Japan right now. I’ll face the free skate tomorrow on my own.”

What?

Yuuri, still holding the phone, steps up to him to explain: Makkachin has gotten into some steamed buns and Mari found her choking, took her directly to the vet. They’re doing everything they can, but...

Victor realizes this mustn’t register on an emotional level and immediately shoves his reaction away into the big bag of feelings he got used to carrying around for years. “I’m not leaving you here,” he
says, resolutely. Tomorrow’s free skate will determine whether or not Yuuri makes it into the Grand Prix Final, whether or not he’ll fulfill the promise he’s been making to the Japanese press and to himself about winning with the power of love.

“Victor, you have to go. Listen. Last year, at the Grand Prix Final, I --” Yuuri’s face crumples, for a moment. “I had a dog, too, okay? And he died. He died and I wasn’t home, and I regretted it and --”

Oh, Victor realizes. Suddenly the difference between Yuuri’s short program and his free skate is no longer a mystery. He hasn’t really thought about it in months, but now that they’re having this conversation, he can’t help but think back to that hotel in Sochi, to the way Yuuri had gone from handsy and cheerful to utterly miserable in just a matter of minutes.

All the more reason to not leave Yuuri now, if that's what he's remembering. “I need to stay here with you.”

“But you have to go back!”

“Like I said.” Victor repeats himself again, tries to stay calm. The more they keep rehashing this discussion the harder it’s going to be to keep pretending that he’s not upset, that the idea of Makkachin sick and alone in another country doesn’t bother him. “I can’t.”

He puts a hand to his forehead, looks anywhere else, like the arena’s suddenly going to provide him with a solution. He meets Yakov Feltsman’s steely gaze. “Thank God,” breathes Victor, and though it’s tempting to run, he makes himself walk, plants his hands on Yakov’s shoulders while Yakov fixes him with an unflinching stare. “You’re the only coach for me.”

“What?” Yakov’s incredulous, and nearly smiles. “You want to come back?”

“Can you be Yuuri’s coach tomorrow, just for one day?”

This is not the question anyone anticipated.

“Huh?” mumbles Yuuri Katsuki.

“Huh,” grunts Yuri Plisetsky.

“Huh?!” roars Yakov Feltsman.

Yakov decides this is a conversation he and Victor are going to have privately, and because private is not a place easily found if you’re Yakov Feltsman and Victor Nikiforov, standing inside a major skating competition in Moscow, they wind up having it in a broom closet, of all places. Victor explains the situation, and then explains it again.

Yakov is unconvinced. Possibly even unmoved. “Victor, you owe it to that boy to stay here and coach him.” This is the exact moment when Victor runs out of patience, when he can no longer pretend like he’s not about to have a meltdown in public.

“He doesn’t want me to be here for my own sake,” Victor snaps. “You’re right. I’m not the best coach. If I was, I’d ignore the fact that my lover wants me to leave, and I’d let my dog die alone in another country and I’d stay here to make sure my skater excels. I’d make myself miserable to attain that end, and if I felt particularly vindictive about it I’d probably grind you and Yura both under the heel of my foot for failing to recognize my decades of sacrifice.” Lover. That’s what Yuuri is now, unquestionably, and Victor realizes that he’s that before he’s anything else, before he’s a friend, before he’s a skater, a student. This is why he’s in a fucking broom closet, having this awful conversation. His eyes narrow. “But I’m not that person. You are. And I’m sorry, Yakov, but
because I’m not you, I can’t do what you’ve done for all these years. Skating is not more important than my fucking life.”

He sees the damage he’s done, but at the same time he feels immensely validated by it. Yakov has no idea how deeply his criticism cut in Beijing, and while Yuuri may be helping Victor rediscover the light side of love, he’s never once forgotten the dark parts, the way caring about a person tacitly hands them the ability to do harm.

For once, Yakov has no retort. Yakov is staring at him and shaking ever-so-slightly with that ill-temper they both share. Victor’s anger evaporates as quickly as it came, and he reaches forward to do something he does very rarely. He twists Yakov up in a hug. It’s rare not because Victor isn’t affectionate; he is and always has been too hungry for touch. It’s rare because Yakov and Lilia are people who only very rarely expose themselves to sentiment. “I’m sorry,” he says, and he means it. Anger has shone a cold, hot light on the truth: on all those years ago when a childless Yakov and Lilia opened the doors of their home, on every year Yakov spent carrying him forward into greatness, every time he proved he might’ve been a great father, if only.

He sees with great and terrible clarity the way Yakov Feltsman has ruined his own life for the skaters he raises up into glory. Yakov, who has never missed a practice, an event, a contest. Yakov who was stern when he was younger, but not bitter, the way he is now.

“... I never understood until just now,” Victor apologizes again. He’s not sure he’s ever apologized to Yakov. Yakov’s heavy hand curls into his shoulder but the indignity of commenting on his failed marriage is too much. It’s something they’re never going to talk about again, Victor realizes, past this moment.

“I’m sorry to ask it of you one more time,” he says, very quietly. He’s spent years taking advantage of the way he’s practically Yakov’s son, and at the start of this season he walked away from all of that sacrifice without properly acknowledging how much he’s in this man’s debt.

“One day, Vitya,” says Yakov, gruff. “One day.”

It’s another one of those love things, Victor realizes, like his father, his mother, his sister. This is the first time Victor’s ever heard it from Yakov, in Yakov’s own way; the first time he’s ever understood.

“Thank you,” he breathes, and blinks away tears.

“Quit being such a baby,” Yakov grunts. “The press is going to notice.”
this chapter turned out to be about twice as long as i expected and it also ruined me on at least three distinct levels all of which i'm sure we'll discuss in the comments.

i'm not sure whether or not there's going to be additional explicit scenes in the story. it happens here because it's incredibly important to victor, and because there's some of yuuri's own experiences that they're dealing with / working through in the scene. i'll maybe write more about it later when i'm not like, dying from how long this took to put together today. /dead. rip in pieces sim, you did this to yourself/
The drive to the hotel is remarkably understated.

For a fleeting moment, earlier in the day, Victor had planned for this. He’d pictured the instant the door would close behind them, and the driver would turn around to attend to the road -- Victor’s too much of a celebrity in Russia, relies on private car services -- where he might grab a fistful of Yuuri Katsuki’s JSF jacket and drag him in for a kiss. None of that is happening because he’s on the phone with Aeroflot, who do not understand the gravity of his current circumstances. He accepts the one seat they can offer, in coach, in the back of the plane.

It’s an overnight flight. *Makkachin’s going to die while you’re in the air,* whispers an insidious voice that sounds like his but isn’t.

Victor’s head is a mess; they ought to be talking about Yuuri’s short program, the other skaters, what he needs to do to be ready for tomorrow, how to handle his anxiety heading into his free skate. *Tomorrow* is the word his thoughts keep catching on, because tomorrow Yuuri will be skating alone, without his support. Tomorrow he may be trying to figure out how to bring the body of his dog back to St. Petersburg because that same part of him, cold and dark and miserable, whispers that’s where she belongs; not alone and scared and dying in Hasetsu with a vet that she doesn’t know and that he has no reason to trust.

Tomorrow is a word he’s been using to think about a future that always has Yuuri in it, which has been foolish. Tomorrow Yuuri will skate without him in Moscow. Tomorrow Victor will be alone in Hasetsu.

Tomorrow, he realizes, is not a guarantee. It is not a promise.

“Victor?”

*Breathe.* He glances at Yuuri, swiftly, and then he has to make himself look outside the car, count passing lampposts. Yuuri does not need the additional burden of Victor’s free-fall into a depressive state right now, not when the most important skate of his season waits for him, the last hurdle in front of the goal they’ve been chasing all season long. “I’m on the last flight out,” Victor murmurs. He doesn’t mention the terrible seat. “Eleven o’clock.”
Objectively, he has known for a while that this could happen, that he could be off skating in a competition or a show, doing a photoshoot, and he’d get a call. Strange that he somehow thought his intellectual assent to Makkachin’s mortality meant that he’d be emotionally ready for it. That telling himself she’s older than she used to be could prepare him for this moment, that he’d be able to power through it the way he’s been gritting his teeth through one medal after another: without failure and without joy.

He misses Yuuri’s subtle frown, but he what he doesn’t miss is the way Yuuri moves closer and takes one of his hands, the way Yuuri softly kisses his cheek.

It’s not even six yet. Victor has hours of this agony to endure.

When they arrive at the hotel, his family’s waiting placidly in the lobby. They’d made dinner plans, earlier, but Victor can see judging by the takeout bags sitting unopened on the lounge table that they’ve already made alternate arrangements. He watches what happens next like someone who exists outside of his own body; Sergei stands up, walks briskly his way, and immediately envelops him in the kind of hug Victor hasn’t gotten since he won a gold medal in Sochi. This is not to say that his father doesn’t hug him; Sergei’s tactile, the way he is, and so once Victor cleared his most turbulent teenage years they were able to reinstate touch as a gesture. This is something measured in a kind of protective ferocity that Sergei rarely displays.

He stands in the circle of those arms for a moment and lets them transport him back to that day years ago in St. Petersburg, nothing more than a petulant teenager going fine, I’ll take the stupid dog, I guess while Makkachin stared at him with big, frightened doe eyes from the wrong side of a cage.

“She’s going to be fine, Vitya,” his father says, very quietly.

Victor feels very young and very small. “How can you say that?”

Sergei glances back at his wife, watching as Mariya helps Evgeniya up to her feet and directs Sofia to help carry their bags. “That’s my job in this family,” his father replies, and then he smiles, heart-shaped, and steps back to make room for Yuuri.

“We thought it’d be better to order in. We’ve already checked out; would it be too much trouble to use your room for dinner?”

Yuuri turns the color of Victor’s favorite Team Russia jacket, and then presses a hand to the bridge of his nose, flustered. It’s objectively adorable; if Victor were in a better mood, he’d probably chuckle. “That’s fine,” Yuuri says, in a wavery voice which Victor imagines is Yuuri’s exact tone for is this real life. Because nobody else has been to their room, the illusion that it might be a double instead of a suite is still a plausible reality.

When he opens the door, it’s going to be very apparent that they’re sharing a bed.

Nonetheless, the door opens.
This is how he finds them all arranged in a loose circle on the floor around Evgeniya and Mariya’s feet, since the two matrons of the household share similar perches on the loveseat. Sergei tells Yuuri stories of Makkachin’s early days, and Yuuri, whose knee keeps bumping against Victor’s, anchoring him to reality, gently shifts the conversation further back into Victor’s childhood and then absorbs every detail with a strange, adoring light in his eyes. Mariya translates on the couch for her mother, who snorts inelegantly: “That dog was trouble in my house,” insists the woman who still has at least three cats and who probably feeds stays. “Not half so much trouble as you.”

Then Sofia says this, pointedly, in English:

“I don’t know why you’re being so nice to him,” she chides their father. “It’s his fault Makkachin’s in Japan in the first place.” Victor sees two things at once: he sees the cold, warning flash of his mother’s eyes, and he sees the way the blow’s landed on Yuuri. Objectively, he knows what this is, remembers that stage of experimenting with being cruel, of discovering his own power.

It doesn’t make it any easier to endure right now. “Sofia,” he says, before his mother can, already getting to his feet. “Come with me to get some ice.”

She knows she’s crossed a line, but she tests to see how far over she is by making a face and flashing a pretty pout. “Can’t the hotel people do that?”

Victor is already on his feet. “Now, birdie.” That the fates are unkind enough to force him to be dealing with this emergency and his sister’s jealousy on the same day is not lost on Victor. Sofia glances at her parents for one last chance of rescue, but none of them are going to intervene, and so Victor grabs the ice bucket and escorts her outside.

“I don’t like him.”

“You haven’t bothered to get to know him,” Victor points out, slowly practicing his elementary Japanese by counting to ten in his head to control his temper while they walk down the hall. He has no idea where the ice machine is or if it even exists, but he recalls a pair of vending machines not too far from the elevator and sets that point as their destination.

“I don’t want to get to know him,” protests his sister. Her blue eyes have begun to sparkle with tears, and in this situation Victor has about as much hope of using the I’m bad with people crying in front of me excuse as he’s previously had in a carpark in Beijing. “Papa says you’re in love with him and that you’re not sure when you’re coming back,” she sniffles. The rest of it comes out in a blur of words, so much French that Victor has a momentary struggle keeping up: “Papa says people do
incredible things when they’re in love but I think it’s stupid and everyone says I’m wrong every time I say that. Mama says he keeps doing well every time I ask and that means you’re just going to keep staying in stupid Japan with that stupid boy and, -- and -- and --”

“And it’s very far away,” Victor murmurs carefully.

His sister just gives a miserable nod. “You didn’t even come see us, this summer.”

Ah. There it is. The heart of the matter. Victor chews on the inside of his cheek for a moment, fighting the big brother urge to provide immediate comfort, debating what to say. “Can I tell you a secret?” He asks, and when his sister reluctantly nods, Victor leans against the wall, slouches so that he’s closer to eye-level. “You’re right,” he says carefully. “It’s one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.” Sofia’s clever enough to sense a trap, and she’s right to eye him a little suspiciously, waiting for the other shoe to fall. “I didn’t know if he’d want me to be his coach when I left,” Victor adds, glancing surreptitiously down the hall for any other members of the press, ISU officials, anyone not entitled to this much information about his personal life. “Much less even like me.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“Because I needed to find out.” Christophe Giacometti and Yakov Feltsman are the only two people Victor knows who have been privy to the entire sequence of events: the Grand Prix Final, the banquet, the stretch of silence that followed and the eventual posting of Yuuri skating his program, the response to a question Victor hadn’t entirely known that he’d been asking. There’s not a good way for him to explain this to Sofia, not until she’s older, and so he doesn’t try. “I didn’t want to regret not trying,” he adds, and he turns to the vending machine, scanning its contents. It’s strangely comforting to know what every item is, after months in Japan.

“When I was your age, all I wanted was to win a gold medal,” Victor says. “Then I won them and I didn’t think there was anything left to want.”

Sofia turns big, pale eyes on him, pouts. “You could have come back to stay with us.”

There is no explaining to this child why that was never a possibility: Sofia is growing up in the perfect Paris flat that Victor has never once really lived in, and even if she sticks with ballet the trajectory of her life will never diverge from their family’s as sharply as his once did. Victor likes Paris quite a lot, might even be able to live there if he really tried. It’s been so long, though, since seeing his family on a daily basis was part of his reality that it never once presented itself as a possible solution for his growing restlessness. He imagines that none of them would really know what to do, trying to actually reassemble a norm that’s been disrupted for something like fifteen years. He’s reasonably sure Sofia wouldn’t like it nearly so much as she thinks, since she’s already proving to be a little reluctant to share the spotlight. “But I’m really happy where I am now, Lastochka. For now. Can’t you be a little happy for me, too?”

Her stubborn silence has Victor cursing the family genes. “I’ll tell you something else, though, okay? Do you know what matters to me just as much as whether or not you like Yuuri?”

“... No,” she admits, and uneasily toes the ground, flexes and stretches an ankle.

“I want Yuuri to like you, too.” There’s a little bit of a threat here, one that only Victor knows is empty. He has gotten to see the patient, abiding way with which Yuuri endures the antics of the Nishigori triplets, who might be some of his biggest fans, but who are also some of his biggest saboteurs, talented as they are in disruption and chaos. “I want him to love you almost as much as I do.”
“Almost?”

“Mhmm,” Victor confirms, and he finally drops a few rubles into the machine, punches a selection for those chocolates he used to eat when he was younger, a bar of Алёнка chocolates, staring young and baby-faced back at him from the other side of the glass. “Because I don’t think anyone can love you as much as Mama, Papa, and I do, Lastochka.” He scoops out the chocolates, pretends like he really intends to just get them for himself. “He won’t get a chance, though, if you keep being so mean to him.”

“I can be a little bit nicer.” She seems to be weighing the pros and cons. Most of the time, Sofia reminds him more of their father than their mother, but tonight’s behavior shows a lot of Mariya’s influence. “I guess.”

“Good,” says Victor, who’s too tired to continue this conversation. The emergency several thousand miles away keeps disrupting his thoughts, fills his brain with a kind of static he hasn’t really endured since he was a teenager. “Chocolate?”

When they arrive back in the room, he and his mother carry on an entire conversation without words: she looks pointedly at the candy Sofia is munching on, and he shrugs, artlessly. He’s just the big brother. Discipline is his parents’ problem. He sits back down next to Yuuri, who looks a little more composed, and brushes his hand along Yuuri’s back. It’s a reassuring gesture, but it also lets him read the tension that Yuuri sometimes hides when he’s being over-polite. This is one of those times. He can feel the way Yuuri’s begun to internalize in the rigidity of his spine.

Honestly, if he had some way of taking the same measurement of himself, Victor thinks he’d fare no better. He slips an arm over Yuuri’s shoulders, and glances at his sister, who frowns and clears her throat.

“Mr. Katsuki.”

“Aaa -- Yes?”

She doesn’t apologize, but she does hold out one of the little chocolates, just like her brother. “Chocolate?”

They leave for the airport just after, a departure that consists mostly of hugs and handshakes. Sofia makes another effort; reminds Yuuri that it’s his job to make sure Victor gets to Barcelona so that she can see her brother again. Victor’s mother kisses his cheek, and then moves to Yuuri to give him another one of those assessing looks. He blinks and blushes subtly while she inspects, but doesn’t
look away, and Victor nearly smiles when his mother pats Yuuri’s cheek once without a word. Then Mariya turns to follow Sofia out past Sergei, who holds the door open until his mother-in-law clears it.

Just like that, they’re all gone, steeping the room in a blessed silence that Victor has needed for hours. He sinks onto the edge of the bed. Exhales a long, heavy breath. Victor needs to pack, but at this moment all he’s inclined to do is to open his suitcase, sweep his belongings off the bathroom counter and into it, and then throw his suit on top. Wrinkles and spills can become the problem of a laundry service. Hell. Aeroflot can lose the bag. None of it matters.

Yuuri steps forward, bracketed by Victor’s knees, and slips his fingers into Victor’s hair, sweeping soft, idle circles against his skull. “Vitya,” he says, very softly. “What do you need?”

Victor twines his arms around Yuuri’s hips and leans in, turning his cheek against the plane of Yuuri’s abdomen. He says nothing because he doesn’t trust his voice.

Besides: everything he needs is right here.

Yuuri makes him change, helps him pack, wraps a soft, olive-colored scarf on Victor’s shoulders over his peacoat before Victor can protest. A glance out the window reveals why: outside the sky is dark, and it’s starting to snow. Victor used to love watching the first snow of the season, but now all he can think about is what he’s going to do if he gets to Sheremetyevo and the runway’s not clear. Strange: the possibility of a canceled flight is equal parts horror and relief. It’s not too likely, he thinks; this is a soft kind of snow, the sort that reminds him of his arrival in Hasetsu.

He shouldn’t be thinking about the weather. He’s Yuuri’s coach, and he’s leaving him here to face his free skate alone. Victor counts down floors in the elevator, breathing through static to try to think of something to say, some last talisman he can offer in his absence.

They part in the lobby. Victor tells Yuuri to ask Yakov for help with anything he doesn’t understand, and then he reaches forward, gives him one last hug. “If you’re in trouble, just hug him,” Victor says, which sounds like the worst advice because Yakov Feltman does not seem like the sort of man who is susceptible to hugs. Victor has learned a thing or two, these past twenty four hours, about the nature of Yakov’s heart and the way in which it works. “He’ll help you.” He’s sure of this. “Sorry, Yuuri,” Victor apologizes, even though Yuuri’s told him not to. No one is to blame here. “Even if I’m not here,” he adds, “I’ll always be with you in spirit.”

Always.

He wanders, listless, through one of those little convenience stores in the airport, catches sight of his own face in the top corner of a tabloid cover in a triptych consisting of himself, Yuuri, and Saga. Wonderful. Objectively, Victor knows he shouldn’t read it, but he’s not in the best headspace, and he doesn’t give a single fuck about the cashier watching him pick it up and flip to the story. There’s a two page spread of the kiss from the Cup of China and a single quote from Saga, the kind of offhand remark made to paparazzi who evidently caught up to her in the Italian alps. What he reads surprises him: I had no idea. I think he’ll be a very good coach. Some part of Victor wants to call bullshit but he knows Saga too well: she doesn’t answer questions when she doesn’t feel like it, and she never lies. Apparently when pressed for details, she had this to add: I have my own season to get ready for now so it’s not really a focus. If what you say is true, I’m glad he’s found someone to love.

He puts the magazine away. Stews. Calls Yakov one last time, which is a conversation that is very different from his last departure from Russia, and yet oddly reminiscent of it. He makes a few final texts: Yuri, Mila, Georgi; mostly to explain his absence and to ask them to look out for Yuuri.
Then he digs through his email, because he deleted Saga’s phone number ages ago, unfollowed and unsubscribed, searches until he can send a note off:

Then the wheels are up. He’s sandwiched between a Russian business man and a Japanese grandmother, and he’s pretty sure a little girl two rows up has recognized him, because she keeps twisting and climbing over the seat to have a look.

Victor spends twelve miserable hours making a very determined effort to not fall apart, including a layover in Seoul on the way to Fukuoka in which he wanders the airport in a fugue state, feeling lost and a little bit like he’s slowly starting to lose control of his own limbs.

By the time he makes it to Hasetsu, Victor has read every one of Mari’s text messages several times through, has googled treatments for intestinal blockages in dogs, and has messaged Yuuri to note that he’s made it back to Yu-Topia more or less in one piece. He's whole physically, at least. And on time.
Mari picks him up at the train station, takes him to the vet, where he meets a kind looking woman who Mari introduces as Kurosawa-sensei. The doctor is polite enough to wait through introductions. “Nikiforov-san, I’m sorry we needed to disrupt your travel plans with such bad news. I’m happy to report that Makkachin seems to be doing much better this morning, though there’s a few things we’d like to see from her before we release her. I think she’ll probably be ready to go home a little later this morning.”

“Can I see her?”

“Of course.”

Makkachin is lethargic, sulking inside an extra-large veterinary cage with her head in a big, protective cone. There’s still an IV catheter attached to one of her front legs, but she’s alive, and as soon as he breathes Makka, she lifts her head, thumps her tail, and whines. Victor doesn’t ask for permission; he opens the door to the cage and cradles her sweet, soft face.

He met his dog under circumstances not so different from this. “Makkachin,” he chides, without teeth because he’s already kissed her big, fluffy forehead, and he’s already accepting sloppy, messy licks without paying attention to where they land. “You were a very bad girl, and you made everyone very worried.”

She adds a messy, wet stripe up the bridge of his nose, which is the moment when Victor realizes that this poodle, the creature who has been with him through every low point, is going to be fine. If there are tears, they get lost into her fur, and both the veterinarian and Yuuri’s sister are much too circumspect to say anything about it. They bring her home in the afternoon, and it’s not until he’s got Makkachin settled back down at Yu-Topia that Victor realizes he never paid the bill.

All his body wants to do now is sleep, but Victor forces himself into the kitchen, finds Toshiya, who stubbornly stands his ground on the topic of reimbursement. **Makkachin was in our care. It’s our responsibility.**

“I’m sure it was expensive, let me --”

“Victor,” Toshiya finally says, suddenly stern. “With everything you have done for Yuuri, this is the very least we can do in return.”

He tells himself he’s going to stay awake to watch the skating live feed; there’s ice dancing before the men’s rounds, after all, and he knows some of those people. He fails miserably, falls asleep like he did on his arrival to Hasetsu on the tatami mat in the dining room.

Mari shakes him awake, much later, when it’s time to watch the men skate.
He watches Emil Nekola’s space-aged program from the deepest pit of his jetlag. Nekola’s a jumping phenomenon, but he doesn’t have the stamina to make the program last, and his step sequence doesn’t have the artistic merit of many of the other skaters. In spite of the upbeat, dance-ready music, Victor catches himself about to nod off onto Mari’s shoulder, which is as good a sign as any that Nekola won’t be advancing to the Grand Prix Final, even if he can expect to see him again at Europeans.

Wait, no: he won’t be seeing Emil at Europeans at all, because he’s not going to be there. Victor’s still puzzling over that realization when Michele Crispino takes the ice in a costume that makes Victor think of Lambiel. This is a program which catches his attention: there’s a contemplative quality he’s never seen in Crispino’s skating before, and a longing that’s the kind of thing he expects to see from Georgi, not from the Italians. His phone vibrates; Mila, this time, who has an opinion to share: *Italians are weird sometimes, you know that?*

It’s a story he’ll get from her later, when he can manage to care more. Michele comes just short of 200 points, sets a new personal best, and gets mauled by his sister in the Kiss & Cry. Seung-gil Lee skates next, but falls on his first jump. The rest of the program is decent but unremarkable, and the standings reflect that change. He leaves the Kiss & Cry without any show of emotion whatsoever, as far as Victor can tell, although halfway around the world Katsuki Yuuri witnesses him cry.
Yuri Plisetsky skates next. Victor’s been watching the video of the Appassionato program all season, keeping an eye on his development and monitoring for Lilia’s influence. There’s no mistaking it here: she’s in every one of Yuri’s perfect extensions, and his spirals and step sequences all reflect the unforgiving force of everything Lilia Baronovskaya thinks is beautiful.

“He’s changed the jump sequence,” Victor tells Mari, the moment he recognizes the change. It’ll be impressive if he pulls it off. Victor’s not sure he can. It’s exactly the sort of decision he cautioned Yuri against when he was still in the juniors, the sort of thing that’s going to take more out of his body than he needs to be asking at this exact moment in his career. It’s a fierce, impatient decision, made by a teenager starving for success and it reminds him of — oh. It reminds him of himself. Yura ...

Victor doesn’t miss the brief flash of Yakov patting an unexpectedly watery-eyed Lilia on the shoulder, smiles in spite of himself. Perhaps there’s still hope for the old man after all. Yurio’s collapsed on the ice, and he’s just a tiny .13 points away from breaking the 200 mark, has set a new personal best and no doubt gotten his ticket to Barcelona stamped with a flourish. He’s about to send Plisetsky a message of congratulations, but Victor’s phone falls idle in his lap because it’s Yuuri’s turn and suddenly his heart is in his throat.

He feels the accidental single in Yuuri’s first combination jump like he’s skated it himself, knows exactly what it’s like to pop off the ice like that, to catch the bad side of an edge and not have any alternatives other than just the one rotation. He also knows Yuuri tends to flub his jumps when there’s too much on his mind.

“I should be there,” he whispers, miserable, and Mari reminds him: he wanted you to be here.

Yuuri fights through his next jump, gets enough rotations that he’ll be credited for it. The triple loop is two-footed, but his triple axel’s as gorgeous as ever, and his triple flip comes off clean. Victor squints at his face on the feed, tries to read what Yuuri might be thinking. The next combination comes off perfectly, and then Yuuri launches himself into the last step sequence. It’s nothing like what Lilia has choreographed for Plisetsky. Objectively, it’s harder, Victor’s working with a stronger skater, but it’s also objectively gentler on the eyes, expresses Yuuri’s beauty better: the slow sort that comes softly and gently, the kind that has built a home inside his heart.
What should be a quadruple flip becomes a triple-triple combination, a good choice to recover some technical points. Yuuri has to save it with the brush of a hand but it’s a pragmatic choice. Victor knows what Yakov does as Yuuri heads into the Kiss and Cry; he knows that Yuuri is not going to place above Crispino, and he knows that they need to practice more alternative jump sequences, just in case.

One of the triplets tugs on his sleeve, and asks a question in Japanese that Victor can’t answer. Yuuko looks apologetic. “Loop wants to know if Yuuri’s going to the Grand Prix Final.”

Victor taps his chin, contemplates. “Probably,” he admits. Then he realizes he actually has to root for JJ in order for that to occur, at least insomuch as JJ needs to keep Michele in third to ensure the tiebreaker falls in Yuuri’s favor.

The universe has been very unkind to him, in the past 24 hours.

“So long as the Canadian doesn’t mess up.”

“Oh, you mean JJ?”


Minako explains that the Japanese commentators are making a big deal about JJ’s skate being nearly as difficult as his own programs, which Victor simply shrugs off. He’s pretty sure if he ever had a chance to skate with that arrogant fool again he’d win by a wide margin out of sheer spite, at this point, and anyway, it doesn’t matter: he’s Yuuri’s coach.

*So why was he thinking about Europeans earlier? Worlds?*

It’s true that this program has the highest technical difficulty of all of the ones registered at Rostelecom, and true to form Jean-Jacques skates it cleanly and confidently with great quads and two strong combinations.

It’s strong skating. It’s not as beautiful as Yuuri’s.

“He’s going to Barcelona,” Victor confirms, before the scores are even in, and he ignores the erupting chaos of the house long enough to text Yuuri: *Congratulations. Call me when you’re out of interviews?*

In his head he compiles a list of finalists: Otabek Altin, Christophe Giacometti, Phichit Chulanont, Yuri Plisetsky, Jean-Jacques Leroy, Yuuri Katsuki. Chulanont’s the weakest of them technically, but he’s seen Altin, Leroy, and Giacometti on the podium before at last year’s Grand Prix and then again at Worlds, and Plisetsky’s been grabbing medals in every event this year.

It’s a tough field.
Victor calls. It goes more or less how he expects: *I feel like a fraud,* admits Yuuri, from the placid quiet of his hotel room. *Qualifying on a technicality like that after Mickey made the podium.* He sounds wrung out and weary, and so Victor reminds him of his victory earlier in the season, points out that if the Cup of China and Rostelecom happened in reverse order it’d be much easier to acknowledge that the system is working the way it should and has progressed the right skater.

“Yakov really lit into me in the Kiss and Cry,” Yuuri murmurs, distant, and Victor wishes he was there to twine his arms over Yuuri’s shoulders, to draw him back into an embrace.

“He does that with people he likes,” Victor replies mildly. Sitting in his inbox is an email from Yakov with a list of commentary written up in shorthand, which is at once more than he expected and yet also precisely what he should have known to expect. “Yura said something about katsudon pirozhki?”
“Yeah …” A pause. “His grandfather made them. They’re really good. He was pretty upset that JJ beat him even after he got a personal best, reconfiguring his program like that.”

“I’m not sure it’s safe for him to skate it that way.”

“At least he knows he left all he had out on the ice.”

That’s the voice Victor hates: the one that Yuuri picks up when he’s begun to lie to himself about who he really is and how much he’s truly capable of. “Yuuri,” he admonishes gently. He’s still under-equipped for conversations like this, slowly coming to terms with the fact that there’s no easy fix that will make Yuuri see himself the way Victor sees him. “If you really did that, what would be left to make you want to come back the next time?” Hypocrite, Victor accuses himself, reminded of the conversation he’s just had with Yakov in a broom closet about his dumpster fire of a life. When Yuuri’s silence persists, he changes tactics. “Makkachin misses you. Do you know what she told me earlier?”

Yuuri heaves a sigh, but Victor hears its fond notes. “No. What did she tell you?”

Victor grins. “She said: Yuuri would let me out of this ridiculous hat, Vitya.” He glances across the room at the dog, still in a little bit of a drug-induced haze.

“I’m so glad she’s okay.”

“Me too,” Victor breathes. When he gets off the phone it’s all a little too much: the crash of relief over Yuuri’s qualification half a world away, and the reality of his poodle, still a living, breathing thing both send him into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Everything is clearer in the morning when he wakes. Victor joins Toshiya for breakfast, thumbing through a reservation he has yet to complete on his phone. “I want to stay with Yuuri for a few days in Fukuoka.”

He wants Yuuri to take a few days off to rest and recover, wants him to actually enjoy his birthday, wants them to spend some time together in quiet and privacy. Still, admitting this to Toshiya is more or less confessing the thing they’ve all been treading around since Beijing; the new normal of Yuuri coming into his room at night, the way they walk, sometimes, arm in arm or hand in hand. He’s not really asking for permission. Still, there’s a part of Victor that wants to do this right, so maybe it’s approval he’s looking for, and maybe that’s why he asks the question anyway:

“... Would that be alright?”

Toshiya turns another page over in the paper, sips his coffee. “I’ll let Hiroko know.”

Yuuri texts him from Seoul to let him know his plane’s on time and to give Victor the Shinkansen schedule, letting him know when he thinks he’ll arrive in Hasetsu. Victor has already rented a car. He makes the drive parallel to the train line with Makkachin buckled into the passenger seat, watches the ocean and the countryside pass by in equal measure while he listens to one of his father’s more recent recordings: Beethoven’s eighth. He stops long enough to check in at the Hotel Marinoa Resort, pays his pet fee, heads to the airport. Makkachin makes such doe eyes at him that he caves and leaves the lampshade device she’s been wearing in the hotel room.

He’s forty-five minutes too early, spends them sitting outside the glass wall for customs trying not to constantly check his watch. It’s the Omega from Sochi, still. A constant reminder of the way he once carried his nation’s flag, not so long ago.

Supposedly his greatest achievement. Victor’s not so sure.
Makkachin sees Yuuri before he does, runs up to the clear glass and barks. Victor’s feet usually know what to do even when he doesn’t; now is no different, he’s up and running towards the door. Yuuri’s eyes spark in recognition and they sprint down the length of the glass divider until Victor can stop in front of the door with his arms thrown open. Yuuri all but barrels into him, nose to Victor’s shoulder, and Victor swallows down an apology. *I should have been there.* “Yuuri.” He’s never going to get tired of saying Yuuri’s name. “... I’ve been thinking about what I can do, as your coach...”

“Me too,” says Yuuri, and Victor wrestles with bewilderment as Yuuri’s hands grasp his shoulders, push him back a step. “Please be my coach until I retire,” he says, and Victor spends a moment caught off his guard.

Of all the things he expected to hear, it wasn’t this.

He pushes aside the handful of times he’s caught himself thinking about Russian Championships, Europeans, Worlds, every flicker of momentary disquiet when he’s been reminded that he’s not a competitor.

Victor decides right then and there that he’s not coming back to the ice, and that if that’s a sacrifice he needs to make to stay close to Yuuri, it will be more than worth it.

He’ll relocate.

It’ll be fine.

He smiles a little bit, finds the edges of Yuuri’s wrists and then gathers one of Yuuri’s hands in his own. Victor gently kisses a knuckle, massages Yuuri’s palm with his thumb. “It’s almost like a marriage proposal,” he teases weakly, too touched to turn it into a proper joke. He feels transparent, like Yuuri might be able to reach through him at any moment now and simply take his heart right out of his chest.

*It’s yours.* He’s not sure his heart is worth much, these days. He’s been neglecting it for years; the thing Yuuri woke up in him, almost a year ago, must have been starved and measly. No wonder he waited for a call, lost and hungry. Slowly but surely, these past seven months, it’s been assembling strength, collecting light, and sometimes it still hurts to feel this much again. Whatever he is is safer in Yuuri’s hands than Victor’s own. *Keep it.*

Yuuri steps forward, tugs them back into the close orbit of their first embrace, and Victor tilts his cheek against Yuuri’s hair. “I wish you’d never retire,” he says, but what he means is something at once simpler and more complicated.

He’s rewarded with Yuuri nestling closer to Victor’s shoulder, even though his voice betrays him. Victor’s fingers flex into Yuuri’s backpack, pull him closer. “Let’s win gold together at the Grand Prix Final.”

They each pretend there aren’t tears.

*Okay,* thinks Victor, who closes the book on his own career so that he can entertain the idea of forever.

“Okay,” he agrees.
precious things is going to be something like 250 pages long when it's finished, i think. i've added a chapter count for my estimate of what's left.

the next few episodes, as i think you all know, are going to be seriously challenging to write so i'll probably be on a two week update schedule for a while. stay tuned though~

(the rings, oh god, the rings)
We’re not taking the train?

Victor smiles to himself, leads Yuuri to the carpark. “No,” he says, and he lets Makkachin into the backseat of the rental before unlocking the trunk for Yuuri’s luggage. “We’re not.” By the time they’ve reached the hotel, Yuuri’s mask is drawn back over his face, though it’s not enough to hide the hint of a flush along his neck and his ears: something Victor smiles privately about as he leads the way back to their room, which overlooks the water. The marina’s quiet; it’s too late in the year for any sailing.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“No,” agrees Victor, who twists his arms around Yuuri’s waist and rests his chin against Yuuri’s shoulder, “... but I wanted to.” It’s the first part of winter, but Yuuri’s lips against the corner of Victor’s mouth are still an unfurling spring bloom, a gentle breath. “Your jetlag must be terrible. Get some rest?” Even though Victor’s been back for a few days more, he feels nearly as tired and wrung out as he was on arrival, and that’s the whole point of this stopover: to recover. Yuuri nods but doesn’t move, brown eyes fixed on the horizon, his fingers anchored into the safe harbor of Victor’s arms.

It’s one of those moments that can’t possibly last for more than a minute or two at most, but it feels infinite. It comes apart comfortably: Yuuri wants a shower to wash off all the hours spent on the planes that ferried him back from Moscow, and Victor stretches out on the bed with a book. Yuuri drifts back to him in an old t-shirt and a pair of workout pants; Victor promptly decides dinner’s going to consist of room service. “What are you reading?”
“Calvino.” Victor says. The book’s called *Invisible Cities*. It’s something Christophe sent him, a year ago, maybe more, unopened until now because he just never seemed to find the time or to have the motivation to dig in. When Yuuri slips in next to him with a curious look towards the pages, Victor reads and recites. “... *Beyond six rivers and three mountain ranges rises Zora, a city that no one, having seen it, can forget,*” he hums with a smile as Yuuri comes close. Yuuri’s toes brush his calves and his hands run along Victor’s ribs, the kind of touch he’d been indulging in more frequently, lately. These things give Victor a deep sense of belonging, and not of the homecoming sort: belonging as a verb, to a person, in a way he's never felt before and which always draws out a subtle, contended smile.

Victor slips a bookmark into place, sets the book aside, and then turns on his side so that he can thread a leg through Yuuri’s, drape an arm over his hips. Yuuri exhales deeply, turns into his chest, and for a moment Victor thinks they’ll lay like that until Yuuri falls asleep, an event which can’t be that far off given the flutter of his lashes on his cheeks, the slowing curl of his fingers, or the descending steadiness of his breath. Then Yuuri’s hand skims a little lower; his thumbs brush over Victor’s hipbones, and his mouth opens to the hollow of Victor’s throat.

“You’re not tired?”

“Mm,” hums Yuuri, equivocating. He is tired. He’d have to be. Regardless, his next kiss comes just below Victor’s jaw, against the flutter of his pulse. “Missed you.” Victor’s fingertips always know what they want; they glide underneath Yuuri’s t-shirt, find a home in the small of Yuuri’s back, tug him in closer until there’s no space between the press of their bodies. The next kiss is long and sweet and slow, everything Victor has needed these past handful of days and not known how to ask for. Yuuri undresses him slowly and a little clumsily, as though several long flights have caused his fingers to forget their dexterity, until he can skim his hands over Victor’s chest, tracing each ridge and valley of muscle.

There have been a few nights a little bit like this in the dark and quiet of his room in Hasetsu, but it’s here in a hotel in Fukuoka that Katsuki Yuuri chases what Victor Nikiforov thinks must be the very last of his secrets out of his chest. He’s been waiting, perhaps, for the perfect moment, and this isn’t quite it, buried in Yuuri’s body between the wonderful vise of his thighs.

“я люблю тебя,” he gasps, from a place that is mindless and well beyond himself.

Yuuri’s voice is rough-edged; Victor knows he’s close. “Vitya?”

“Je t’aime,” Victor breathes, and his hands shake, even as he falls forward, reaches between them to guide Yuuri into that same shock of pleasure. There are shivers running down his spine that must be tangible even to Yuuri as Yuuri’s hands slide down his neck and over his shoulders, places where Victor carries the fading half-moon indents that are also Yuuri’s work. “Yuuri, look at me.” He’s so fucking beautiful like this; Victor loses himself every time he’s seen Yuuri arch his back and curl his toes, every breathless, finishing gasp.

“Yuuri,” he mumbles finally, in the one language they share. He can’t not. “Yuuranya, I love you.”

Yuuri doesn’t say it back. Instead he drags Victor down for another kiss, this one desperate and shaking. It is followed by others, each of them little aftershocks, the logical result of the original collision.

In fact, Yuuri doesn’t remark on it at all until much later, long after the delivery of a meal to their door, something that goes mostly half-eaten, picked at.

“... Did you mean it?” He mutters into Victor’s sternum, already back in pajamas and half-asleep.
already. Victor can’t blame him; for Yuuri it has been something like a thirty-six hour day.

“Mm?” Victor, tracing the bumps in Yuuri’s spine, doesn’t realize what he means for a moment. “... Oh.” A pause. Not because he’s uncertain. He had an inkling of what it was he was chasing months ago, when he first booked a plane ticket. Since then he’s only become increasingly sure of it. “Yes.”

“How?” Yuuri whispers, very quietly, almost-disbelieving, and Victor also hears why. He doesn’t answer immediately, considering his response, and then says, very gently:

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“It’s just … you’re you,” mumbles Yuuri. “I’m me.”

“Huh,” Victor replies, and though it has a teasing lilt, he is entirely serious. “I think that’s very nearly exactly why.” He turns to kiss the crown of Yuuri’s head, smooths his hands down Yuuri’s back one more time. “Can you believe that I believe it?”

Yuuri doesn’t respond, and for a moment, Victor thinks he’s completely fallen asleep. Then:

“... I’ll try,” he promises, very quietly.

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted from you,” Victor reassures him.

Once they’re back in Hasetsu, Minako ruthlessly corners him about Yuuri’s upcoming birthday. Victor knows it’s coming, knows the family’s planned a dinner for the night before and that they’ve left the day-of conspicuously open. Mari’s the one to explain why, characteristically blunt over a cigarette break during the dinner shift: People usually go on dates.
Truth be told, he’s been procrastinating a little. Victor wants to find something meaningful, something perfect.

On their first day back on the ice, Yuuri tackles his quadruple flip until he’s bruised and frustrated, at which point Victor intervenes, pulls him into what is, by now, a passable ice dance rebuilt out of the bones of what was once the *Stammi Vicino Non Te Ne Andare* program. It’s very different, now, skating something he choreographed from unrecognized loneliness. In much the same way that Yuuri was once reluctant, at a press conference, to assign a single word to the complexity of his feelings, Victor doesn’t have the right language for how he feels when the way they skate it together shifts, when Yuuri reaches for him and then takes the lead.

It’s what finally gives him an idea, what sends him into Hiroko’s kitchen later that day, when Yuuri’s still in the shower. “I need your help.”

“Yes, Vicchan?”

Vicchan. Victor’s breath catches in his throat. He still notices sometimes, the way this family has so easily moved around to make room for him, to create a space where he fits.

“I …” He pauses. “I need to find a very, very talented tailor.”

The next morning sees him leaving a note for Yuuri -- *meet me at the rink* -- while he races off with Minako to the small store of an old woman who doesn’t speak a single ounce of English. Victor hears a lot of words he doesn’t understand, and Yuuri’s name, and, once, the word *koibito* from the old woman who takes a garment bag from him with a skeptical look.

His conversation without, held with Minako, goes like this:

“She says you’re very disorganized.”

“Yes. Tell her I’m sorry. Tell her I’m the absolute worst. Can she do it?”

Minako looks bemused. “It’s going to be expensive because it’s on such short notice, even if you are *Yuuri’s boyfriend.*”

“Not an issue,” Victor’s already agreeing, bowing a half-dozen apologies to a very bemused seamstress, "-- wait, what?"

“Congratulations, Victor,” Minako chirps, patting his shoulder on the way out. “We just learned you’re locally famous for being Katsuki Yuuri’s trophy boyfriend.”

“Wow,” breathes Victor, who has to head off to the rink now, because Yuuri will be there soon, and Yuuri will want to know why he woke up to an empty bed, and if Victor’s going to pretend he’s been there all morning practicing, he needs to get to it.

All of these facts are secondary because in Hasetsu, Japan, locals see him as *Katsuki Yuuri’s boyfriend.* “Wow,” he repeats, lamely.

“Better get going, you hopeless idiot.” He doesn’t realize for a good half a mile that Minako’s just insulted him the way Yakov Feltsman and Yuri Plisetsky do, like he’s part of her family.
Yuuri’s so focused on the Grand Prix Final that he refuses to take the actual day off. They start the morning at Hasetsu Ice Castle, like always, and then Victor hauls Yuuri off to Hasetsu Baga, the most famous burger joint in town: something that shouldn’t exist, because it’s in the middle of a parking lot, but has existed for decades, and has an actual line of locals waiting to order burgers. They spend the afternoon wandering alongside the river, through a museum of festival parade floats, back through the shrine, and then out for a dinner at the ramen bar Victor’s mistakenly gotten drunk at a handful of times. This night is no different: by the time they make it back to Yu-Topia, Victor’s tipsy, and so is Yuuri, and the hallway that leads to his room seems to have developed new twists and turns that Victor is absolutely certain have never been there before.

“I have a present for you,” confesses Victor, and goes looking for the box he’s gotten Minako to help him wrap up under the bed. Minako was classically sassy about it: even he hasn’t seen the final product, though according to his latest credit card statement, he’s certainly paid for it. “Here. Happy birthday.”

Yuuri sits on the edge of the mattress, clumsy, and he’s overcautious with tape and paper, like even the wrappings are something he wants to keep. Inside, past another layer of tissue paper, he carefully draws out blue fabric, delicate the way Victor envisioned: lighter over the shoulders, with black and silver detailing. There are fingerless gloves, a new pair of trousers, an undershirt, and in Yuuri’s silence as he runs his fingers over silver buttons, Victor worries suddenly that perhaps this was a terrible idea: that it’s egocentric, that still, after all this time, Yuuri doesn’t understand what that single skate means to him. “I thought we could skate it together someday,” he says, stumbling over his words in his rush to explain himself. “The duet version. Like at an ice show?”

“You want to skate your program ... with me?”

“Yes.” Victor hasn’t been this nervous in years, possibly dating all the way back to his junior debut.
“... Blue’s your favorite color, right?”

“Bring yours to Barcelona,” Yuuri says suddenly, and it’s something wholly unique to Katsuki Yuuri, the way his eyes can mist over with water and be lit aflame at the same exact time. “If I make the podium, will you skate the exhibition with me? Before ...”

“Before what?” Victor will know later that the words that almost spilled out of Yuuri’s mouth in this moment were before I retire. In the present, he just wants to cradle the softness of Yuuri’s face between his two hands, smooth his thumbs over his cheekbones. Instead, Yuuri flushes, and hurries to explain himself:

“Before the Grand Prix season is over,” he says. “Because it’s been our goal.”

“Yuuri. I’d never say no to you,” Victor replies, and Yuuri’s bright look wavers for a moment as he blinks, several times, to clear his own vision.

“I know, Vitya.”

“Tanjoubi omedetou, Yuuranya.” Victor’s been asking around. He’s been practicing. Yuuri’s fond look softens beautifully, and Victor now knows two things he did not know before he began this undertaking: in the morning, when he’s sober, he’ll be emailing his father about a duet arrangement of the aria and he’ll be recommissioning the seamstress for a second time, to make sure his own jacket is a perfect match.

For a moment he considers the article he read about himself in a magazine in an airport in Moscow, and then he looks at Yuuri, who continues to carry himself between paradoxes: he is both smoothing over fabric in quiet disbelief, and, with his other hand, twisting his fingers into Victor’s shirt. Every step Victor takes pushes the reality of them, as a unit, more and more into a public life from which there is no easy retreat. Nonetheless, Yuuri’s lips press into the corner of his mouth. “Spasibo,” he says quietly, and Victor realizes it’s literally irrelevant.

It’s like Sergei told him, at the start of Spring: this is the exact shape of every problem that Victor thinks he might like to have for the rest of his life.

When it’s time to travel to Barcelona, Victor upgrades them both to business class.

This time, Yuuri lets him.
Victor snoozes through their flight, but every time he wakes up to turn over, Yuuri’s still awake, mask pulled up over his face, playing through some kind of video game on his phone. “Can’t sleep?” Victor whispers, turning his cheek against Yuuri’s sweater. Yuuri makes a noncommittal noise and reaches up to card his fingers through Victor’s hair. In the coat rack provided for business class passengers, their costumes are hanging in a wardrobe bag together, ordinary and hidden among suits and jackets, waiting for something remarkable to happen.

“I don’t really sleep well on trips like this.”

Victor can’t really move the armrest between their seats, but he can turn on his side and kick a leg up into Yuuri’s footstool, twist a blanket over them both. “You’re going to do well, solnyshko,” he murmurs gently.

“How do you know that?”

“You asked me to know it,” Victor reminds him, and in the unlit cabin he presses a quick kiss to Yuuri’s cheek, fleeting, just under the strings of his facemask. “In China.”

By the time they get to Barcelona and check in, Yuuri makes it very clear that he’s going directly to bed, and Victor, who doesn’t want to sleep while he still feels like he’s just exited a large metal tube hurtling through the stratosphere, decides to check out the hotel pool. From the roof he’ll be able to see the overhead stars and the way Barcelona twinkles up to the coastline, where the Balearic Sea is quiet and dark.

The water is cold enough to take his breath away when he dives in, but it’s a familiar sort of cold, the sort that immediately chases away the last of his plane lethargy. Victor has actually been swimming in colder waters than these, though it’s funny the way the last year has put so much distance between his current self and his past. It would be wrong to say that those twenty years didn’t also belong to him; they did. Even now, Victor can easily imagine a different reality where he’d be the one preparing to skate in the Final. Perhaps Yuuri would be there, too. Perhaps not. Perhaps he would slide under the radar of Victor’s notice the way he’s apparently done for years.

He feels strangely guilty giving the negligence of those years a name. For twenty years he gave himself to the ice, and in return it gave him a place in the history books. It brought him to countries he’d never dreamed of. It carried lovers into and out of his life. All it asked in exchange was the steady sacrifice of himself, left to bleed out on the altar of all of his aspirations.

It was the kindest devastation imaginable. Twenty years of the sweetest, most luxurious death.

“I thought, other than me, only a Russian would be stupid enough to get in a pool in December.” This is a deep voice that Victor would recognize anywhere; he feels his lips curl in response. Christophe Giacometti is standing poolside with a bottle of champagne and a single glass, in house slippers and a hotel robe. “I guess I was right.”

“Coach Victor,” Chris quips amiably. And then he pouts: “And here I was hoping to go skinny dipping.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” says Victor, who has been calling Christophe’s bluff for years. There’s still a flirtation of a sort between them, but it’s old and comfortable now, a friendship in disguise, camaraderie that sometimes wears strange clothing. “I’ll even take photos.”

Christophe does not actually skinny dip, but Victor does wind up taking photos of them both.
“How’s it feel, anyway?”

“Mm…?”

“Retirement.” That isn’t the word Victor’s been using, and it’s still a little bit jarring, like the carved-in landing of a fought-for axel. “Not gearing up to do all this, the whole song and dance.” Victor’s working on finding a flippant, passive answer when Christophe fixes him with a speculative gaze and pours a fresh glass of champagne. He asks the question. “Are you happier?”

“Was I unhappy before?” Victor’s been contemplating it all night. The conclusion he’s come to is that he probably wouldn’t have done anything any differently. Christophe makes a snorting noise, rolls his eyes. Fine. He supposes he owes Christophe something resembling a real answer. “Hasetsu printed a banner almost as big as the whole outside of the Ice Castle to congratulate Yuuri on his qualification,” he says. They love him more than they love me. It’s legitimately refreshing. Victor is a celebrity, expected to do well, expected to shine; Yuuri is born up (and sometimes internalizes) the good will of gentle, warm-hearted people. “I take baths in a mineral pool as big as this one. I can’t remember the last time I spent this much time with Makkachin. I eat the most ridiculous home-cooked meals.” He smiles. “It’s heaven on earth.”

“I’ll be sure to book a visit,” Christophe replies, flashing a playful grin. “And Yuuri?”

“You take a keen interest.”

“Tch.” Chris waves a hand. “I wanted to be where he is, once.” Victor knows that’s true; knows Christophe has also outgrown it. The teenager he remembers is a grown man who evidently only operates on two settings, both of them well-known to Victor: a surprisingly unchaotic home life with a live-in boyfriend and a very fancy cat, and a mature eros setting of eleven-out-of-ten. “It’s not all about you, you know,” he adds. “I met Yuuri back in juniors, Victor.” His grin grows. “There’s a reason I knew about the pole dancing.”

“Now you’re just teasing me,” Victor mutters, climbing up the edge of the pool because his toes have begun to tingle. “All this time, you could’ve made an introduction,” he adds, mock-petulant.

Christophe shrugs. “I wouldn’t have guessed. Katsuki, of all people.” Why not Katsuki, Victor nearly asks, rankled, and then Chris moves on: “Would you have even admitted you needed someone?” He asks. “Or even known what you were looking for?”

“I’ve been with people before,” Victor points out, petulant.

“I liked Saga,” Christophe agrees. “Pity you didn’t.”

“Chris.”

“Don’t give me that, Victor. You know perfectly well there’s a difference between wanting to love someone, and actually loving them.” It’s a lesson Christophe learned before he did, something Victor, of all people, taught him.

It rings so true that Victor almost resents him for it. He partially wishes he could turn back time, because life has always been simpler when people look at him with stars in their eyes, instead of dissecting him the way Christophe Giacometti is doing right now. “Enough,” he grumbles. “All this talk about me. What about you? You’re the one who’s got the song and dance to get to, after all.” Strange. He expects Christophe to make a run at the podium because he’s always expected Christophe to be there. Maybe Christophe will finally stand on top of it, now that he’s gone. Like Georgi will, at Russian Nationals. Except no matter how he configures the results in his head, Victor
keeps coming up with a configuration that leaves someone he expects to medal off the platform, something he’d never really thought about before, when everyone else was really only competing for the other two places.

These ideas shouldn’t be so disquieting, but they are. When did everything become so much less predictable?

You’ll get used to it.

“Since you left, I’m one of the oldest,” mourns Christophe, “and I’m only 25.”

“Stop talking like your life is over, you asshole,” grumbles Victor, over-conscious of his own approaching birthday and thinking much too hard about the way his own legend will be put to rest: quietly. The last time he skated at Worlds was his farewell, and he hadn’t even known to say goodbye.

“You tell me,” Christophe says, with a wink. “I hear it all goes downhill at 27, even if your very good friend does maybe accidentally arrange for you to develop a ridiculous and inexplicable attraction to a cute Japanese boy…”

“Very obnoxious friend. The worst.” Victor corrects him, but it’s all double-talk. One of the best. “Come upstairs and help me wake him up, since you’re being such a nosy bastard.”

“I’d be delighted,” says Christophe, which is probably why he piles on after Victor whines for a hot bath once they’re upstairs: can you make coffee, too? For all of the shit Christophe’s given Victor over getting old, both of them still vault neatly over the unoccupied twin, and Yuuri’s shrieks of protest make Victor dissolve into helpless, still-shivering laughter.
The next day at practice, Victor watches as Yuuri works through his short program, practices the flip. It’s yet to come off clean, but when he manages it, he’ll leave even the Canadian pest in the dust. Victor leans over the rail to take Yuuri’s arms. “Done for the day?” Yuuri nods, folds the day in much more quietly than any of his competition. “What do you want to do now?” Yuuri slides a hand over his shoulder, leaning over to snap his skate guards on. “I recommend a good night’s rest to prepare for tomorrow’s short program,” he says, making what he thinks is a valiant effort to recognize the solemnity of the whole affair. It’s the Grand Prix Final, the goal Yuuri’s had in his sights all season, and he treats it accordingly.

“Don’t be such a model coach now.” Yuuri flashes him a subtle smirk. “This is my first time in Barcelona, so take me sightseeing.”

He follows it up with a wink that makes Victor’s heart skip a beat.

“Leave it to me,” Victor promises. After a stop at the hotel, they proceed out into the city, and stop at the Sagrada Familia, circling the nativity and passion façades before proceeding inside amongst the rainbow refractions of stained glass, and the multi-faceted columns, and the gorgeous, fractal ceiling. Victor explains, as well as he can recall, the meaning of what iconography he can manage to decipher. Yuuri’s less interested in the old stories about Christianity and the Saints as he is in Victor’s childhood. Victor admits that it’s been a very long time since he’s routinely darkened the doors of a church, which is Evgeniya’s second-most pressing concern, after making sure that he finally settles down and gets married.

“Yakov is Jewish,” he explains. “Once I moved in with him, he and Lilia didn’t really care. My grandmother forced me to show up with her for high holy days.”

“Sou ka,” Yuuri hums, almost to himself, and his gaze lingers on a kaleidoscope stained-glass window. “... Do you believe in all these stories, though?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Victor shrugs. Getting philosophical about the universe and the afterlife is another one of those things he never got around to doing, too absorbed in his skating. “I suppose I think there’s probably something that happens after death, and I think it’s probably a good something.” Somewhere in this building he’s sure Christ is reflected on the cross, pardoning a thief. “The Agape program was kind of a way to work through nostalgia about these spaces. You can’t grow up in St. Petersburg without a little bit of respect for sacred architecture. I’ll take you to the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, someday.”

Yuuri looks properly incredulous. “The what?”

“You know.” Victor grins, twists his fingers upwards like spires. “In St. Petersburg. The one with the domes?”

They eat paella for lunch at a restaurant with glorious ocean views, even if the Mediterranean looks a touch moodier in the winter, its blues deepened and desaturated by a slightly cloudy sky and a more distant sun. They go to the Arenas de Barcelona, and take a selfie together in front of the view it offers of the city. Then he leads Yuuri to the Passeig de Gracia, the sort of expensive high street that Victor’s been missing in small-town Hasetsu, past another one of Gaudi’s works: the Casa Batló. Looking at it for too long is like stepping into a dream: on the building’s face, lilies float on the surface of a lake, and at its roof, a dragon, scales shimmering even more in the twilight, coils around the edge of its shores.
In the course of ninety minutes, Victor nearly makes up for all of the spontaneous purchases he hasn’t been making these past eight months, and Yuuri, for whatever reason, keeps insisting on taking the bags. “I haven’t shopped in ages,” Victor admits. “It’s fun, isn’t it?”

Katsuki Yuuri, who has more stamina than any skater on the Grand Prix circuit, begs for a reprieve and sinks into a nearby park bench, which is just enough time for Victor to finish totaling his receipts in his head. He feels slightly guilty: sure, his expenses in Hasetsu have been nothing like what they would’ve been spending the season on the continent, but he also hasn’t really been making any income, either, something he’s sure he could read all about if he ever actually bothered to open his emails from Yakov’s accountant friend. On the other hand, one of those bags contains a new pair of Adolfo Dominguez loafers he’s going to start breaking in tomorrow, a steal at just 120€, and a pair of sweatpants that Yuuri couldn’t believe he was willing to actually pay more than maybe twenty euro for. For a moment, in store, Victor had entertained the fantasy of Yuuri wearing them -- not a pair of his own, but Victor’s, picked up off the floor and low-slung around his hips, slightly too long for his legs.

The cashier had needed to prompt him a second time for his credit card. “... Shame the Euro’s not weaker. You don’t want anything, Yuuri?”

“Oh,” mumbles Yuuri, blocked in by all of Victor’s bags, “... Nah.”

Not for the first time, Victor wonders why it is Yuuri’s wanted to do all this: even in Hasetsu he was a reluctant sightseer, wary of crowds. He’s probably nervous. It’s a way to kill the time.

“Yuuri,” he says, because he loves saying Yuuri’s name, likes all of the little inflections he can drop into the long U-sound, “I’ll buy you a suit for your birthday.” Before Yuuri can protest, Victor reaches over to take him by the hand, pulls him up and starts to lead him back down the Passeig de Gracia. “I think you should burn the suit and tie you wore at that press conference.”

Yuuri’s protests follow them, though:

“Huh? Wait, you don’t have to! I kind of like that suit … Victor!”

In fact, this argument will continue into some future time, when Yuuri unpacks into the spaces Victor clears out for him in St. Petersburg, and there it is in the closet: the awful suit, that sky blue tie. Yuuri, we discussed this, Victor will say, and Yuuri will turn and look at him, pin him with one of those wide-eyed, doe like stares that Victor’s incredibly weak for. This is the suit I wore when I first told anyone I loved you, he’ll say, and Victor will wonder how it is he’s supposed to survive a lifetime with a man who says things like this, sometimes, at 8:47 pm on a Thursday, seemingly out of the blue, right when Victor is least expecting it.

In the present, Yuuri mumbles you already got me a birthday present.

Victor is thinking about how good Yuuri might look in navy, or even, for that matter, in classic black. Somewhere along the way he catches himself thinking about a three piece, and because he can’t help but picture the way a suit like that can devolve over the course of a single evening: a jacket draped over a chair, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, the steady loosening of vest and tie. “I can get you more than one,” he breathes, and reaches over to sweep a thumb over Yuuri’s cheek. “Please?”

The navy Z Zegna suit he eventually gets Yuuri fitted into is a vision, and Victor drags him down the street to a Spanish shir-tmaker for a shirt and tie to cap the whole thing off. The place is called Bel y Cia and Victor still has the texts he got from Christophe when they opened a Geneva boutique.

Yuuri puts his foot down -- quite literally -- when Victor broaches the possibility of shoes. Instead he
shuffles their bags around, combining some, and that’s when his expression sours. “Oh,” he says, “oh no.”

What follows is a meticulous retracing of steps: Victor was certain, judging by the flustered way that Yuuri flew out of Ermenegildo Zegna after Victor paid for his suit that it’d be years until he darkened those doors again, but they stop back in right before closing time, as the sun is going down, and then Yuuri races them back to the bench he’d taken a break on earlier.

“I lost those nuts you bought,” Yuuri mumbles. “You said you were going to give them to your sister, we need to find them …” His expression sours; it’s worry, now, which Victor is terribly familiar with. “It’s not here, either,” he says, mournfully.

For a moment, Victor considers waving it off, but he doubts Yuuri will let him off the hook that easily. “Yuuri, calm down and remember. It’s the bag of nuts we just bought. It’s a brown bag with green print.”

He watches as Yuuri darts around the bench, looking behind and underneath. “Sorry. I have no idea where I dropped it.” He fixes Victor with a determined look. “I’ll go back to the shop and get another bag!”

“It’s okay, Yuuri.”

“Huh?”

Victor tilts his head up towards the twilight sky. “The nuts shop would be closed by now,” he points out, and tries a reassuring smile. He’ll find time before his family arrives to get Sofia something else to congratulate her on her ballet premiere, someplace closer to the hotel, probably. “Let’s head back. You’re tired, right?”

“You don’t have to say it like that,” Yuuri grumbles, irritated, and Victor sighs heavily.

“Well, I’m tired,” he admits, and thinks through the original list of sightseeing stops. It’s more of a walk than Victor would like to be making in his designer shoes, but he does so nonetheless, leading them into the Gothic quarter for a walk through a Christmas market that’s been set up in front of the Barcelona Cathedral. These shops are open a little later than the high street names they’ve just left behind, and most of them are winter specialties, set up for the holiday season, little stands selling Christmas figurines, and other assorted crafts.

The silence between them isn’t quite comfortable, but it isn’t hostile either, and Victor stops to get some warm wine as a pick-me-up. The bright lights scattered overhead reflect in Yuuri’s dark irises, something that briefly makes Victor contemplate how anyone could ever consider brown eyes plain.

“Victor.” He glances over, surprised. “Your birthday is Christmas Day, right?”

It feels like an olive branch, and so Victor takes it, even though to a Russian, Christmas day is in January and not in December, which he knows is what Yuuri’s thinking of. It’s a little mistake everyone who isn’t Russian makes, and Victor’s so used to it by now that he can answer without any dissonance. “Yeah?”

“What would you like for your gift?”

“Oh.” He pauses for a moment, considers how to explain, sure he’s about to disappoint. “... In Russia, we don’t celebrate before the actual birthday. We don’t really celebrate Christmas, either.” Not in the way Yuuri’s thinking of, at least, and certainly not on the same day.
“I see.” Yuuri looks a little disappointed by that answer. Beneath the facts Victor’s just given him is another, subtler truth: he’s not particularly accustomed to receiving gifts. Victor Nikiforov’s been spoiled by sponsors and donors and brands. He’s wealthier than any of his friends. It’s easier to stand on the giving side of the equation, using his money to apologize for his absence and his distance, than it is to imagine, for a moment, receiving.

He’s not even sure what that would look like. You’re hard to buy for, Alena snapped at him once. What do you get someone who has the world at their fingertips?

Still, Victor wants to make peace, move them past the brief argument at the end of their shopping expedition. “... Do you want some hot wine, too?”

“Ah,” Yuuri apologizes. “I try not to drink before a competition.”

“Oh, right,” says Victor, who can’t help but ponder last year’s Grand Prix, when the very same Katsuki Yuuri who stands next to him now stumbled drunk into his arms. Right. He sips at the cooling wine, says nothing.

Yuuri’s expressive eyes always give him away; Victor, who masks so many things, never gets tired of watching them. They’re sparkling now as he looks around them, searching, Victor thinks, though who knows for what.

The last thing he expects is for Yuuri to get fixated on a jewelry store.

He does not expect for Yuuri to scan the window, and then to drag him inside.
He could not have anticipated the moment when Yuuri looked back over his shoulder, face a brilliant shade of red, and demanded: *what’s your ring size?*

(Yuuri is an eight and a half. Victor is a nine.)

“This one, please,” Yuuri says, as though Victor isn’t about to go into cardiac arrest right behind him. Victor is in a thousand places at once while Yuuri says he’ll pay in installments; he is imagining himself in Vasily’s office, trying to explain to the old man how it felt the moment his heart flew right out of his chest; he is in Yakov and Lilia’s old house, a teenager on the couch with his dog, pretending not to watch the fond undercurrent of their fights; he is in Paris, watching as Sergei Nikiforov holds the door open for his mother; he is listening to Alena talking about real emotion; he is here, in Barcelona, watching Katsuki Yuuri buy what is unmistakably a pair of engagement rings.

There are fairytales, and then there are fairytales.

Yuuri has to take the lead to draw Victor back out of the store, his motor functions reduced to something not unlike tired Makkachin at the end of a walk, lingering behind on the end of her leash. Yuuri follows the spires of Barcelona Cathedral, moves them past a cluster of carolers singing traditional hymns in Spanish, pulls him up to closed iron gates.

There are fairytales, and then there are fairytales.

Victor knows so many of them by heart, has grown up surrounded by folklore. The stories cluster together in the knot of his thoughts: a little prince, taming his fox; a beast, restored by a beauty; a woman brought back from the underworld by a persevering lover; a thousand different iterations on love and all of them insufficient. Here he is, standing in front of Yuuri, who is peeling off one of Victor’s gloves while Victor tries to hide the fact that his own hand is shaking.

For once in his life, he does not succeed.

He’s enchanted. The Christmas lights twinkle and reflect in Yuuri’s eyes like little stars, and the high blush across the bridge of his nose and on the apples of his cheeks is positively bewitching, but Victor’s eyes keep coming back to his hand, watching Yuuri slide the ring on while his own fingers tremble.

“Thank you for everything up to now,” Yuuri says, and his words sink in like they’ve been spoken through some kind of thick fog. It isn’t quite disbelief. Victor feels a little bit like he’s been pulled into a dream, except that the ring is a little bit cold and heavy around his finger, and there’s little details that make Victor sure he’s still in reality: his glove, tucked into Yuuri’s pocket, or the tremor in Yuuri’s voice as he hunts for the right words. “I … I couldn’t think of anything else that would be as perfect.”

He realizes, dimly, as Yuuri explains himself, that there’s levels to this gesture, like everything Yuuri does, that he’s using this moment to create something he can carry into tomorrow’s skate, a protective charm. On the surface, that’s all that has been said.

*Tomorrow I’m going to do my best.*

Beneath their words is a second reality: Yuuri has pressed the other engagement ring, bearing the second half of an engraved snowflake that only they and a woman in a jewelry store in Barcelona know about, into Victor’s hand. “... so could you make a wish?”

“Sure,” says Victor, who feels the way his own expression softens because the effect of his exhale reverberates through his entire body. He takes Yuuri’s hand, which is real and solid in a way Victor
only half-knows to expect. “I’ll make a wish you won’t even have to think about,” he murmurs softly.

He slides the ring on, and he doesn’t wish for a future day where he’ll do this again, in front of a small circle of family and friends. On the plane where they are together making some kind of magic, something to carry Yuuri through tomorrow’s skate, Victor says: “Tomorrow, show me the skating that you can honestly say you liked best.”

Where the real magic is happening is somewhere inside of his ribs, where Victor is done making wishes. This isn’t his Stammi Vicino program, his call, Yuuri’s answer.

This is a promise. Victor has a reputation for being terrible about keeping promises, for being forgetful and sometimes self-absorbed, and though, like everything else about his life, it’s an exaggeration crafted over the years, it’s not entirely undeserved.

They are wearing engagement rings, the two of them, and the transformation is complete.

This is a promise. He already knows he’s going to keep it.

“Oh,” Yuuri hums, idly surprised. “Minako-sensei, Mari-neechan. You’re already here.” This is nothing compared to the surprise he gets when both women bodily tackle him for a ‘huge favor.’ This huge favor involves Victor using some of his star power, and his influence over a scowling Yuri Plisetskoy to rearrange them all into a shared table for eight, where
Minako and Mari proceed to have a meltdown, surrounded by five of the six finalists for the Grand Prix Final. Yuri, who’s refused to sit next to Victor, scowls at him from Mari’s right side instead, while Yuuri tries to reign them in. “... You’re way too happy about this,” Yuuri says gently, holding up a hand.

“Why did we all have to get together,” grumbles Plisetsky, under his breath, like he’s not happy to see Mari, or Minako, or like none of them know he’s been exchanging texts with Yuuko all season long.

When the food arrives, shrimp and paella and tapas, the table settles into familiar chaos: Phichit wants a photograph of everything; someone feeds Yurio shrimp, Yuuri wonders if it’s strange to be breaking bread with all of the people who will be his competitors tomorrow. Victor reminds himself to share stories later of years of ridiculous bets with Christophe and Georgi, of dinners a lot like this one. Yuuri, by contrast, has always been so determinedly alone.

He’s mulling over all this over a beer when Yuuri explains why he thinks it’s weird for them to be together now. “At last year’s final,” he says, “I was always by myself, even at the banquet.” Victor smiles to himself and takes a sip from his glass, because he’s expecting what comes next to be the story he already knows: Yuuri and several bottles of disappearing champagne and the pole dance that still haunts his waking memories. It all goes south halfway through his drink. “I couldn’t even talk to Victor.”

Victor promptly chokes on his beer. “Yuuri, you don’t remember?”

“What?”

Christophe helpfully supplies the facts. “Yuuri,” he says. “You got drunk on champagne and started dancing. Everyone saw it.” Around the table, reactions vary: Phichit looks smug, as though this is something he’s experienced before; Christophe is putting on his most angelic face, Minako and Mari look stunned, and Yuri Plisetsky is steadily retreating back into familiar teenage fury.

“That was disgusting as hell,” Yurio spits, and Victor charitably ignores the teenager’s envy. “I was dragged into a dance-off and got humiliated, too!”

“A dance-off?” Yuuri looks about ready to perish from embarrassment. Victor considers whether or not they’ll need a medic for one or both of them. “With Yurio?”

“We did ours with a pole dance,” Christophe hums, still all blithe cheer. “Half-naked.”

Victor shoots him a momentary side-eye, as if to suggest he did not particularly need the reminder. “I start going off the rails when I drink,” Yuuri whisper-hisses, which suddenly makes a lot more of Victor’s past year make sense, “... just like my dad, so I was trying to lay off, but ...”

“I still have videos of what happened,” Victor admits, fondly reminiscing, and he can’t help but grin a little bit when Yuuri nearly leaps out of his seat.

“I do, too,” Christophe adds, chipper, and then he tilts his phone over towards Phichit, who wasn’t there to witness the event and who immediately gets engrossed in a photo.

“Yuuri, that’s so dirty,” he hisses, which draws both Minako and Mari over both of their shoulders, determined to have a look, while Christophe, who is the patron saint of dirty dancing, offers his most approving, angelic smile. Yuuri scrambles over the table, trying to stop this process from unfolding, and that is when Christophe notices, right like Victor suspected he might.

“Huh.” Victor’s in the middle of sharing a photo with a stoic Otabek, cheerfully celebrating their
amazing first dance, when Chris finally asks the question. “What’s with the rings, you two?”

Mari looks at her brother, and then at Victor. “Huh? Rings?”

“I don’t remember you wearing that,” Minako says, which is perfect Japanese politeness, but also, Victor recognizes, a pointed line of inquiry, one that’s not directed just at Yuuri.

Yuuri scrambles for an explanation; Victor leans back into his orbit and works through his brief terror of these two women who have both loved Yuuri for a lot longer than he has. “They’re a pair.”

It seems to send a lightning bolt crashing through Phichit Chulanont, who pounds his fists on the table and then stands up in a rush, clapping fervently. “Congrats on your marriage,” he shouts, and then he proceeds to turn and inform the entire restaurant. “Everyone,” he shouts, while Yuuri tries and fails to rein him in. “My good friend here got married!”

There’s an eruption of cheers, which Yuuri also waves his arms to try and stop, still stumbling through any other explanation. “N-no … this is, um --”

Victor glances around the table. Minako and Mari look stunned. Otabek is clapping resolutely. Yurochka has forgotten how to close his mouth. Christophe is sending him another angelic look perhaps best translated as you sly dog. “It’s to thank him for all his help! And lots of -- lots of -- other things!” Yuuri stammers. Approximately none of his deflections have done anything to redirect the rest of the restaurant’s attention. “… Yes, other things!”

Christophe positively leers.

Enough. Victor can’t resist adding a little mischief of his own. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Don’t get the wrong idea.” He drops his chin in one hand and flashes a smile over towards Christophe. “We’ll get married once he wins a gold medal,” he quips. “Right, Yuuri?”

“Victor.” Oh, he’s going to pay for this later, but it will have been worth it: Victor watches as everyone else at the table buys into this wager he’s laid out for them, whether they realize it or not, and he’s about to rescue Yuuri from his trembling when a new voice shouts from across all of the tables.

“Wait a second!” Oh, Christ. It’s the Canadian maniac. Victor was really hoping he’d gotten lost at the airport. “I’ll be the one who wins gold and gets married, of course!” shouts James? John? Joseph? Something like that. It’s a shame for everyone else with those names that they have to share them with someone who dresses like this much of a tool, like any minute now someone’s going to land a plane in the middle of the market and then Jaybird here will be the one ready to take off.

There’s a woman with him, presumably the person who is going to have to suffer through an entire lifetime of this sort of shit. Victor almost pities her, right up until the point where she opens her mouth. “That’s right,” she says. “It’ll definitely be JJ.”

So that’s why his name’s so bloody hard to remember. It’s not even a real name. “Sorry we can’t congratulate you on that future marriage,” quips Letters, and Victor revises his previous opinions swiftly: these two deserve each other.

“Check please,” says Victor.

“Hey.” The Canadian menace and his bride-to-be are still waiting for a table when the rest of them leave. “I was just joking!”

It’s probably petty, but Victor’s no saint.
Back at the hotel, Mari tugs on his sleeve long enough to get Victor to linger back behind the rest of the group as they head for the elevators. “You could have said something,” she whispers. Victor looks at her for a moment, realizes, for the first time, that someday in a not-too-distant future, his connection to Yuuri’s family will be something stronger than their initial kindness and care.

“Mari-neechan,” he rebukes her mildly, glancing pointedly ahead towards her brother.

Mari stares after him dumbfounded until Victor’s subtle gesture begins to sink in. “That little shit,” she protests weakly, and then gives Victor a shove forward, so that he can catch up. “I’m telling Minako.”

Back in their room, Yuuri kicks off his shoes and paces over to one of the beds, raking his fingers through his hair for a moment before he fixes Victor with a frown. “Tell me about the banquet.”

Victor’s been waiting for this; he takes his time, hangs his coat up, drapes his scarf over the shoulders. He leaves his loafers in a row next to Yuuri’s, pockets his phone, walks over to the bed. Victor runs his palm down the length of Yuuri’s spine, measures his tension, and then he tells the story:

I had to step out for an interview, so by the time I really showed up you were in some sort of dance off with Yura, Victor says, slipping his fingers under Yuuri’s sweater to rub against the cotton t-shirt underneath. “... I came closer to watch whatever was going on, because I could hear Mila laughing, and the next thing I knew you caught a handful of my suit and made me dance with you.”

He feels the way Yuuri shrinks into himself. “That’s so embarrassing … I --”

“Shh,” Victor murmurs. “You were magnificent, Yuuri. You … led me through a double reverse spin and you were so pleased it worked that you threw your head back and laughed and then changed the steps again, I don’t even remember how many times. I went to find us drinks and when I turned around you were gone, and Christophe had challenged you to a pole dance.”

“Oh. Oh no.” Yuuri mumbles, running his hands over his cheeks to hide a blush. “I never should have told him about that --”

“He’s a horrible friend,” Victor agrees fondly. “But you were … you were so beautiful, Yuuri. I had your shirt, so I was helping you dress, and you …”
"I what?"

"You told me your family ran a hot springs resort and asked me to come." To not tell Yuuri the truth now, when there’s an engagement ring on his finger, is beyond Victor. "You asked me to be your coach." Yuuri’s silence lingers longer than Victor wants; he runs his hand back up Yuuri’s back, makes himself finish the story. "Christophe and I got you back to your room, I couldn’t really understand what you were saying, but you threw up twice and we finally got you to bed." He pauses. Out with it, Vitya. "I left my number on the nightstand," Victor admits. "I kept hoping you’d call. And then when you didn’t I told myself I’d see you at Worlds, and then you weren’t there, either."

"I never found it."

"Huh?"


Victor doesn’t want to admit what he thought. "When I saw that upload of you skating my program," he murmurs, quietly, "I …"

There’s a subtle tremor in Yuuri’s back, detectable against Victor’s palm, and then an incredulous, mirthless laugh. "That’s why you hit on me so much, when you first came to Hasetsu."

"Well," Victor mumbles, trying but failing to come up with anything clever to say in response. "... yes."

"And why you kept asking if I was seeing anyone."

"Yes."

"And why you made me skate the Eros program."

"Oh, God, yes." Victor can’t help but chuckle at it now, though in hindsight he’s really just laughing at himself. "Then you told me you couldn’t do it while Yuri Plisetsky, who wouldn’t know seduction unless it came up and scratched him in the face, argued that he ought to skate it, and for a moment I thought maybe I was in a different universe, with the wrong Katsuki Yuuri …"

Yuuri hesitates, and then shifts away from Victor’s touch, and what he says next is so transparently self-loathing that it makes Victor ache. "... Maybe you still are."

"I’m not." He’s sure of it. Victor taps through the gallery for the banquet on his phone. "Look at this," he says. It’s a photo of the two of them dancing together, Victor tilted down into a backbend, Yuuri’s hand cradling his face, each of them laughing without art or agenda. "Mila sent it to me, after."

"It’s a beautiful photo," Yuuri agrees, somber. "But I’m not like the person in it."

"No," Victor replies. "You’re better." He moves on the bed so he can sit behind Yuuri, meets with no resistance as he slips his arms around Yuuri’s waist and rests his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder. "We sat on a beach together once, and I would have played any part you gave me, no matter what you said, and instead you told me all you wanted was to be myself. You’ve reinterpreted choreography I’ve given you in ways I couldn’t have imagined, even a program that I thought nobody but me was ever going to really understand. You told the entire Japanese press corps that you loved me in a way that was something entirely different from being attracted to me, which …" Victor doesn’t say it, but
he's sure it's something nobody else has ever fully done. "You pull yourself together and skate in situations and circumstances that would destroy lesser men, and you’ve done it for years. You put your whole season at risk and attempted a jump you knew you couldn’t land at the end of a program just because you thought I might like to see it, and then later, when I couldn’t be there to support you, you did the opposite to make sure that we’d still be here. And today, you pulled me into a jewelry store, up to a church --"

"Did you mean it," Yuuri interrupts him, the whisper choked and strangely fierce. Yuuri’s trembling in his arms has gotten worse, and Victor knows if he was to lean a little further over Yuuri’s shoulder, look up at his face, he’d probably see tears.

Victor smiles; he can’t help it. “Are you asking about the medal, specifically, or the part where I said that I’d marry you?”

“Victor.” The way Yuuri says it is insistent, a desperate demand for an answer to a question he’s never technically asked.

“I have meant everything I’ve ever said about you,” Victor promises, and this time he’s not surprised by how Yuuri reacts. Victor knows better than anyone what Yuuri does in key moments like this. He’s pushed back, and willingly falls to the bed, opens his arms up for Yuuri’s body over his, and tilts his chin up to receive Yuuri’s blind, hungry kiss.

Victor wakes to pink and orange light -- early sunrise -- streaking through their hotel room, checks his phone, decides to slip out while Yuuri sleeps until his alarm. In the morning quiet, Victor intends to make a few phone calls while he walks alongside the ocean, to send messages before any of the press catch wind of his new accessory and blast it all over the news. In the end he makes just the one call, to his father. His family’s coming out in time for the Free Skate, as promised, making what will be a very short trip before Sofia’s Nutcracker and the holiday concert season call them all back to Paris. On the phone, Sergei sounds a little stilted, taken by surprise, even though he’s known from the beginning how Victor feels. “I’m very happy for you, Vitenka,” he says, finally, and Victor only realizes that his father might be crying because he hears his mother’s sharp voice in the background and then hears the moment the phone’s transferred to her.

“Engaged?” She echoes. “Pozdravleniya.” Mariya is never sentimental for long, though; always reassembles herself into the family’s strategist. “So you’re going to keep coaching, then? In Japan?”
“We haven’t really -- we’ll figure it out after the Grand Prix,” Victor admits.

“Make sure you do,” says Mariya, with the weight of experience behind her, and before Victor can feel any of the old worry about whether or not he stole away her dreams, she sighs. “So much like your father after all. I’m proud of you.”

Victor hangs up and turns to look at the sun, now that it’s crested over the Mediterranean. He extends his hand, studies the light as it bends through his fingers, refracts off of the band around his finger. He imagines his mother in another time and place, on track for principal of the world’s most prestigious ballet, discovering her own pregnancy. Then he remembers what it was like in Sochi to carry the flag, to bend over and accept a gold medal and then to turn and listen to his own National Anthem.

Recalls the first brush of Yuuri’s lips against his.

He’s lost in his thoughts when Yuri Plisetsky’s dirty, grimy sneaker lands squarely in the middle of his back, no doubt leaving a footprint in the middle of his favorite Burberry peacoat. Six similar kicks follow while Victor braces his weight and slowly counts to ten. Yura’s idea of a good morning hello is the following:

“Victor Nikiforov is dead!”

Victor turns around slowly, reminding himself that they don’t allow boutique weddings in prison. He stares Plisetsky down over his shoulder and says nothing; it’s too early to indulge tantrums. What do you want, Yurochka.

“Why do you look so happy to be looking after that damn pig?”

The slur ignites Victor’s fury, and he turns more fully, leans down to emphasize the way he’s had to hunch over just to get onto Yuri’s level. He’s let this go on for long enough. Yuri’s anger is a strange mix of unbridled arrogance and transparent jealousy, and Victor has better things to do than to keep entertaining it.

“Did you want to compete against me?” He taunts.

“Don’t be so full of yourself,” Yuri spits back, which only curls Victor’s smirk, and pointedly so. “Not all skaters look up to you. Just go away already, geezer.”

Victor curls a hand under Yuri’s chin and forcibly lifts him up to his own height; stands unchanged by the force of Yuri’s resistance. It’s a critique of its own, delivered wordlessly: even in a season off, spent not competing, Victor is stronger than he is. Yuri’s pluck and his talent are remarkable, but they’re not built to last. You’re going to burn yourself out at this rate, Yura.

Plisetsky tries what Victor thinks must be the lowest blow he’s got in his book of insults to escape. “The ring you got from that pig is garbage,” he mutters, as Victor’s hand shakes around his cheeks. “I’ll win just to prove how incompetent his owner is. Let me go!”

Victor does. There’s a dog barking on the beach behind him, and he turns back to look at it. He says nothing, because everything he has to respond back with is something Yuri already knows: had he continued skating, everyone else on the Russian team would have fallen into their traditional places; Georgi behind him, and Yuri waiting in the wings.

Neither one of them would have felt the spark of this fight.

Yuri scowls and walks away, disappointed, and then he adds this: “This place reminds me of Hasetsu’s ocean.”
Victor feels his lips curl, watches seagulls taking flight. “I thought so too.”
Victor kills another half an hour sitting on a bench by the ocean, where he can at least watch the birds and listen to the waves while he lets his thoughts settle. His anger at Plisetsky is remarkably short-lived, like a fire extinguished nearly as soon as it’s been lit. He spends a little bit of time attempting to decode Yuri’s anger before deciding it’s a hopeless exercise: Yuri keeps gravitating into his orbit like there’s something he wants and then backs away hissing whenever he doesn’t get it. Victor reminds himself that he’s still got a handful of people to reach out to. He sends a group text off to the St. Petersburg crew, but makes sure to call Georgi, good-hearted, head-in-the-clouds Georgi, who has gotten honest-to-God tears in his eyes at every wedding he and Victor have ever had to go to together, after so many years skating together under the Russian Federation’s flag.

His phone begins to light up with texts. Evgeny writes the obituary to Victor’s single years in one message and then, after Alena’s bitchy response, recommends four different event photographers in the next. Kenya, who Victor hasn’t called in years, offers an enthusiastic congratulations, and Dmitri wants to know how he worked up the nerve, since he’s been thinking of asking Zhanna. Have you tried getting engaged by accident, Victor writes back, which sets Alena off again.

Then he emails Saga to give her the courtesy of a warning, one final time, and then considers whether or not he ought to extend the same courtesy to his agent. The email is half-drafted when Victor smiles to himself and saves it in his drafts. It’s been a long time since he’s caused that sort of chaos. He’d forgotten how to be properly mischievous.

Then he heads back to the hotel because the Grand Prix Final is waiting, and more importantly, so is Yuuri.
Rituals follow. Breakfast. A light amount of stretching. Victor gives Yuuri a back massage to at least erase the physical remnants of his anxiety, helps him into the Eros costume, puts the finishing touches on his hair. He’s holding the door of the hotel room open when Yuuri calls back for him. “Vitya, you left your gloves …”

Victor smiles to himself. “I don’t want them.”

Yuuri’s midway through the six minute warm-up when Victor realizes they’ve never really gotten the send-off ritual right. As the other skaters exit the ice and leave Yuuri on it, he finally realizes what to do. “Yuuri.”

“Yes?” Victor’s supposed to offer him words of wisdom, last tips. He doesn’t do that. He takes Yuuri’s hand and kisses Yuuri’s ring. Hundreds of cameras and the entirety of the crowd come roaring to life, and as Yuuri skates out to center ice, Victor does his part to seal the wish between them, a gesture Yuuri mimics a moment later when he brushes his lips over the gold Victor’s just kissed and then flashes Victor Eros’ customary smirk.

It occurs to Victor that this is the first time all season that Yuuri knows, fully, why Victor’s had him skating it.

They’ve changed the jump composition, which is a big gamble to make at this stage of the competition, meant to keep him on pace with the technical points Leroy’s been churning out all season long. Don’t you want to see it, Victor? Yuuri’d asked, back when they ran through final rehearsals those last days in Hasetsu. I do, Victor had breathed, and then he’d thrown his arms around Yuuri in delight. These are the kinds of instincts Yuuri has learned not to doubt, but it doesn’t mean that Victor’s heart still isn’t about to leap out of his chest. Yuuri glides through a pretty triple axel, and it’s hard to believe that he couldn’t consistently land a quad salchow at the start of the season because his combination is nearly flawless. As he skates into the quadruple flip, Victor jumps up in the air in time, watches Yuuri catch himself with one hand on the ice. His final spin is wonderfully executed, but as soon as the program’s over, Yuuri sinks to his knees on the ice, where Victor thinks he might be crying.

It’s all he can do to stand there and clench the boards until Yuuri gets to his feet and joins him at the Kiss and Cry. “Yuuri, you were great,” Victor breathes, keeping a hand on the small of Yuuri’s back as they sit and wait for scores. The 97.83 which arrives feels lower than it should rightly be, leaving Victor to wonder whether or not today’s judges will be so hard on everyone or if this is going to be the unpleasant consequence of skating first. Yuuri says nothing, just leans forward to squint at the details.
It makes Victor think about his last two seasons, constantly trying to find new ways to one-up himself. How trapped he’d been by his own ghost. He reaches over and lets his hand linger on Yuuri’s knee.

“Let’s watch Phichit’s skate,” Yuuri mumbles, clenching his towel. Victor simply nods.

Phichit Chulanont skates with clean, bright energy, but with only one quad under his belt it’ll be hard for him to pass the rest of the roster. It’s an accomplishment all its own to be here, Victor knows; no other skater from Thailand has ever made it so far. Yuuri’s not the only one to cry when he’s finished; there are tears in his eyes as he finishes his footwork sequence. “This was his goal,” Yuuri explains, very quietly. “He wanted to skate Shall we Skate at a major competition…”

Victor’s about to say something back when a very familiar kick practically overturns their bench. “How long are you idiots going to sit in the Kiss and Cry,” Yuri Plisetsky hisses.

“Yurio …”

Victor considers several possible replies. He settles for hugging the Makkachin poodle box a little bit closer, to keep it safe from Yura’s proclivity for violence. “Davai.”

After that the rituals of the rink resume. Reporters are waiting to be fed, and Yuuri’s got interviews to make it through before Phichit can join the lineup. Victor squeezes his shoulder and then leaves him to it, climbing up the stairs to the section of the stadium reserved for skaters. He wants to watch Agape off of a television screen, without the distraction of commentary.

He could never have predicted what happens next, though the raised-arm triple axel ought to have been a clue. This is a far cry from Yuri’s morning snarls. I’ll win just to prove how incompetent his owner is, he’d said, and here he is, proving himself in earnest.

Every jump is done to the highest possible degree of execution.

Victor Nikiforov is dead.

Strange.

He’d felt plenty alive, this morning.

It’s one of the universe’s great ironies that Victor is watching the murder of his own legend, brought to him by a program he choreographed on a theme of selfless love.

“Victor?”

You never took him seriously, Victor realizes. Objectively he knows this outcome would never have occurred if he’d stayed on the ice. Objectively he knows it’s a compliment to his choreography.

Vasily’s voice in his head, now: Objective knowledge is different than emotional intuition, Victor.

“Huh?” Yakov Feltsman is bodily lifting Yuri Plisetsky in the Kiss and Cry, which is something Victor remembers from his own teenage years. Yakov’s sparse with praise and affection; he remembers the first time he got a bear hug like that, remembers the way Yakov used to smile and laugh through their press conferences while Victor nibbled on chocolates.

He’s sure it’s a bad idea. Can’t be good for Yakov’s back.

“I got curious about how it was going, too,” Yuuri says, cautiously.
Victor imagines Achilles must have had to turn away from something, too, for the arrow to strike him in his heel.

“Chris is about to take the ice,” he murmurs, like he hasn’t been struck. It’s such a habit to pretend to be invincible in this setting that Victor doesn’t even realize he’s being dishonest. “Let’s find a seat.”

“Okay,” Yuuri says, though he doesn’t sound convinced. Of course he isn’t.

Christophe opens his program with his quadruple lutz, a jump only a handful of skaters on the circuit manage to do, and then launches into a combination spin. Victor can’t help but smile a little as he watches; the program’s just too perfect for Christophe: sinuous, idle seduction, music that sounds deceptively slow. He suspects Julien’s got something to do with that; there’s an interplay of dance here, an invisible partner for Chris to lure to bed.

Victor’s pretty sure Christophe’s quad is underrotated, but that doesn’t stop the judges from putting him ahead of Yuuri. Curse of being first, then. Still, Victor’s happy for him: after threatening that he’d lost his motivation, here Christophe is, making another podium run. Behind him, someone brushes against his chair and the next thing he knows both Yuuri and Sara have jumped in their seats because Yuri’s tossed his foot up between them.

*Congratulations* would be the appropriate thing to say here, but Victor can’t manage it, not just yet. What he does take note of is the way Yuri hasn’t rubbed his face in the result, isn’t gunning for a fight. He shouts a hearty and apparently sincere *Davai* for Otabek Altin’s benefit. Otabek responds with the world’s most stoic thumbs up.

Otabek surprised a lot of people when he came in third at last year’s Worlds. Victor had been too busy in his warm-up routine to really pay attention to his skating, though he’s had a chance to watch clips this year. Something about it gets lost on the stream: if Victor mutes so that he doesn’t have to listen to Russian commentators complaining about the lack of ballet influence in his style, he can’t hear the music. Otabek’s combination is force when thrown in stark relief to Yuri’s grace. His triple axel doesn’t have Yuuri’s beautiful entry. His quad salchow, though: there’s impressive distance and height to it. Behind this program is a kind of unique energy, a style that seems to be all Otabek’s.

“Another score higher than the pig’s,” Yuri gloats. Strange that he’s focusing on that, instead of how he’s just secured a world record, hammered a nail into the coffin he spent the morning insisting Victor belonged in.

“He’s great,” Victor admits. The judges think so too, putting Otabek behind Yuri. “Unique,” he adds, for Yura’s benefit. It’s an olive branch, praising Yuri’s friend while he’s still processing the loss of his legacy. “Fresh.”

Yuuri shifts uncomfortably, and says nothing as Jean-Jacques Leroy is announced. Victor sighs to himself, offers a half-hearted prayer to the God he only believes in when it’s convenient. *Plisetsky I can learn to live with, but if you give my record to the Canadian, we’re not going to be on speaking terms.*

Victor knows this program because he’s made himself watch it to compile JJ’s technical score. He recognizes exactly when it begins to go off the rails, from the very first takeoff. JJ fights for a single quad, doesn’t have enough speed to make it into a combination, and proceeds to pop his triple axel.

*Now you know*, Victor thinks. He’s heard secondhand about the way Jean-Jacques developed this program to beat him, and now he’s watching a first-class meltdown in the Grand Prix Final.

Everyone thinks it’s easy until they’re the ones with the targets on their backs.
This is what it’s like to be the favorite, JJ. It’s a pressure chamber Victor has lived in for years. It only knows how to produce two things: diamonds or dust. You wanted it so badly. Enjoy.

A sidelong glance at Yuuri reveals a very different reaction. Jean-Jacques Leroy’s quad lutz becomes a single while everyone watches in stunned silence. Yuuri’s expression is all empathy, subtle concern, even determination. It’s the exact moment Victor realizes he’s now going to have to befriend this idiot.

It’s just really not his day.

Yuuri’s sympathy continues even as a completely stricken JJ stumbles into the Kiss and Cry, where his parents try to comfort him. Nearby, Victor recognizes the woman from dinner, who stands up even though she’s in tears. She shouts his name. Claps. Slowly the neighboring audience does it too.

Shit. He’s going to have to befriend them both.

Yurio goes nuclear behind them when Jean-Jacques stands up to acknowledge the audience with his signature shout and his stupid hand signals. Next to Victor, Yuuri still radiates understanding.

Ugh.

![Men Result](image)

Afterwards, Yuuri promises to go for gold in his free skate, and Victor evades questions about the rings they’re wearing, not because he has anything to confirm or deny, but because it isn’t relevant to the skating itself. Besides, he’s learned, these past few months, that he doesn’t have to intervene every time Yuuri’s in front of the camera. Still, he only half succeeds in excluding himself from the spotlight.

*How do you feel about losing your world record to Yuri Plisetsky, today? Someone asks.*

“Yura skated well,” Victor agrees.

“It’s a beautiful program,” Yuuri adds, and Victor glances at him in surprise. There’s a subtle compliment there and a hint of something else he can’t quite place; regret, perhaps.

That elusive quadruple flip.

*Don’t you miss competing, Victor?*

Yuuri looks at him. Victor opens his mouth to speak only to hear a familiar voice chime in from among the gathered press.
“I’m sure he does,” says Stéphane Lambiel, who is a coach himself, these days, and if the press badge is to believed has been doing some commentary. “I think we all do. But I think perhaps Victor is trying to focus on his coaching responsibilities this week.”

“It’s true,” he says, with a smile, and some relief. “Which is why I’m looking forward to the long program.”

Before they can leave, Lambiel draws him aside momentarily, and Victor’s struck by the paradox of time. He’s a teenager again, sharing the ice with this man for the first time, being subtly guided away from danger and into focus. He’s also a grown man, and in much the same way that Yuri Plisetsky has surpassed him in at least one milestone today, the name Nikiforov stands where many of Lambiel’s own records used to be entered in the history books.

Maybe that’s just how it goes.

“Congratulations,” Stéphane adds, with a bright smile and a glance between Victor and Yuuri, whose cheeks immediately turn rosy as he lingers at Victor’s side. There’s an entire conversation loaded into the one word; Victor’s first season spent coaching, the rings on their hands, Yuuri’s arrival for the second time into the Final, even Plisetsky’s record, achieved because Victor wrote him a beautiful program that any other season he might have skated himself.

Victor takes Yuuri’s hand. “Thank you,” he says, and like Lambiel, he means more than just the one thing. He leads Yuuri back to the hotel. There’s a whole free day between now and the free skate, and Victor considers how best to spend that time, what he can do to buffer Yuuri from his own anxiety. What this will look like tonight is a series of post-event rituals: Yuuri gets out of his costume, hangs it up. Victor asks how he’s feeling, offers a massage strictly to work out any twists and pulls from the day’s performance.

Afterwards, they get dinner with a much smaller audience: just Minako, Mari, and Phichit. Even with the smaller crowd, the meal’s more chaotic than Victor first pictured: Mari’s finally able to corner her brother, and with Minako’s help, wrestles the story of the rings out of a stammering, nervous Yuuri. Phichit’s put on an aura of forcible cheer. Yuuri, you can’t even be that mad. Look at me! I’m practically in last place.

“I just wish I hadn’t touched the ice for the Flip,” mumbles Yuuri, picking at his food. Phichit scrolls through his phone to find out what everyone else is up to, but Yuuri and Victor both make polite excuses to escape another evening out.

Victor sits somewhere balanced on the precipice between introversion and extroversion. Yuuri does not. He looks tired after days like this, spent only in the company of other people. Victor, on the other hand, feels a little antsy, keeps replaying his day. Victor Nikiforov is dead, he hears, in Plisetsky’s voice, over and over and over again. He still has the score memorized down to two decimal places.

It’s all unexpected static. “Would you mind if I go take a swim?” Victor asks, once they’re back at the hotel. If nothing else, the cold will clear his head, and laps will wear him out, will burn off the energy his body still seems to believe he ought to be expending at an event like this.

“Go ahead,” Yuuri says. Victor kisses his forehead, changes, and he’s nearly out the door before Yuuri looks up from the video game he’s started to play, sitting back on the bed. “Hey, Victor?”

“Yes, Yuuri?”

“… Can we talk when you come back?”
Victor hesitates, turns back. “Is everything alright?” He asks. Yuuri smiles to reassure him. *Everything’s fine,* he promises, and Victor, fool-in-love that he is, doesn’t question it. Hindsight will later linger on this and a dozen other moments as places where things were more unraveled than he thought, will reveal to him the glossy sheen of his own mania. Every future Victor is slightly wiser than the man that he is now.

Back on the upper deck, he lasts for all of twenty minutes swimming laps, racing against a version of himself that is invincible and untouchable, whose legend is carved so deeply into the ice that nobody can erase it. The myth of Victor is immune to cold; the real, flesh-and-blood version is not. Still, he feels better when he heads back downstairs, reminds himself he’s probably just cranky and jetlagged and second-hand stressed about the Final on Yuuri’s behalf.

Yuuri’s still on his phone when he comes back, hasn’t changed. Victor’s not even sure he’s moved. “Hey, Victor.”

“Just a sec,” Victor promises with a quick grin. He knows Yuuri doesn’t need the reminder about how cold the pool is. “Shower.”

“Mm,” Yuuri agrees absently. With the single exception of the shower itself, there’s no real division between the sinks and the bedroom; it’s all suave and modern, half of a wall and a panel of clear glass. Victor shrugs off the robe and slips out of his trunks without shame, nearly smiles to himself. A year ago he was in Sochi, alone, unaware; now he’s engaged and with that thought comes the idea that this is his new normal, that Yuuri sitting ten feet away playing a mobile game while Victor changes and showers is as mundane as it is intimate.

“You’ve been domesticated,” Evgeny might crow, almost like an insult, incapable of understanding the strange delight Victor feels whenever he thinks about little things like this, each one of them a milestone of how far he and Yuuri have traveled together, these past eight months.

His skin tingles at the immediate contrast between crisp December air and unforgiving heat and steam. Victor keeps it brief, gets himself back into a robe and then goes to sit by the hotel window, still drying off his hair.

Yuuri turns to face him, scrolling through Instagram. “… Apparently, Minako-sensei’s drinking with Celestino at a bar.”

Victor has won a drinking contest against Celestino, although he only vaguely recalls his victory, and he’s heard the story a dozen times by now of how *they kicked us out because you took your pants off in the middle of the restaurant.* On the other hand, Victor’s pretty sure Minako is undefeatable. Worse, she’s sly about it: he’s fallen victim more than once to Minako’s idle pass of a full beer, followed by a sharp-edged, observant question. “Wow, best to keep our distance.” He’d prefer not to spend the next day hungover, not in a week like this one. At the banquet, however, all bets are going to be off. “… By the way, Yuuri. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“… Right.” Yuuri closes the app, and Victor watches as he clenches his hands into fists. He waits, quiet, concerned. “After the Final,” Yuuri murmurs, “… let’s end this.”

*Let’s end this.*

Victor attempts to think. His mind does not cooperate.

“Huh?”

“You’ve done more than enough for me, Victor. Thanks to you, I was able to give everything I had to my last season.” Victor has stepped out of the shower into some kind of nightmare universe.
Nightmare universe Yuuri strings together sentences comprised only of words Victor doesn’t want to hear together, phrases that are hurricanes bouncing through all of the halls of Victor’s body. *Let’s end this* sweeps through first. Then comes *my last season*. Victor stares as Yuuri bends over in one of those formal Japanese bows, the sort he’s never given Victor before. “Thank you for everything, Victor,” he says, as though this whole endeavor is already past-tense. As though Victor has already agreed to this ending. “Thank you for being my coach.”

A drop of water lands on Victor’s foot. It shouldn’t be a surprise to him. Objectively he knows he’s crying; he can feel all of the symptoms, the flooding of his eyes and the restriction of his throat. He detects a slight tremor in his own hands.

He does not want to be crying. Maybe nobody ever does. Certainly not Victor, who has burned years of his life pointedly avoiding the way misery tends to move in as an unwelcome guest, refusing to acknowledge his own sadness. He has preferred, these past five years, to be protected by the shield of celebrity and invincibility. For all his romanticizing the little, mundane things, he’s currently being confronted with an intimacy he hasn’t calculated for, would never have anticipated, and certainly does not like.

Miserable Victor has always been a thing he’s tried to starve to death, and Yuuri’s just set out an entire feast for his unhappiness.

“Victor?”

He tries to stop crying. It does not work. Victor feels himself getting angry over his own meltdown, which just makes the tears come faster. “Damn.” He rarely curses around Yuuri, but Victor can be vindictive, and those parts of him are unleashed now, poisonous little actors trying to mitigate the damage. “I didn’t expect Katsuki Yuuri to be such a selfish human being.”

“Right.” Yuuri’s terse. Almost sarcastic. “I made this selfish decision on my own.” *You’re damn right you did,* Victor nearly spits, and then Yuuri reinforces his choice. “I’m retiring.”

Yuuri’s beautiful triple axel, the one with the layback entry, will appear exactly one more time in competition. His yet-unperfected quadruple flip may never see the real spotlight. The elegance of his footwork, the grace with which he skates.

*Finished.*

Victor cries harder, and hates himself for it.

Yuuri reaches out to brush aside his bangs, the last thing Victor has left to hide behind. Instinctively he resists this. There’s a reason he hasn’t looked up. He hasn’t wanted to be seen.

“... What are you doing, Yuuri?”

“Oh,” Yuuri breathes, hesitant. He wasn’t hesitant to *do this in the first place,* Victor’s defensive outrage whispers. “I’m just surprised to see you cry.”

Victor swats his hand away. “I’m mad, okay?”

“You’re the one who said it was only until the Grand Prix Final!” They’re fighting. They’re going to have a real, honest-to-God fight.

*Honey, you’re outmatched,* Victor wants to laugh, bitter. It’s the sort of insult Christophe might use. Yuuri’s throwing words in his face that haven’t been spoken for months, and anyway, after Rostelecom, he’d been perfectly clear standing in Fukuoka airport. *I wish you’d never retire.* “I
thought you needed my help more,” he murmurs, trying to be calm. It’s nearly impossible. Let’s end this hasn’t finished its war path, and he hasn’t come down from the instinct to panic in defense of what initially sounded a lot more like a conversation about their relationship than either of their careers.

Although perhaps he ought to be in that state about the relationship regardless, if this is where they are.

“Aren’t you going to make a comeback?” Yuuri asks. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Victor, irritated, reaches forward for Yuuri’s shoulders and barely resists the urge to shake sense into him. “How can you tell me to return to the ice while saying you’re retiring?” He hisses.

Yuuri proves that he’s not so outmatched after all when he stares back at Victor. “How can you sit across from me and pretend like you’re not doing exactly the same thing?” Victor opens his mouth and closes it because words aren’t coming: Yuuri, for all of the flaws of his original argument, has struck at something much closer to the truth. “You miss skating,” Yuuri snaps. “Maybe you hide it from everybody else, but you were miserable when Yuri’s score came out, earlier, and then watching everyone else …. Victor, I know you.”

There is both balm and bane to be had there: Yuuri once gave Victor permission to be himself. Now he is collecting on even Victor’s depressive streak.

Victor briefly considers lying, simply out of habit and first instinct. It would certainly be easier.

It would also be the beginning of a different sort of ending, and there is a ring on his finger. For all of its magic, Victor knows it is not a thing made to survive deception. “I’ve thought about it,” he says, curtly. It’s the easiest way to say that every time he’s experienced discomfort he’s tried as hard as he can to push it away, because there’s not room for it in the life he’s trying to make with Yuuri instead. “But I like coaching you.”

“I know.” Yuuri, too, is deflated; he slumps under Victor’s hands and deflects his gaze to the view of Barcelona outside their window. “But you shouldn’t ruin your career just for me.”

Victor marvels. What a pair of hypocrites they are. He slides his hands over Yuuri’s shoulders, stands up slowly. “How can you sit across from me,” he echoes, “and pretend like you’re not doing exactly the same thing?”

It’s Yuuri’s turn for tears. “I’m not as good as you are,” he mumbles. “It’s an easy choice.”

“Not yet,” Victor agrees absently. Yuuri also has four years less experience, doesn’t have the advantage of Victor’s upbringing or Yakov’s powerhouse of skaters. Victor moves to their suitcases, scrubs at his face, and throws the towel on the bathroom floor. “The real waste of it is that you could be better,” he says, tugging on the first pair of briefs that he finds and then following suit with pants, a sweater. Victor’s usually careful about his outfits and this is certainly anything but that, hastily and thoughtlessly selected. “That’s what I’d like to see.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going for a walk,” Victor says. “To calm down.”

“... Don’t you think we should --”

“What, talk about it? You’re right. That’s what couples do.” He’s being vindictive again. Hypocrite. Underneath all of this irritation is a splinter lodged in Victor’s lungs: a reminder that he’s hidden the
things that make him uncomfortable about himself from Yuuri; that until now they haven’t once talked about the subtle longing Victor’s been trying to ignore, and that in his bag is a journal from a therapist that he hasn’t opened in weeks. In fact, he hasn’t even admitted that he has a therapist.

Doing so would require admitting that he is not always happy.

*What do you want me to do? Go back to St. Petersburg?* That’s where he’ll have to be if he picks up skating again; Yakov’s his coach and the Yubileyny is his rink. What does Yuuri picture himself doing, in this narrative he’s constructed while Victor’s unawares? Sit in Victor’s apartment in a foreign country, playing house-husband?

Perhaps this is what he thinks Victor’s been doing, all this time, in Hasetsu.

Wasting his damn time.

Victor inhales, exhales, points at his own mouth. A whole lot of ugliness simmers right underneath the surface of beauty, sometimes. That’s in the fairytales, too. He’s not just the hero. Sometimes he’s the witch. “I’ll be back when I’m calmer.”

“Okay,” Yuuri says carefully and miserably. Victor has no doubt that he’s going to start crying in earnest when the door to their room closes behind him. He leaves nonetheless: it was not a lie in Beijing to say that this is not something he’s good at, and when he knows he’s upset for a perfectly good reason it’s even harder to want to coddle away Yuuri’s tears.

He’s too angry to bother, anyhow, and there’s the real rub: it’s precisely because he loves Yuuri that he can be this upset in the first place. It’s as good of a reminder as any why Victor has always eschewed this closeness with everyone else who’s ever made the effort.

Victor’s feet carry him out of the hotel and back down the sidewalk to the sea. It’s late and it’s cold and it’s dark; he’s left his scarf in his room. The beach is all but abandoned, except for a familiar figure bundled up into a trenchcoat, hat shoved down over his head, smoking a cigarette underneath an overhead streetlamp. “Yakov?” *What are you doing here?* Yuri’s probably off with Otabek again, ignoring Yakov’s attempts at enforcing curfew, being a generally rebellious teenager. It’s what Victor would have done, at that age. Still, Victor hasn’t seen him with a cigarette in hand in well over a decade, particularly now that all the health risks are known. It’s a bad habit for skaters who need all the endurance they can get, and Yakov’s usually not the sort to ask for his trainees to expend
willpower that he, himself, is unable to summon. “... I thought you quit.”

“Vitya.” Yakov sizes him up as he comes into the light. There’s a momentary pause while he takes another drag. “You try spending a week with your ex-wife while you pretend like you’re not raising another teenager,” he quips.

“Lilia,” Victor murmurs, in sudden understanding. He’d heard Yakov was back in their old house again, a rumor from Mila, except Victor knows how big of a house it is, knows perfectly well how easy it might be to simply avoid each other. After all, he tried for years.

Yakov studies him a beat longer. “Yuuri,” he counters.

“He wants to retire.”

“So he’s as stupid as you,” Yakov murmurs. It’s as close to a compliment as Yakov ever gets, and it validates Victor’s own opinions. Backhanded as the words are, they’re also an admission that he, too, sees the possibilities in Yuuri’s skating, and knows it’s too soon for them to be abandoned.

“There’s justice in the universe after all.” The old man chuckles wryly when Victor scowls at him and says nothing. After their last argument, Victor’s in his debt, isn’t interested in returning blow for blow. “... My father gave me interesting advice when I got married,” says Yakov. “Yasha, he said to me, you can be right, or you can be married.”

“Yakov.” Victor hasn’t tried a cigarette since he was seventeen, and he’s almost tempted now, except that he remembers quite clearly the coughing fit that happened as he tried to inhale. It isn’t something he wants to repeat now in front of his coach as a grown man, pretending like he’s got his career figured out, life and love all on the right track. He’s irritable, so he does what he used to do when he lived in Yakov’s house as a teenager, trying out new and inventive ways to swear just to get under his coach’s skin. They both have tempers, though Yakov’s is more obvious, and Victor was so bad, back then, about playing with fire. “... What the fuck does that even mean?”

“It means that if you love that boy, and you don’t someday want to be an old man smoking a cigarette alone on the beach, you’ll go fucking walk back into that hotel,” Yakov grunts, mimicking him. “It’s harder than a quadruple flip, Vitya. And you’re less naturally apt. Better start practicing now.”

Victor scowls at him. “You’re the worst,” he grumbles, but he reaches forward to pluck the cigarette out of Yakov’s hand, to stomp it out on the sidewalk. As much of a pain in the ass as Yakov is, it would be highly inconvenient for him to get lung cancer and die. He kneels to pick it up afterwards while Yakov glares at him; glances out to count three more waves coming in against the shore.

Then Victor turns back to the hotel, tosses the cigarette into a trash can he passes on the way. “And take your own damn advice,” he grouses, thinking of Yakov and Lilia, each hard as stone; coal and diamonds, made of the same stuff. “Nobody else on this planet is going to marry either one of you.”

“I could say the same of you,” Yakov fires back, and Victor realizes he knows better than anyone, having played father to all of the parts of Victor that he’s kept hidden from everyone else, even Yuuri. Witness to most of his dark.
When he arrives back in the hotel room he can’t even see Yuuri at first; he’s not on the bed, even though his phone and glasses are there. Then Victor’s eyes land on the top of his head, peeking over the edge of the bedframe, and he kicks off his shoes as he comes around to where Yuuri’s sitting cross-legged in the narrow space between the bed and the window, chin resting on top of the pillow he’s hugging.

Yuuri wipes at his face, tries to rub away the streaks of his tears.

Victor sits next to him, shoulder to shoulder. “I want you to reconsider.”

Yuuri sniffs. Glares at their reflection, which Victor knows he probably can’t even really see. “Only if you do.”

Blindly, Victor reaches up for the bed, pats the mattress until he finds Yuuri’s glasses. He cleans them on the hem of his sweater, and offers them back. “I will.”
They fall asleep on separate sides of two pushed together twin beds; Victor remembers it clearly, because sometimes silence can be so loud. He sleeps uneasily, but when he wakes, Yuuri’s turned over and curled into his back, which is subtle comfort. Victor’s bag is not in easy reach, so he carefully climbs out of bed to retrieve his things, tugs out the journal he hasn’t touched in too many months before settling back in next to Yuuri. What happens next is unusual for Victor: a steady murder of the morning hours, time he kills while counting Yuuri’s breaths and trying not to check the clock. There’s an uneasy feeling still lodged someplace between Victor’s throat, chest, and heart; it keeps getting in the way of his pen. When he makes no progress -- nothing other than a very teenage urge to circle his pen over and over again on the page, until it’s black with ink, Victor turns back to his tablet instead, browsing through books and writing down quotes the way he did when he still had programs to design.

Eventually Yuuri stirs, though the way he jolts, bumping into Victor, with the realization of precisely how far he migrated as he slept; the way Victor feels him processing the prior evening’s argument
through the shifting of the mattress suggests that yesterday’s demons are not yet slain. “Morning,” Victor greets him mildly, though it isn’t quite. He’s making a determined effort to bridge the jagged edges of new distance between them, to go at least halfway.

“Morning,” Yuuri replies, carefully. It’s been longer than Victor cares to recall since Yuuri’s been careful with Victor, like this. Months, really. Victor thinks he almost prefers the alternative, but before he can decide what to say next, Yuuri’s curiosity has caught up with his mouth. “... What are you doing?”

Ah, that’s right. Yuuri never saw him in the morning, sitting up with a fresh mug of tea or coffee and Vasily’s notebook open, back when it had been a habit. Somewhere along the way, comfort left Victor reaching for these things less and less, and then, even later, Yuuri had moved into his bed, and then Victor forewent the practice entirely.

“Writing,” Victor quips wryly. Hindsight is always so, so clear. Then, because no real writing has actually occurred, he admits: “Plagiarizing, mostly.” The answer’s unsatisfactory, he knows, he’s every bit as much the mountain as Yuuri is. He too will wait years before the next expedition. Except the wound is too fresh for him to admit what else is on the pages. He closes it and tosses it back towards his bag, flips back a few pages in his tablet. “And reading. You know I’ve run into Yura and Yakov at the beach here?”

He hands Yuuri his phone, lets him read for himself. Another poem. It ends:

If you are easily disturbed
you need to get an ocean.

“... Is that where you went yesterday?” Yuuri asks, which is a different, gentler way of asking are you easily disturbed?

Victor answers both readily. “Yes.”

“I didn’t think you would cry,” Yuuri murmurs, a little miserably. “I --”

“I know.” That’s a part of the myth Victor’s built up, too: he’s a five-time world champion who never has reason to weep. Victor doesn’t want to relive it, particularly, not when he can easily pick up on Yuuri’s fretful, anxious habits already. Yuuri slept longer than he did, though Victor thinks he probably fell asleep long after Victor first went to bed. That’s just the way their bodies work, more attuned to different parts of the day, and anyway, Yuuri doesn’t look well-rested. “Make your decision after the Final,” he suggests quietly, trying to find some place to carve out a compromise. “... One thing at a time, okay?”

Yuuri nods, and looks down at his hands. Victor tries and fails when he tells himself not to despair, and the kiss he leans over to press to Yuuri’s forehead is a little bit rote. Victor has a lot of practice at that; in fact, it’s his old habits that have him out of bed shortly after, and already in the shower, reconstructing the perfect image of a functioning human being. Yuuri follows him afterwards; there’s, in theory, public practices they’re supposed to attend today, a chance for press and commentators to get new notes on each skater’s long program. Yuuri thinks they’re still going. Victor already knows that they aren’t. He spends all of the twenty-or-so minutes Yuuri spends getting ready calling every rink in the area, until he finds one on the outskirts of the city willing to
block off a third of the ice during their public skate for the two of them.

When Yuuri accompanies him downstairs, expecting to walk over to the arena, face purpose-built and blank, Victor simply stops to find a bellboy, instructs him to hail a cab instead.

It’s not the worst practice he’s ever had with Yuuri, not by far, but it’s very far from the best. Victor’s helpless here, watching Yuuri work through and battle a creature he can’t fight for him. “Enough,” he says, eventually, when it looks like Yuuri’s about ready to cry with frustration. It’s the middle of the afternoon and the rest of the rink is occupied by just a handful of skaters; a couple teenagers, cutting class, and what looks like a grandmother with a couple elementary-aged children that make Victor think of the triplets. He knows the employee monitoring the public skate has already recognized them, and the teenagers have pretended to be surreptitious with their phones, fooling no one.

Victor doesn’t really feel like practicing the duetto, but over the years he’s gotten very good at doing things he doesn’t feel like doing. He holds his hand out for Yuuri and sweeps him into their dance, and by the end of it, as Yuuri’s lowering him gently back down to the ice, Victor almost feels like himself again. Back in their hotel room both of those costumes are still waiting in the wardrobe. Evidently they’re only going to be worn once, and maybe not even then, depending on how the long programs all go tomorrow. He catches himself thinking about that, tries and fails for a second time to keep his mood from plummeting.

“We should head back,” Yuuri reminds him. “Your family will want to see you when they arrive.” Even that turn of phrase is colored by his anxiety, a subtle erasure of himself and the place Victor’s carved out for Yuuri in his life.

Victor catches himself grinding his teeth. “You too,” he says. Or does Yuuri not want that now, either? “They’re going to be your family, too, someday,” murmurs Victor, which is both a concession to the edge of his own temper, the fire mostly out, down to smoldering charcoal and the occasional spark, as well as a way of fighting back against Yuuri’s tendency to try and make himself smaller than he actually is, as though he might someday actually manage to become unimportant.

Victor knows he could never be that.

Victor tells himself he won’t allow it, but he’s not really sure it’s his decision.

Yuuri looks up at him in surprise, and then he exhales, and though he says nothing, Victor reads the way tension bleeds out of his posture, the way his gaze softens and his eyes water. On their way out of the rink, this time, it’s Yuuri who takes his hand.
Victor’s reminded of why he hates Charles de Gaulle airport when his family’s flight is delayed by a solid two and a half hours; by the time his parents and his sister arrive it’s almost nine o’clock. Victor’s invited Minako and Mari to join them for a late dinner; introductions get made in the lobby. You have a lot of earrings, Sofia says, to Mari. Victor watches as his father shakes Yuuri’s hand and as Minako and Mariya size each other up. “Sofia,” he murmurs gently. “This is Yuuri’s ballet teacher.”

“Are you as good as Mama?”

“She won a Benois de la Danse once,” Yuuri says, because while he’s been content to let Victor’s sister walk all over him, local-Hasetsu-celebrity Okukawa Minako is apparently one step too far.

It works in a way Yuuri probably did not expect: Sofia immediately wants to know everything there is to know about Minako’s career. Mariya shakes her head with an apologetic chuckle; Victor lets Sofia ride piggyback while they walk to a nearby restaurant as she peppers Minako with questions. So you danced with the Royal Ballet? You were a primadonna? What was your favorite solo? Are there videos of you on YouTube? By the end of this interview, his sister is convinced that Minako is a worthwhile addition to Victor’s life, and Yuuri seems to have risen somewhat in her estimation if only because Victor’s sure that Sofia hasn’t quite yet figured out whether or not he and Minako are a packaged deal.

“By the way,” she huffs, in Yuuri’s direction, “if you hadn’t been such an idiot in Moscow you probably wouldn’t have had to skate first and then the judges wouldn’t have given you such a stupid score.”

“Hey!” Mari protests.

“Sofia.” Victor chides.

“What?” She sulks. “It’s true!”
“All I can control is my own skating,” Yuuri replies. “If I had landed that quadruple flip cleanly, they wouldn’t have had anything to downgrade.”

“You came closer to it than anyone else except Vitya,” Sofia points out. “Did you teach him, Vitenka?”

“I did, birdie.” Victor’s glad when they arrive for dinner, a few more blocks and he’s sure he would’ve needed to set her down. Sofia’s gotten bigger and he’s getting older, and someday even these little things will be well into the past.

At the table, Mari leans over to him, and whispers something like: is everyone you know this opinionated? Victor looks at her quizzically until he realizes she’s talking about Yuri Plisetsky, who rushed into Yu-Topia with equal amounts of delicacy and consideration. Only all the ones I really care about, Victor whispers back, which probably says something about him, the way everyone he keeps adding to his life has such sharp edges. Even Yuuri, who hides them so well.

He rests his chin in one hand, glancing back around the table; Minako and Sergei and Mariya are engrossed in a conversation about recently premiered ballets, and his sister is still needling Yuuri about his jumps.

“... You’re going to try again in tomorrow’s skate, right?”

“You better,” Sofia huffs. “Otherwise everyone will think my brother’s not a very good teacher! And also, I came all this way! What’s the point of all this if you don’t try your best, huh?”

It’s dangerous territory, the kind that has Victor ready to intercede, but in front of his eyes, Yuuri demurs and deflects the way he once did with Yuri Plisetsky. “We’ll see what happens,” he says, with a tiny smile. Something flutters in Victor’s chest, a little bit revived. Don’t get your hopes up, he chides whatever that is, but it’s futile: this is a creature made out of hope, and it doesn’t know how to be anything else. “Let it be a surprise. Do you like those as much as Victor does?”

Sofia studies him. She knows she’s been tricked in some way, but can’t quite figure out how it happened. “I do,” she confirms, which Victor knew already.

This is as good an opportunity as any, he figures. “... Speaking of surprises,” he chimes in, “I have one for you. One is a surprise, and if you’re very good after I tell you the surprise, I’ll tell you a secret.”

“Is one of them that you got engaged?” Sofia inquires, wrinkling her nose. Victor can’t help the way his mouth falls open, or the quick glance he sends in his mother’s direction, betrayed. “Don’t look like that, Vitya, gosh. I read it on the internet this morning.”

Yuuri looks bemused. Victor closes his mouth and then remembers he was asked a question. “... That was supposed to be the surprise,” he amends carefully. “What do you think?”

Sofia glances around the table, sees that all eyes are on her, and tilts her chin up a little bit to command the stage she’s been given. Somewhere, deep down, Victor Nikiforov is sighing internally over this monster his parents have made: two monsters, really, children of prodigy sitting around this table. Still, there’s an underlying fragility there, too; Victor knows that just as well. “... Does it mean you’re going back to Japan for good?”

Victor opens his mouth to explain, but Yuuri beats him to it. “We haven’t decided,” he says, and then his knee bumps into Victor’s, though he doesn’t look over. It’s too marked to be an accident. “I
want Victor to start skating again.”

“Really?” Sofia asks, delighted, and Victor swears he sees the corner of Yuuri’s lips curl before his sister remembers that she’s supposed to be cool and collected.

“Like Yuuri said,” Victor demures, “there’s a lot to decide after the Final.”

“Fine, whatever, congratulations. Daddy wants to toast you, I think.”

Sergei laughs and smiles his brightest smile. “I’ve been waiting all night,” he agrees, and while he signals the waitstaff for champagne, Sofia leans back over to Victor.

“You still have to tell me the secret,” she insists. So Victor leans over, though he stage-whispers it loud enough that Yuuri can still hear: if Yuuri makes the podium, I’m going to skate his exhibition with him.

“No way! Won’t you get into trouble?”

Victor holds one finger up over his lips while the champagne is poured. “It’s a secret,” he reminds her. “You can’t tell.”

Sofia turns to look at Yuuri, crossing her arms. “That settles it,” she tells him airily. “Now you have to do the flip.”

The morning comes with or without their consent, and it paints everything with new poignancy. Victor helps Yuuri with his hair for what might be the last time, smooths out the beautiful blue blazer he looks so elegant in, walks him over to the arena. His footfalls sing-song I don’t want this to end in iambic pentameter as they walk in silence, at a distance that feels foreign to Victor. It makes him an easy target for one of the waiting press members, who pull Victor aside to do a quick chat with Lambiel one last time.

“Hi, Victor!”

“Hi, Stéphane.” He makes a weak joke. “It’s been a while.” Victor can’t summon his full smile, so he offers a parting statement for the viewers, something that feels more forced than it is anything else, all function, no form. “People of Japan, please continue to cheer for Yuuri today.”
He sees Stéphane’s brow furrow a little bit on the screen behind the camera, and steps away from the sound of history’s voice behind him: *It seems neither Yuuri Katsuki nor Victor Nikiforov have the energy we’ve come to expect.*

Victor shouldn’t frown, not here where so many people are watching, where even when he’s not on the ice people still look to him, and take their cues from what he does.

He does it anyway.

In a complete reversal, Jean-Jacques is on the ice first. He looks nervous and fidgety, even as his parents try to encourage him from the boards. Yuuri turns away to start stretching as Victor watches the program: JJ misses his cue, and touches a hand down on his first jump. Victor immediately counts him off the podium; it’s harsh and judgmental, but so is the sport they share. The ice is as unforgiving as it is beautiful. Jean-Jacques fights his way through the rest of his program in a way that is audible and tangible: Victor can hear it in the crunch of his skates on every edgy-landing, instinctively feels in his feet and his knees the way those moments go.

He steps out of the quad loop, too.

The judges give him 213.91 points for all of those flaws.

Phichit is up next, but today Yuuri doesn’t have time to watch his friend. Victor turns his back on the ice and studies Yuuri instead.

He looks about as miserable as Victor feels, and it’s time.

*Well,* thinks Victor wryly, as they step out into the stadium lights. *Let’s end this.* Except even as he thinks it, he knows he doesn’t mean it. Putting words to how he feels, knowing this is going to be the last time Yuuri takes the ice as a professional unless something changes in the next six minutes, is difficult. Finding something encouraging to say is even harder. “... Don’t worry, you can win gold, Yuuri.” It’s still Yuuri’s goal, after all, and Victor knows the potential that’s still there, that might forever go unrealized. “Believe in yourself.”

He takes Yuuri’s hands, and Yuuri flinches a little in surprise.

“Hey, Victor ...” Victor swears he sees a tiny curl in the corner of Yuuri’s mouth, the ghost of a smile. “… I told you before that I wanted you to stay who you were, right? Don’t suddenly start trying to sound like a coach now.” Yuuri’s palm curls around his, and there’s something being said in the press of their hands, but Victor isn’t there just yet, can’t quite translate. “I want to smile for my last time on the ice.”

Behind them, Phichit’s scores come out, something under 200. *My last time on the ice.* Victor thinks back over the past few days, months, contemplates what to say.

Then he leans in very, very close. “Yuuri, listen to me,” he says quietly. “I debated whether I should tell you this now, but ...” *I want Victor to start skating again,* he hears Yuuri say, defiant in his own quiet way at dinner, “I took a break after becoming the five-time world champion to coach you,” he hums, “so how is it possible that you still haven’t won a single gold medal?”

*A break.* It’s a hint, a little one. He doesn’t want to skate if Yuuri’s not there, but he’s promised to consider it, is considering it still. When he thinks about competing again he’s largely excited to compete against Yuuri, who’s the only skater present who has the potential to challenge Victor on Victor’s terms. Victor knows what Yuuri can do: he’s seen this program skated cleanly at practice, knows the way things ought to be coming together.
So he dangles the possibility of his return, along with the one thing Yuuri was so afraid of at the start of the season: the way people will look into his skating, and decide that he’s unworthy, that Victor’s a failure as a coach by extension.

Victor knows that isn’t the case, but he also knows Yuuri is nowhere near his full potential. “... How much longer are you going to stay in warm-up mode?”

Yuuri’s eyes widen and Victor leans over the rail to hug him, even though he’s still complaining. “I really want to kiss the gold medal,” he grumbles. You’re going to break my streak.

Yuuri stares at him, and then breaks into a smile and hugs him harder. The cameras pick up. Victor’s not sure whose shoulders shake first, whether he’s laughing or crying.

Maybe he’s doing a little of both.

What he does know is this: it’s time for the last time.

Yuuri Katsuki takes his place at center ice, and the piano strains begin, send him into the delicate opening spin, wistful in the same way Victor’s program was, the year before. Watching Yuuri glide into his first combination is almost like watching himself: two toe loops, both executed with uncanny ease. Yuuri’s quadruple salchow is as calm as a quad can be, and instead of a triple loop, Yuuri does a triple flip that makes Victor’s heart skip a beat.

Maybe it’s because the flip has always been his jump, or maybe because it’s the kind of pointed difficulty Victor might calmly insert into a program, just to remind the watching world of the distance between him and the rest of his competitors. It’s statement-making, even if he doesn’t know yet what it is that Yuuri’s trying to say. Maybe it’s a mystery even to Yuuri. Whatever the case, he makes it look just as easy, and then some: his layback Ina Bauer into a triple axel is miles prettier than anything Victor’s ever done, the sort of grace that haunts his dreams.

The music picks up, and Victor watches, from some skating paradise, as Yuuri puts another quad in the place where a triple is supposed to be. Watching Yuuri skate is always a strangely elemental experience, as though Yuuri’s the one manufacturing the music while he moves, but this is achingly beautiful, so wonderful that Victor’s completely at a loss. Two combinations follow. Yuuri makes it all look simple, uncomplicated, and then throws himself into the difficult step sequence they designed together. It’s the hardest sequence in any of tonight’s programs, and the word for the way Yuuri skates it is serene.

Don’t you see, Yuuri? Victor wonders if Yuuri will ever understand how incredible he is. If he’ll ever realize how happy it makes Victor to stand here at the side of the rink and watch Yuuri compose
love songs like this with the sweet hiss of his blades and the elegant bend of his spine. It’s all the original beauty that made Victor want him so much in the first place, honed to a perfection that breaks Victor’s chest open and does strange things with whatever lives inside there, whatever things make Victor Victor.

His eyes are wet.

He spent so many years trying not to cry, and now it seems like crying’s all he’s ever going to do.

You can’t quit.

Yuuri’s on his backwards inside edge, and Victor holds his breath, counts the flashes of Yuuri’s face one last time.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

There it is.

His quadruple flip is now also Yuuri’s quadruple flip.

Victor clamps a hand over his mouth, blinks away his tears as Yuuri moves into his finishing spin.

When he pulls out of it one arm is extended in perfect, gorgeous reach; directed as though he could reach across the yards that separate them, any distance, really, and touch, with delicacy and determination, with gentleness and grace, the fragile glass that is also Victor’s heart.

It’s perfect.
That moment lasts for exactly one second before Yuuri acknowledges what he’s just done: he raises both of his hands into the air and screams.

Victor knows it, too: “Yuuri,” he shouts, throwing his arms open. On the ice, Yuuri hesitates for just a fraction of a second, enough for Victor to read in him what Yuuri’s claimed to see in reverse the whole time: the body language of a man who wants to be out on the ice, and not waiting along the boards. … I don’t think you want to quit, either.

We’re so alike, you and I.

In the Kiss and Cry, Yuuri hunches over, presses his face into his hands. “Don’t worry,” Victor assuages him gently, reaching for Yuuri’s shoulder, drawing him close. “Your performance was so perfect. I’m sure you’ll get a great score.”

Yuuri does get a great score. At 221.58 points, it shatters Victor’s other world record. Yuuri squints at it and Victor reflexively frowns, because this is the second time this week that he’s been knocked out of the record books.

It catapults Yuuri into first place, puts him well over three hundred total points.

Victor holds a hand out with a slight smile, and Yuuri shakes it. This was their goal, this moment, the result of months of hard work. Victor draws him in, and this time, by some miracle, he’s worked out what it is he needs to say. “Congratulations, Yuuri,” he says, low and breathy into the shell of Yuuri’s ear, where none of the cameras will pick up what it is that he’s said. He thinks he detects a subtle shiver and nearly breaks character. “Having both Yuri’s beat my records is the ultimate bliss as your choreographer and coach,” he purrs, and if his smirk ghosts over the ridge of Yuuri’s ear, so be it. “... but it’s the ultimate diss as a competitor.”

“Huh?” Yuuri leans back to offer him a bright-eyed, beautiful smile, the kind of thing Victor might call hopeful for the first time in two days. He wants more of it, wants an infinite number of smiles exactly like this one. “Does that mean you’ll come back?”

Victor, conscious of where they are, just looks back at the ice, where Christophe is due to skate in a costume that’s got cutouts entirely down the sides, and smiles. He makes a photographer take a photo of them together on his phone, immortalizing the moment, and then looks back towards the ice where Christophe is no doubt chasing Yuuri down, the way he’s done with Victor, all those years.

He looks just in time to see Christophe pop his quad salchow, which is the sort of mistake which will probably keep him off the podium. Allez, Chris! Their friend recovers admirably: gets a standing ovation and a flower crown from Minako Okukawa; replaces Victor and Yuuri in the Kiss and Cry
where he promptly finds himself in third place with two fierce competitors left to skate. He smiles
and blows a kiss, but Victor sees his disappointment, watches the slight press of Julian’s hand on
Christophe’s back as they leave.

Strange, the way Christophe probably won’t be on the podium this year.

It’s an idea Victor isn’t used to any more than he is finding his records erased. However, it’s also the
precise moment that guarantees Yuuri a medal. Otabek’s due to take the ice, but Victor’s got
something he needs to get off his chest, and he’s too impulsive to wait. He’s never been the sort to
back down on a decision once it’s made; that, more than anything else, explains the presence of the
ring on his finger, which in turn is because he once saw a video of Yuuri putting Victor’s heart out
onto the ice, and then he decided to fly out to Japan without a backup plan.

So Victor leaves Yuuri with the reporters and works his way back towards the dressing rooms to find
the Russian team. Yuri, Yakov, and Lilia are all walking towards the ice when he finally finds them.

“Yakov. I want to talk to you about something.”

“Right now? Tell me later. It’s almost Yuri’s turn.” Victor has spent years of their relationship not
doing as what Yakov says and there’s no reason to stop now. He finally lets himself breathe the
words: I’m coming back to skating.

For a precious second, just before Yakov transforms into muscles and rage, bark and teeth, Victor
feels his life hang in a perfect equilibrium of facts. He will orchestrate, now, a goodbye to the ice that
happens on his own terms. Yakov will be his coach. He will share a rink, at least some of the time,
with Yuri, Mila, Georgi.

He is also, at least unless Yuuri makes the wrong choice, the coach and choreographer of Yuuri
Katsuki, who has just done impossible things with his free skate.

But Victor doesn’t think that’s as likely now as it was this morning.

Victor is best at reading Yuuri’s body language when he skates. What he saw was someone very
much like himself: someone with more time left, someone who isn’t quite ready yet to part ways.

Yakov shatters all of that with a howl.

He and Victor aren’t so unalike after all: they are both men who break things.

“What. You’re coming back?!”

“Yeah,” says Victor, who knows he’s going to have to explain himself at some other moment. Lilia’s
perma-frown isn’t the kind of thing he can decode, anymore. There’s a reputation to repair there,
something he didn’t notice the divorce had pushed distance into. “For now, I’ll time my return to the
Russian Nationals,” he explains, and watches Yuri Plisetsky take his earbuds out.

Victor prepares himself for outrage, but Yuri surprises him instead. “Hey,” he says, with alarm and
insistence that Victor can’t decode, “does that mean katsudon’s retiring?”

It’s a logical conclusion to jump to. Victor will give him that. It just isn’t the place he expected Yuri
to go first. Victor was prepared for defensiveness, for the kind of fury Yuri’s shown earlier in the
year whenever they’ve had to share a spotlight, for selfishness.

This is, markedly, none of that.
“That’s his decision,” Victor says carefully. Yuri stares at him. Of the three of them, Yakov looks the calmest. Victor doesn’t dare call what he sees on his coach’s face happiness, so he’ll settle for acceptance, for now. “He said he’d decide after the Final.”

Victor smiles. It’s very agape, somehow, to be concerned for Yuuri now, minutes before Yuri’s due on the ice to try and beat him. He hugs Plisetsky. He still needs to say congratulations in the right way, but maybe, for now, this can be it. I’m proud of you, Yura, he thinks. “Don’t forget what it is that you want,” he says quietly. “Now is the time to take off.”

Whether he means take off as in give-yourself-a-break, child; or take off as in put-yourself-on-a-rocketship-to-fame, even Victor can’t really say. He remembers the ascension Yuri is experiencing right now like it was yesterday, and he has intimate knowledge of the two kinds of fruit it bears, both sour and sweet.

Victor checks the scores. Otabek is in third place, just behind Jean-Jacques. He’ll figure out later that the Hero of Kazakhstan skated a perfectly clean program and then come to his own conclusions about the judges. For now, Victor’s primary concern is finding Yuuri, although he keeps catching glimpses of Plisetsky’s program: the quad salchow he taught Yuuri earlier in the year sparkles on the ice, but he falls on one of his other quads, up so quickly that Victor wouldn’t be sure it happened if not for the reactionary gasp of the crowd.

It’s a program asks too much of him, really, which is ironic, considering that Yakov didn’t want Yuri skating quads at all, just one year ago. Though Victor suspects the ratcheted difficulty is a Plisetsky-Baranovskaya collaboration, and not entirely Feltsman’s work. Well, good. He’s been Yakov’s pet-project for years. Now Lilia’s got someone to form. When Yuri is finished with his imperfect but almost total sacrifice of self, the sort of thing that makes Victor think back to Rites of Spring and the dancer who dances to death, he breaks down into tears at center ice.

How appropriate, Victor thinks, struck for a moment by the contrast between the two women in his life who once stretched their bodies out over the altars of the Mariinsky and Bolshoi.

Victor finds Yuuri just in time for the last scores to be announced. Plisetsky wins by a margin so narrow it practically doesn’t exist: .12 points. Neither one of them say anything, though Victor watches as Yuuri exhales and looks down at his hands.

It’s a little bit selfish to think that maybe Yuuri’s thinking about what he said so flippantly at dinner just a few nights ago. Married after a gold medal.

Perhaps Victor’s now strangely in Yuri Plisetsky’s debt. It won’t be the strangest thing to happen in Barcelona; he’s sure of that.

He watches from the boards as the ISF rolls out the podiums, hums the Russian anthem to himself from where he stands with his hands in his pockets. Yura turns to offer Yuuri a piece of his mind just after the medal ceremony, a moment no doubt recorded by a dozen different cameras.

Victor is still waiting when Yuuri finally skates to him. “It’s not a gold medal,” Yuuri apologizes, soft and a little bit wistful, “... but …”

Perhaps it’s because Yuuri once gave Victor permission to be himself that there’s no filter between Victor’s thoughts and his mouth nowadays. Or perhaps it’s because of the emotional rollercoaster of the past 72 hours. Victor’s not as mature as the outside world believes; when the impulse for mischief strikes, he wholeheartedly gives in. “I don’t feel like kissing it unless it’s gold,” he hums. It’s been years since Victor Nikiforov has kissed a silver medal.
“Man,” he complains, to underscore his point, faux-whining, “I really wanted to kiss one.”

Yuuri backtracks as Victor takes several steps forward, purposeful, eyes narrowing in intent. “I’m such a failure as a coach,” he complains, refusing to smirk as Yuuri bumps into the boards and has to bend backwards over them. Now there’s an enticing image. “Yuuri, do you have any suggestions? Something that would excite me?” He conjures the image of thoughtfulness and of innocence, taps his mouth. “What did you think just now?”

“Oh, um.” The determination that Victor loves erupts over Yuuri’s face. “... Well.” For the second time, Yuuri manhandles him at the edge of the rink, pushing Victor backwards and down until he’s sitting on the floor. Yuuri drops the medal nearby as he kneels over one of Victor’s legs, cages Victor’s shoulders in the circle of his arms. “Please stay with me in competitive figure skating for one more year,” Yuuri says, as his hands slide over Victor’s shoulders. “This time I’ll win gold for sure!”

Everything that exists between them is too big to be contained in Victor’s body. It’s enthusiasm and love of the sport; it’s joy and love of each other. “Great!” Victor has completely forgotten the mechanism of his earlier joke; he’s imitating Makkachin now, all begging, puppy-eyes. “But keep going!”

“What?”

Victor almost chuckles, reaches over to pick up the discarded silver. “Even I’m worried about making a full comeback if I’m also staying on as your coach,” he murmurs as he drapes the medal back around Yuuri’s neck where it belongs, lets his fingers linger on the skin at the edge of Yuuri’s collar. “In exchange, I’ll need you to become a five-time world champion, at least.”

Yuuri holds the medal in a fierce grip, blinks away tears. “Okay,” he breathes, which is the exact moment Victor brushes two fingers under his chin, and leans forward to offer Yuuri a soft, gentle kiss.

Victor was never chasing a medal in the first place. Everything he really wants is already right in front of him.
Together, Victor and Yuuri see Victor’s family into a cab bound for the airport, a little scene that’s touching to watch because each of his parents congratulate Yuuri in turn, and then Sergei gives Victor a hug and Mariya briefly touches his cheek. Sofia toes the ground while she waits, practicing ballet moves, until Victor finally comes to pick her up and give her a twirl. “Are you still going to do it? Skate tomorrow?”

“You’ll have to watch the live feed and find out,” Victor replies, but for now he’s not particularly good at being mysterious. There’s been a smile on his face ever since Yuuri asked for one more season, since Victor demanded five, and it shows no sign of stopping. Especially not when he can glance Yuuri’s way and watch Yuuri treat his silver medal with care and delicacy and -- well, it isn’t quite disbelief, but it’s something not particularly far off. Victor has known about the fairy tale they’ve been in all season long, but Yuuri seems to have finally arrived, looking around from time to time as though at any moment the magic will finally be revealed.

Victor wants to laugh: Yuuri’s seen him as the fairy godmother of this story for far too long. Yuuri is the magic of it. Everything he does is suffused with it. There’s also the brush of their hands and the way their bodies interact on the fringes of each other; Yuuri stands a little too close, for instance, and Victor’s fingers keep finding their way to the small of his back or the outside edge of his shoulders, gathering.

They’ve spent all these months growing together. Now seems to be the time for harvest.

“Well,” says Sofia, hesitating outside the cab as she looks up at them both, “Congratulations, I guess.” With such a rousing endorsement for Yuuri’s current success, Victor can’t help but give in to his laughter. He can’t help it; this kind of happiness was never meant to be contained in just one
body. Even Yuuri’s lips twitch. She makes a face at them both and then scowls at Victor one last time. “You better still beat him at Worlds,” she points out. “If you’ve been slacking off, Vitya, I’ll be able to tell.”

“I’m sure you will,” Victor murmurs, and he closes the door behind her. In his mind he’s ticking away conversations he needs to have until he can get around to what he really wants. What he wants has something to do with the way Yuuri’s hip keeps bumping into his, every time either of them move.

One of the conversations probably needs to be with Yuri Plisetsky. Whenever Victor’s imagined Yuuri doing their exhibition skate after the Grand Prix Final, it’s always been in the context of his winning gold. Now Yuri Plisetsky will be the last to skate instead, and to a certain extent, Victor’s return in the second-to-last skate is going to take something away from his achievement, even if that’s not at all what Victor intends. Even if Victor’s records have both been surpassed at this event, the waiting world will still hold its breath for him the moment he puts a skate on the ice.

He mulls this over while helping to carry Yuuri’s bag back to the hotel, where familiar sounds are coming from the bar just off of the lobby. In a place like Barcelona, the Russian language would stand out even if Lilia and Yakov didn’t both have such distinct, rumbling voices. Victor’s hesitation can likely be felt through the twist of his hand in Yuuri’s, and for that reason, he’s sure, Yuuri glances over at him and then redirects to the bar. There, Yakov and Lilia seem to be sharing a toast while Yuri pretends to look bored and disinterested, playing some kind of game on his phone and probably racking up the kinds of roaming charges truly only achievable by a teenager.

“Vitya,” greets Yakov. Lilia offers Yuuri a prim congratulations, and in the same breath provides a comparison between his short program and his output in the free skate. The edges of Yuuri’s eyes crinkle just slightly, enough to reassure Victor that he’s unoffended, perhaps even bemused. It won’t dawn on Victor until much later why this is the case: he and Yakov and Lilia are all so critical, in their own way, and so even as he hears Lilia tell Yuuri that his Ina Bauer in the long program was indeed sublime, he also hears her getting on to him about a bad habit with his free leg she caught in the short, something not nearly so disastrous as Lilia makes it sound, all things considered. What it means is that she’s been paying attention to him, to Yuuri, and it’s a compliment in its own way. Come to think of it, it’s Victor’s choreography that holds all the records this year, not hers, and Lilia’s handling the results with austere grace.

Victor does something he hasn’t done in a while: he kisses her cheek for it. “Yura,” Victor asks, once the ordeal’s gone on long enough, “have a minute?”

Yuri’s eyes narrow and he chews the inside of his cheek, still focused on the game. “Whatever. Sec.” Yuuri and Victor wait for him to pocket the device, and move with him to a corner table, where Victor waves off a waiter; he’s not really here to stay.

“Yuuri’s going to skate my program from last year at the Exhibition tomorrow,” Victor murmurs, and even though he hasn’t told Yuuri that he’s wanted to broach the subject, Yuuri proves again that he’s a quick learner.

“I want Victor to come join me, as a surprise,” he says carefully, honed in on Yuri’s guarded, thin scowl. “It’s … it’s a way to say thank you, and a way to welcome him back.”

“Whatever,” says Yuri, a little too quickly. Victor has several realizations at once: that he’s agreeing because he owes Victor, too, for a record-breaking program, for holding up his end of the bargain, concerning Yuri’s debut; nonetheless, he’s still probably only saying yes because it’s something Yuuri wants. “You’re both gross, but the exhibition doesn’t fucking matter.” He’s got another skate programmed by Lilia to put on, and it’s another one of those ethereal, beautiful programs. Severe the
way the angels are. There’s a reason he can’t skate either of them for the full four minutes.

Later, when he’s hearing the story of the night Yuri will spend out after this, and his impromptu decision to completely change his program, Victor will think back on exactly this moment. And it will be because he’s able to ponder Yuri Plisetsky’s obvious dissatisfaction that he’ll be able to open his life up to the teenager in St. Petersburg in a way that wasn’t really possible before, not, at least, until Yuuri Katsuki began crafting bridges that led away from Victor-the-legend and instead directly towards Victor-the-person.

“Do what you want,” Yuri emphasizes, and it’s hard not to hear you always do. Victor can concede that it’s nearly a fair accusation: he’s done what he wants, and usually only what he wants, for a very long time.

This is different, though. This is for Yuuri.

“He’ll be okay,” Yuuri tells him in the elevator, once they’re alone, just before he presses a soft, soft kiss to the sweeping line of Victor’s jaw.

*I love you,* thinks Victor, for what must be the thousandth time. He almost fumbles their room key, and then the door is unlocked; alone for what feels like the first time in ages, even though it’s only been since the morning, the two of them collide. There’s still one more conversation to be had, but Yuuri’s got his hands in Victor’s jacket, and there isn’t anything that can’t wait while he kisses Yuuri the way he’s supposed to be kissed: thoroughly, and well. Somewhere along the way, Yuuri’s bag hits the floor; they’ll hang the costume up later, everything can happen after. Victor kicks out of his shoes, shrugs out of his coat, and makes a backwards walk to the bed; Yuuri’s JSF jacket joins the string of articles that document their path.

They’re almost in sync; Victor’s back hits the mattress right as Yuuri’s knee folds over the outside of the bed. As incredible as it is to watch Yuuri climb over him, to admire again how he transforms and prowls, even, Victor’s got other, newer ideas, and he hooks a leg around Yuuri’s waist for leverage before Yuuri can manage to straddle his hips. What he receives as Yuuri falls into his arms, bracketed by his legs, is a surprised little huff: “Vitya?”

“Yuuranya,” he preens, in return, already back to smiling against Yuuri’s mouth. Victor makes his intentions known with the line of his body and the roll of his hips; tonight he’s an offering, tonight he’s Yuuri’s prize.

Yuuri makes very good use of his stamina. Bliss is something that happens as while Victor’s lost in the pleasure of his own body, drowned in it, making new mantras out of Yuuri’s name, finding fresh ways to say *I love you,* but it’s also something that happens afterwards, when neither one of them has
managed to get up and back out of bed, when one of Yuuri’s hands is still skimming through the sweat and mess of Victor’s abdomen, one finger circling his navel; when Victor’s still got one hand sweeping through the soft strands of Yuuri’s hair, and the other one fumbling with the menu for room service.

He barely manages to sit up to make the order. “One of us has to get dressed enough to collect our food in half an hour,” Victor points out, after he hangs up.

“That’ll have to be you,” Yuuri quips, faux-haughty. He doesn’t relay the joke, but Victor doesn’t need the words: it’s something about how Yuuri’s a Grand Prix medalist, now, and Victor’s old news, and so if anyone’s going to show up looking ruined at the door for the hotel staff, it will be the former world record holder.

Victor would fucking love to be a trophy husband, and now they both know it. “Yuuri,” he whines, with a delicious painful stretch: there’s still protest in his limbs and weakness in his legs, perfect reminders of what they’ve just done together, “after what you’ve done to me? Terrible.”

“I think you should check my back for scratches,” retorts his lover, with the subtle, subtle smirk that Victor loves so very much.

“Why?” Victor inquires, and it’s his turn to be mock-innocent. He hasn’t been an innocent for years, really, but Yuuri almost makes him feel that way again sometimes; like the world’s new, like the clock has wound back to terrible decisions made when he was young and stupid and believed he was invincible. Yuuri has erased none of those things, but his presence gives pain meaning, tells Victor that if all of those choices were what it took to get him to this exact place then each and every one of them was worth it. “Would you like some more?”

Yuuri’s lips curl, but neither one of them moves to make good on the threat. This bodily comfort is precious, too. “Maybe later.”

Later doesn’t come in that way, at least not this night; later is Yuuri being the one who actually puts pants on and gets to the door in time to get their food. Later is Victor watching Yuuri realize he’s starving, and smiling a little to himself as Yuuri throws himself into their paella. Later is making Yuuri sulk with a single reminder about his meal plan, and it’s also the honest conversation they finally only start after dessert, after a fast shower full of slow kisses, when the entire tray’s back in the hall and they’re stretched out together, watching terrible Spanish television.

Yuuri’s found his phone along the way, comparing schedules for Japanese and Russian Nationals. They’re at basically the same time, which is inconvenient, but somehow not a terrible prospect now. Compared to the reality of just a day before, when Yuuri wasn’t going to skate Nationals or Worlds
at all, Victor can accept the flaw in his miracle, the little bent pieces that tell him it’s all very much reality. “I guess it’s going to be my turn to fly halfway around the world to chase after some figure skater,” Yuuri murmurs, trying to dress up something serious in flippant clothing.

Victor exhales and tries not to get ahead of himself, lost in a possible future where he shows Yuuri all of his favorite things about home. “You can stay in my house rent-free,” he teases back, “and I won’t even put you in a spare banquet room.” This isn’t the first time he’s treated a serious topic with a little bit of mischief and challenge, but it occurs to Victor that for once he probably shouldn’t. “Yuuri,” he says, quietly, reaching up to mute the television, “when you said you were retiring, what was supposed to happen next?”

“I … I hadn’t really thought that far ahead,” Yuuri admits, a little uncomfortably, and for the moment Victor refuses that sweet, protective urge to coddle him. “I guess that maybe you’d decide to skate in Hasetsu, or that you’d go back to Russia but ask me to come with you …”

Victor is coming to terms with the fact that there are going to be moments, peppered throughout the rest of his life, where Yuuri’s disbelief is stronger than his faith. That no matter how many times Victor says or reinforces I am going to spend the rest of my life with you and only you, there’s something in Yuuri that periodically hisses back you don’t deserve to be this happy. “Zolotse,” he chides softly, “what would you have been doing, if you weren’t skating?”

Yuuri bristles, but only a little bit: “I have a degree, Vitya,” he reminds Victor, with a little bit of pride in the fact. Victor’s proud of him for it, too; particularly now that he knows exactly what it was Yuuri was going through last year, that at least he managed to snatch a degree from the jaws of defeat. It’s more than Victor ever managed to do in college, and Victor’s pretty sure he’s never going back. “What were you thinking when you said we were going to get married?”

“I was thinking about how you’d look in a tuxedo,” Victor confesses, without shame, and he flashes a wry grin when Yuuri swats him for it.

“Victor.” There’s a counter-argument in there somewhere, a valid one: Victor threw himself into the idea of the engagement without preamble or delay, without discussing any of the things even he understands usually come before: talks about the future, about goals and shared dreams and all of the things he’s just let himself imagine will work out.

“It’s true,” he murmurs. “I …” There’s no way to explain to Yuuri that those details don’t matter to Victor: he’s had a life organized to what he thinks he wants for a decade, every possible success he could have ever dreamed of. Lately he thinks he’d like to try it the other way around. “All I want is you,” he admits. “The rest of it … just doesn’t matter as much.”

Yuuri goes very quiet, and very still. “That’s a lot to live up to, Victor,” he says, and Victor understands with sudden and startling clarity the dance Yuuri does around the center of his universe: why he can be the same person who insists that he wants the whole world to see what it is that Victor means to him, and to hold onto him, and also why his first instinct at dinner was to clamp up and cover the rings he’d just purchased for both of them.

“... Yeah,” Victor murmurs, properly chastised, and already more understanding than he was just a few moments before. “Yes. Okay.” He makes a resolution to do better; knows he’ll probably fail, but like Yuuri, he’ll get up and he’ll try again, and again, and again, until he gets it right. “That’s fair. I admit. But you, retiring? I don’t ever want you to give up something you love because of me. It … You’re not worth less than I am, Yuuri. You –”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been doing, though?” It’s the same line of reasoning he tried at the tail end of their argument, and this time, Victor’s prepared for it.
“Maybe a little,” he concedes. There’s no question that indefinite breaks are usually not good indicators for Olympic careers. “... But I like coaching you. I haven’t been skating, sure, but what I got back in return … it could have been enough, Yuuranya.”

“You deserve more than enough,” says Yuuri, and Victor just shakes his head with a chuckle. So do you.

So alike and so different, he and Yuuri. Stubborn and self-sacrificing. “I didn’t realize I could have both,” Victor says, and Yuuri makes a humming sound, agreeing with the sentiment in his own way. Yuuri who’d also been prepared with the can of petrol and the match, ready to set his own career ablaze. How very like his coach. “And I … I wasn’t unhappy, I meant what I said after Rostelecom.”

“I know,” Yuuri mumbles. “I know you did.” He sucks in a breath. “It made me realize that I had to quit if I ever wanted to see you skate again.” Before Victor can protest, Yuuri’s pressed a finger to his lips, brow furrowed. Victor remembers this look: it is the Yuuri of a press conference with the rest of the JSF, about to talk about a feeling he’d decided to call love. “All I’ve ever wanted was to skate on the same ice as you,” he says, wistfully. “You inspired me for so long. I thought maybe I could be good enough to have a place near you. That was my dream. And it was clear you were going to just let all of that go for some dime-a-dozen figure skater --”

“World record-holding figure skater,” Victor corrects, unrepentant while Yuuri blushes under the praise, and then fidgets with the sheets, determined to continue.

“So I weighed them … those two parts of my dream, and I decided I’d rather get to see you skate again, even if it meant that I wasn’t going to be there exactly when it happened.”

Now is the time for Victor to give in; he turns on his side and curls closer, sweeping Yuuri’s bangs out of his face, “What a pair of idiots we are,” he murmurs quietly. “I didn’t even realize … until you pointed it out, I mean. That I’d been thinking about competitions, and not being in them.”

“I know,” Yuuri says gently, tucking his head against Victor’s shoulder. “You don’t notice a lot of things,” he adds, words that from anyone else would be an insult, except for the gentle, gentle way Yuuri’s delivered them and what it is that he means. “I think you could have been just a little unhappy forever, maybe. About that. Like living with a splinter in your thumb.”

“... Mm.” It’s an apt picture of who he is. Then again, Yuuri’s always known Victor better than Victor knows himself. “I’m pretty acclimated,” he admits.

“Acclimated to what?”

“Unhappiness.”

In response, Yuuri merely climbs into Victor’s waiting arms; presses a kiss to his clavicle. “You know that thing you did, just now? Where you won’t let me talk down about myself …”

“You noticed,” Victor jokes.

“I always notice,” Yuuri huffs into Victor’s throat. “I fight back, too, Victor. You get to do more than just cope.”

Victor can’t remember a time when he’s ever felt so still; he’s tamed by the familiarity of Yuuri’s weight against his chest and comforted by the gentle press of his hands. “I love you,” he says, and this time when Yuuri says it back in Japanese, Victor understands the words. They lay like that together for a very long time before he feels inclined to speak again at all.
“Yuuri?”

What he gets back is a sleepy mumble, which is more than fair; it’s been a long, long day. “... Yeah?”

“You’re going to move in with me, right?”

“Mhmm.”

Victor grins fiercely over Yuuri’s tousled curls, so triumphant he could sing. “... I wasn’t kidding about the five world championships,” he adds, a little playfully. Now Yuuri can have both halves of his dream, too: he can skate with Victor, and then he can beat him.

Victor hasn’t lost in a very long time; he imagines he won’t like it very much, which is exciting in the strangest possible way. He doesn’t intend to go down without a fight. The fact that there’s actually going to be one has him grinning back at the neon light of their television, long overdue for being turned off.

Yuuri’s voice rumbles back into his chest. “... Gonna have to beat you at least once if we’re ever going to get married,” he replies, turning his cheek to listen to Victor’s heartbeat, fumbling for the remote.

They’re left in the darkness and quiet of the room, after that. “What do you mean, if?”

Yuuri makes the most adorable noises when he’s tired, and now is no exception. “Go to sleep, Vitenka.”

“Soon,” says Victor, and he means it in all things.

Somehow, he avoids the press as he and Yuuri return to the stadium for the exhibition; nobody notices Victor’s buttoned-up peacoat, covering the undershirt of his costume, and they don’t question the bag he’s carrying, either. He realizes they’ve all gotten a little too acclimated to seeing him rinkside. *Surprise, Victor thinks, already smiling. Surprise,* he thinks, again, when he pretends to forget that he’s supposed to take his skates off after standing out on the ice to watch Yuuri warm up.

Soon enough, Yuuri stands alone in center ice in his royal-blue costume, where he proceeds to skate the opening to *Stammi Vicino Non Te Andare* flawlessly, wonderfully. It’s better than watching it on a grainy YouTube video; even since their last practice together, there’s fresh understanding in the way he skates, already a new transformation underway. Yuuri’s face softens with longing, and his dancer’s frame makes the opening reaches sweeping and elegant. Victor watches him sail through two of the three jumps they’ve got planned for this edition, calm and at ease, and then he takes off his
coat, folds it over a nearby bench.

He’s due back now. It’s time.

Yuuri twists on the ice for the third jump, and Victor pushes past the gate as he takes off, comes out to join him right as he exits the landing. His fingers ghost over Yuuri’s waist as they circle around each other, and into the dance; hardly disconnected until they skate the footwork sequence side-by-side.

He realizes it had to be this way.

There’s no one else he’d rather have welcoming him back on the ice.

It takes a full five minutes for the applause to stop after Yuuri lowers him from the final lift. They bow in every conceivable direction, practically one section at a time. Victor would like to think it’s because of the skating, but he knows it’s probably because of the way he’s cupped Yuuri’s face in his hands at the finish, their foreheads tilted together.

Minako Okukawa tells him, much later, that that was how the program was meant to be skated.

Victor skates around to collect some of the things thrown down for them, presents Yuuri with a bouquet of roses as they near the exit. “Stay close to me, solnyshko,” he murmurs quietly, with a private smile that’s just for Yuuri.

Yuuri proceeds to add at least another ninety seconds of raucous cheering to their exit when he tugs on Victor’s lapel at the edge of the ice, and kisses him rather firmly on the mouth. “Always.”

Victor thinks he hears Yuri Plisetsky shouting something derogatory, but he’s not about to ruin a moment by tuning in. He kneels and takes Yuuri’s skates off before tending to his own, and then leads him to their seats. Victor expects to receive the opening notes of another classical program, designed by Lilia, and instead the whole arena shakes with a howling electric guitar.

Out on the ice, Yuri Plisetsky is being anything but angelic. He’s being very teenage, and also very Yuri, and when Otabek Altin bites off one of his gloves, Victor can’t quite help himself. “Wow,” he says.

“Wow,” echoes Yuuri.

Yet when Yuri exits the ice, and bares his teeth in Victor’s direction with a triumphant, fierce grin, Victor, who once skated a program in the costume Yuuri now wears because it conveyed something about him, just hugs him close and ignores the incoming meltdown.

“I’m proud of you.”
Dinner at the gala that night is decent but safe, and Victor notices with a very critical eye that this banquet room is severely lacking in poles. Come to think of it he still has one to get installed back in his flat, and that’s apparently going to need to be a rush job.

He can think of few better ways to celebrate a pair of national gold medals.

“I think you’re trying to get me drunk,” Yuuri hisses under his breath at the gala as Victor presses a fourth glass of champagne into his hands and then graciously leads him away from the ISU officials they’ve been making smalltalk with.

“Of course I’m trying to get you drunk,” Victor replies, steering Yuuri back towards a table where Phichit and Christophe are waiting. “It’s a new tradition.”

“Tradition?” Christophe hums, looking up with a flicker of interest that Victor hasn’t seen in him yet, this evening. Victor doesn’t blame him for it: he imagines it’s probably hard to be here socializing after a fall from second to fifth, suspects that Chris has some wrestling to do with the possibility of his own complacency. “Actually, I was thinking. If you’re not in the running this year, does this mean Yuuri’s paying for drinks?”

“Drinks?” Phichit asks.

“Victor and Georgi and I used to make bets. Winner always paid.” Chris sighs, momentarily melodramatic. “This year that’d be Plisetsky but we all know he’s still on juice boxes, so, Yuuri … You’ll have to do, I guess.”

“The drinks here are free, though?”

“I think they watered down the champagne so you don’t make a spectacle,” Christophe teases, flashing a lazy smile while Yuuri slowly turns red. “If that was how you were on the first date, Yuuri, just imagine…”

“Chris,” Phichit whispers, scandalized. For all that, though, his phone’s already plugged into one of those portable chargers. The boy came prepared. Victor re-assesses him for what is probably the
third or fourth time this season alone. Phichit blinks back, innocent.

This time, Victor doesn’t buy it. “Fine, Romeo,” he quips, sliding a smirk Christophe’s way. He drains his own glass of champagne, and eyes Chris and the Thai skater whom he’s rapidly concluding is a co-conspirator in this evening’s endeavor. “Where have you two decided we’re going?”

“Oh, darling, I thought you’d never ask.”

“There are so many people here,” Yuuri mumbles, as Victor guides him past the bouncers of Sala Apolo in Barcelona, just behind Christophe and Julian. Victor’s got a hand on the small of his back again, and Yuuri’s hips have the most wonderful sway as he walks. Victor can’t wait to dance with him, to really dance, perhaps the way they did last year but even better now, because that was the euphoria of strangers and he’s well and truly Yuuri’s now. “... Do you think we’ll be recognized?” Yuuri wants to know, evidently still sober enough to care what the rest of the world thinks.

God, Victor hopes they will be. He’d like to walk through an airport one day and stop to buy up every magazine that features him and Yuuri, just two lovers caught up in the thrum of a Barcelona night club. He can’t be blamed for leaning in; it’s loud, after all: the whole place is alive and thrumming with dance music it already and they’re only just past the door. He can probably be blamed for nibbling on Yuuri’s ear while he replies, but he’s not sorry about it in the least. “Yuuri,” he breathes, steering them along as Christophe heads to the sleek, backlit bar, “… I think that’s the point.”

He feels, rather than hears, the way Yuuri’s breath catches, and although Christophe and Julian and Phichit are all meandering for drinks, Yuuri immediately pulls him out on the dance floor.

“Sauced,” Victor says later, back at the booth they’ve somehow managed to snag. Phichit has taken Yuuri — insatiable, exuberant Yuuri, who can out-dance any of them — off of his hands for a round of dancing, which leaves Victor with Julian and Christophe, attempting to determine the exact level of his current inebriation.
“Was gonna go for hammered, myself,” Christophe hums, pushing another drink into Victor’s hand. Freshly delivered. This one is various shades of sunrise, and Victor bets, knowing Christophe, that it has some kind of raunchy name.

“Hammered comes after this,” Victor decides, taking a sip. Christophe bursts into raucous laughter, which makes Victor belatedly come to terms with his own accidental pun. Well. That wouldn’t be the worst, either. He’s grinning back when Yuuri collides with his back, arms thrown over his shoulders. Victor’s pretty sure he’s splashed some of the drink on his shirt, which isn’t the worst this suit’s going to see in one evening: already his coat’s been lost somewhere, which is a pity, he’s fond of this one. Victor’s got his sleeves rolled up, although he’s resisted the urge to get out of his tie, and his shirt’s still tucked in, despite at least three different efforts Yuuri’s made to change that particular set of circumstances.

Yuuri, on the other hand, has all but destroyed that nice blue suit they bought in the meanwhile. Victor’s made Julian the guardian of its jacket, Yuuri’s tie, and Yuuri’s belt.

Yuuri is in the process of being unmade. But not nearly enough. Victor’s got any number of particularly lewd ideas about how to finish the transformation, and when, and where.

“Vitya,” Yuuri whines, “look at me.”

“I am looking,” says Victor, coyote grinning through Phichit’s revenge-photo. He gives Phichit his drink as a consolation prize, and turns so that Yuuri can fill his arms.

Yuuri bats at his tie, lets it slip through his fingers. Victor knew he had a very good reason for not taking it off earlier. It’s paying dividends now. “Not enough,” he pouts.

Victor already knows how this is going to go; the night is young, after all, and there’s still a fire in Yuuri’s eyes, still energy in his frame. “Tell me how to make it up to you, then.”

“Dance with me,” Yuuri says, and he’s already dragging Victor back out to the crowd of bodies while Christophe composes an epitaph in his honor from his place on Julian’s lap. Victor has no problems letting his hands slide down the arc of Yuuri’s back and over that record-shattering ass once they’re back among the throng of dancers; there’s no reason, this year, not to press his lips to Yuuri’s pulse, to grin as Yuuri raises his arms overhead and then cups a hand around the back of Victor’s neck, dragging him impossibly closer. Yuuri is very drunk, which is to say: only slightly ahead of Victor. “You were right,” he half-hums, half-shouts, over the thrum of a beat that refuses to be denied.

“Mm?” Euphoric. That’s the word. Victor’s been happy before, carrying his own country’s flag into the Sochi Olympics, or cradling his sister, but this is a new and different peak; this is him and Yuuri and the way all of their pieces sometimes fit together so improbably, so perfectly.

“Whole world’s gonna know that you’re mine.” Victor loves Yuuri in every form and fashion, but he thinks he might be especially weak for these little moments where he’s brazen, free from a thousand other concerns, momentarily released from the thing that lies to him all the time and says you can’t have this.

Because Yuuri can have him, and he will.

Victor means to say yes, please, and thank you, but the words get lost in Yuuri’s kiss.
so i know i normally avoid canon modifications where possible but i have some opinions about WTTM, namely that i think it'd be exceptionally rude for yuuri and victor to truly, truly surprise yuri with the duetto without giving him some warning.

like: yuri's just won gold, it's a way of spotlighting him, he deserves his victory lap. so that's why they tell him here, although i think it's also okay to interpret that as feeding into the events of the comic where he gets increasingly dissatisfied because he know what they're going to do, or has at least some idea, and he's stuck with yet another skate that lilia and yakov make him do vs. watching victor, who's gotten to do his own thing for so long. so enter grumpy!yuri and the whole track-down-otabek bit and the final result is still his surprising victor and yuuri back with a program all his own.

just wanted to explain that a bit! next up: an epilogue concerning st. petersburg and the matter of a few medals left in the season :d
Victor and Yuuri spend precisely three days back in Hasetsu for packing, an activity which seems strangely weighted in Victor’s direction: the things he’d shipped to make his room at Yu-Topia feel like home, along with all of the boxes of his old costumes, make up more in sum total than anything Yuuri seems to want to bring forward with him into their new life.

“I didn’t really have much, in college,” Yuuri points out, which Victor supposes makes sense: he was half a world away in Detroit, after all. Still, he’s certain that somewhere in this house are all the artifacts of Yuuri’s childhood: baby albums, and photographs of his first days out on the ice, a sweet, smiling, chubby thing. Hiroko has already been kind enough to show Victor a few of those pictures. He wants more of them. He will turn his flat into a temple of everything it took for them to arrive in the space to share it together. It has been his castle for much too long, and castles come with keeps and walls.

Already the concept of home is changing paradigms in Victor’s mind, turning into something that has room for two.

Still, Victor, who is a bit of a hoarder even if his entire house looks like it belongs in a magazine, can’t quite help himself. “There’s nothing else you want to bring? Nothing you’ve ever thought about having?”

Yuuri applies a fresh layer of box tape over one of Victor’s costume boxes. He is the kind of quiet Victor’s learned to wait through, processing. “I have all the things I want already,” he says, softly, which is precisely the sort of thing that makes Victor nearly drop the matryoshka dolls he’s putting back into a box.

“You can’t just say things like that,” Victor mock-complains, drawn inexplicably closer so that he can drizzle a kiss onto the nape of Yuuri’s neck. Yuuri shivers and half-heartedly attempts to escape the circle of his arms, something Victor knew he’d do; something Yuuri does because Victor knows he’ll do it.

“I must have learned it from you,” Yuuri replies, which is mostly a lie. Victor may have a poet’s soul, but when Yuuri waxes romantic, he mines sentiment from a vein of gold that runs miles below the surface.
They have dinner together with Yuuri’s family and friends one last time; Victor makes sure Minako’s brought her camera, tells her he wants prints shipped to St. Petersburg. One by one the others peel off, and Victor decides he wants one last night in the hot springs before he puts himself back on a plane and separates himself from this magical place for several months.

Yuuri beats him there, and he can’t help but smirk as he feels the heat of Yuuri’s eyes lingering on his back while he takes off his bathrobe. Sure enough, when he glances over his shoulder, his fiancee has deflected his eyes, wearing a tell-tale blush that can’t entirely be credited to steam. “Oh, that won’t do,” Victor decides, with a dangerous smile. “You get to look all you want now.”

Yuuri vibrates on the precipice between retreat and conquest, and then he blinks at Victor, his decision made. “What else do I get to do?” He asks, which is the question of Victor's undoing, because the answer is everything.

Dawn ferries them back to Fukuoka, and then to St. Petersburg.

Victor attempts to keep it together, after that.

He fails three distinctly different times in the span of a single evening: once as they step out of the airport with the driver they’ve hired into a brisk cold that Victor recognizes as home; again as he points out streets and landmarks while they drive to his flat; and finally when he unlocks the door and realizes Yakov’s already arranged for the delivery of all their boxes.

Makkachin does an eager lap, reacquainting herself with familiar spaces and smells. Victor wipes at his eyes again. Yuuri holds out his arms and kisses the corner of Victor’s mouth; hums against his ear. Vitya, you silly, perfect man, why are you crying?

“You know,” admits Victor, etching out a shaky, tremulous laugh, “I don’t even think that I know.”

That first week in St. Petersburg is hard. They carve out a schedule together that sends Victor and Yuuri to the rink bright and early, while it’s still winter-dark and brutally cold, and while Yuuri’s still bleary-eyed from sleep. It keeps Victor there in the afternoons, where he tries to put together a pair of
programs he’d only properly begun to think about back in Hasetsu. He grits his teeth through mistakes and aches and Yakov’s incessant growling, fights his way through fresh inconsistencies in his quads that weren’t there this time last year.

When he falls, he’s not the only one who hurts: Yuuri’s eyes linger on him, worried, afraid that he really has done it. He’s ruined Victor’s career.

Yuri Plisetsky taunts him with shouts about obsolescence. This is the same Yuri Plisetsky who appeared begrudgingly at Victor’s flat to help you unpack, I guess, or whatever; who keeps showing up at the flat for lunch with Mila and Georgi, the one who Victor knows has asked Yuuri for advice because Yuuri’s got the best triple axel in all of men’s skating.

“... You forgot to add that extension you wanted at 1:54,” Yuuri says, meekly, from the side of the rink.

“Yuuri,” Victor says, and he has to force himself to be gentle in the way he skates up to the boards and cups Yuuri’s face in his hands, “you are the light of my life and I love you, but right now I need you to go home.”

Home is finding Yuuri curled up miserably around Makkachin on the couch in the dark when Victor finally makes it back from a costume fitting he had to call in half a dozen favors to even get. In the interim, Yuuri has fought and evidently lost the battle against all of those extra fears he constantly carries around. “Oh, darling,” says Victor, whose practice ended with the indignity of him falling on his own signature jump; Victor who is tired and sore and wants nothing more than to drag himself into a shower and then into bed.

“S-sorry,” mumbles Yuuri. “It’s fine. It’s fine.”

Victor knows enough by now to know that it isn’t fine, so he walks over to the couch, and he makes himself pick Yuuri up, ignoring the other man’s protests. He sets Yuuri on his feet in the bathroom, starts the water running in the tub. He strips, and then he pulls Yuuri’s shirt over his head, gently pulls his sweats around his ankles.

Yuuri shudders, and not in the way Victor would like.

“I just want you to have the best comeback,” Yuuri murmurs, once he’s seated between Victor’s legs, back against Victor’s chest. Victor’s got his chin on Yuuri’s shoulders, his eyes closed. “And I’m so worried it’s going to be less than your best because you took so much time off …”

“I know,” Victor says. “I’m not going to let that happen, Yuuranya.” There are ideas coalescing now, two very separate chains of thought “Will you let me surprise you, though?” It’s cheating, to wheedle like this. Against Yuuri’s anxiety, Victor will cheat every time. “You know how much I love --”

“Surprises.” The water, first scalding, hot-springs-style bliss, has long been lukewarm, and Victor’s toes are starting to prune. Still, Yuuri flashes a wavery smile, which makes tonight’s battle won, some of the ground recovered. “Okay,” he breathes, and repeats the word, seemingly for his own benefit. “Okay.”

“Let’s go to bed,” Victor murmurs. “I’ll take you someplace different tomorrow.”

Different is Vasily’s office. “So soon, Victor? You know I don’t do marital counseling,” says the old man, with a wry smile.

“You did such a splendid job not curing me the first time around that I’ve brought you a referral,”
Victor quips in return, and then he turns to Yuuri and lets go of the final secret he and Yakov have been keeping for years. “Yuuri, this is Dr. Vasily Semenov, my therapist.” Then he grins broadly, makes the sort of joke that never fails to activate Yuuri’s blush. “Vasily, this is the only person on earth who understands me better than you.” He resists what feels like a teenage urge, the sort of thing that might insist this is Yuuri Katsuki and he is precious beyond measure and you have to take care of him. Barely.

Vasily’s eyes sparkle. “Why don’t the two of you come in,” he says, “and we’ll have a little talk over some tea.”

“No jam in mine,” Yuuri mumbles, and then he smacks a hand over his mouth. “… Please.”

A week later there’s a new journal on Yuuri’s nightstand. Now they both write.

Victor just barely manages to get an overnight trip to Paris scheduled on their one off day. He’s not even sure it’s a good idea: his program isn’t as polished as he’s used to; it’s rough around the edges, more potential than perfection. Still, a promise is a promise. He takes Yuuri to the Orsay and then up to the Sacré-Cœur; has just enough time to kiss him under the Eiffel Tower before they rush out to dinner and then on to Sofía’s performance.

She is just one child in a cast that has many children, but Yuuri still catches the way Victor’s eyes glisten when she takes the stage, and he laces their hands together.

“How did I do?” His sister wants to know, later. Yuuri is giving her a piggy-back ride; Yuuri who is so unexpectedly strong, stronger than Victor is, even.

"I thought you were wonderful."

It’s all Victor can do to not stop him, then and there, while they walk along the Seine, and his footsteps beat out fresh arrangements of I love you in every language Victor knows as a thin, fragile snow settles over the city. They spend the night in a bedroom that is still technically Victor’s in the Nikiforov family flat, where Victor gets to whisper it very quietly, almost like a secret, as he laves wet kisses down Yuuri’s abdomen in the almost-silent, waiting dark.
The days pass too quickly after that. It has been years since Victor’s really felt a race against the clock, but here he is, under pressure, and it would be novel if it wasn’t also rather difficult. The day before Yuuri leaves, Victor keeps him late at the end of the rink to debut each of his programs in full -- for Yuuri’s eyes only -- first the short, and then, after a momentary break, his long program, too, with some of the jumps dialed down to keep himself from any idiotic injuries at the end of such a long practice.

It is no surprise to Victor that both of them are nearly in tears when he finishes.

Putting Yuuri on a plane the following morning, bound for Sapporo by himself, is probably the hardest thing Victor’s had to do in this comeback period, but he makes himself do it with a smile. “Try to bring me back a medal I can actually kiss this time,” he teases at the airport, putting on a brave face: the costume of his cheerful self, bright and brilliant, on display for years before Yuuri went to work dismantling those defenses.

He’s still doing it, even now: Yuuri grabs Victor by his scarf and kisses him at security, hard and firm and sure. “You’re not the only one who will only kiss gold,” he whispers, sweeping one hand over Victor’s cheek and wearing a blush that Victor hopes stays with him all the way to the plane. “Don’t make me ask Yura.”

Victor fights off the urge to swoon every time Yuuri manhandles him like this. He hopes he never grows out of it. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he promises, from the depths of this lovesick daze.

Yuri Plisetsky, who’d insisted on coming along by pretending not to care at all when Victor offered him the chance to ride with them to the airport, shouts at them both: “I’m right here, you fucking morons! No way am I getting beat by that old man!”

At least it makes Yuuri laugh as they separate. There is nothing Victor hates like the thought of Yuuri skating alone for a second time this season, something he’s tried to apologize for at least half a dozen times before Yuuri put his foot down: I won’t be skating alone, he’d insisted, surprisingly adamant. I carry you with me every time I skate.
“Yuri,” coos Victor, saccharine-sweet, once Yuuri is well on his way and far out of sight, “do you really want to walk home from here?”

“I hate you.”

Victor laughs and walks them back to the car, drives them both back to a rink that’s a little bit lonely again, without Yuuri’s presence in it.

He has skated Russian Nationals alone before. He can do it again. Schedules have Victor taking the ice in Yekaterinburg the day before Yuuri’s going to do the same in Sapporo, and from the moment Victor arrives, the air thrums with an anticipation that’s positively electric.

He feels the way the world waits in an almost tangible fashion, weaves through the knife’s edge of expectations as he arrives at the stadium. Sportscasters have been talking up his return, contrasting it to Yuri Plisetsky’s world record. He knows the headline: is Victor Nikiforov finally not the favorite to win this year’s Russian Nationals? Europeans? Worlds?

It stokes a competitive fire that he hasn’t felt in ages, though all that is secondary to the necessarily brief texts he exchanges with Yuuri when his group leaves the six minute warmup.

It’s unusual for applause to linger so long when a single competitor takes the ice, but it does: he is Russia’s hero, back to the battleground, though no one would ever think so based on Victor’s costume: it’s a blend of blues and greens, sprinkled with sparse constellations of Swarovski in loose, organic patterns, the clothes of a danseur and not, this time, of a soldier.

It takes an interruption from the announcer and three separate laps of acknowledgment on Victor’s part before the cheers settle down enough for the delicate chimes of Ludovico Einaudi’s *Life* to begin. They send him into the slow circles of the song’s opening, before the arrangement picks up on piano and violin. Victor moves through his opening step sequence, connects it in a way that only he can to a quadruple toe loop, followed by a triple; it’s one of the easier quad combinations, but what matters to him is the way he executes it, beautifully as a soft kiss on a misty morning. The triple axel that follows after a lap around the rink is for Yuuri, and he follows it with a flying sit-spin before launching into the short program’s step sequence. It carries him all the way across the rink as the violin and piano build on urgency and frenzy, and that’s when Victor does it: he kicks off the ice and gives his audience their quadruple flip.
Yuri Plisetsky outscores him in the technical elements but not in execution, leads by a margin that’s razor-thin. Victor can’t help but egg him on a little bit, smiling a wolf’s grin now that he’s back out in the wild, hunting for glory. *Of course it put up a high score*, he says, winking in Yuri’s direction, *it’s my program.*

Yuri will skate last in two days, when they finish, and Victor idly wonders how he’ll handle the pressure before he calls Yuuri simply because he misses the sound of his voice.

He’s unconcerned about his own rank. In about half a day, Yuri will be the one who skates, and already that’s where Victor’s thoughts have gone. He listens as Yuri talks about his day, explains the fourteen different conversations he’s had with other Japanese figure skaters in a puzzled tone of voice. “They kept telling me congratulations,” Yuri explains, after he’s given Victor an overview of his afternoon practice. “Do you think they meant on being engaged, or …?”

“Last I checked, love, people don’t ask for autographs just because you get engaged,” Victor replies with a chuckle. “How is your biggest fan?”

“Victor,” Yuuri huffs. Kenjirou Minami, at least, had been very clear on the topic of Yuuri’s record-shattering free skate. Victor can empathize. “Who do you think the autograph was for?”

“I think his crush on you is very cute,” Victor teases. He’s confident Yuuri will be giving out multiple autographs this week, whatever else Yuuri may think about it. They’re face-timing now; it’s late in Sapporo and Yuuri’s in the dark of his hotel room, where he looks soft and comfortable and adorably sleepy. Victor wishes he was there.

“Vitya.” It’s a one-word warning, but Victor loves skating on thin ice.

“Do you think he keeps posters of you in his room?” Victor asks. “Is JSF going to certify him for next year? If he gets drunk at the next Grand Prix banquet and seduces you, I insist that we be married for at least ten years before —”

“You even think about finishing that sentence and I will hang on up on you.”

Victor laughs, and his thoughts drift: he imagines their situations in reverse, pictures meeting Yuuri when he was younger and even more clueless about the human heart. “Oh my god.” Victor breathes, and when he catches Yuuri looking at him quizzically, he hurries to explain the way he might have fallen over himself trying to make an impression, *any* impression.

“You wouldn’t have thought I was anything special, back then, even if we’d been in the same class,” protests Yuuri, of course, and that is when Victor flashes the phone a serious look.

“Yuuri Katsuki,” he says, very seriously, in what he’s starting to think of as his Coach-Victor voice, “I could fall in love with you in any time and any place.”

“How do you just say things like that?”

“You’ll prove why tomorrow, no doubt,” Victor hums, unaffected. Then he taps his mouth and winks. “You know, I think it’s the first time I’ll have the pleasure of watching you skate to *Eros* from the privacy of my bedroom.” He doesn’t need facetime to imagine the way Yuuri must be blushing now; which is a good thing, because Yuuri’s phone camera has him awash in muted blue light.

“You are. The absolute worst.”

“I love you too. Go to sleep. Coach’s orders.”
He calls again as Yuuri goes into the rink in Sapporo. Minako live-streams Yuuri’s warm-ups for him, standing in for him with a choreographer’s badge. When it’s time for Yuuri to take the ice, he kisses the glint of gold around his ring finger, and Victor does the same.

Yuuri’s ahead of the nearest competitor -- Kenjirou, of course -- by well over a dozen points by the time that it’s all said and done, and Victor’s somewhere on cloud nine when he emerges in the hotel lobby, so naturally this is the time Georgi Popovich selects to tell Victor he’s retiring after this year’s World Championships.

“Let’s go for a walk, you and I,” Victor says, and they wander through Yekaterinburg until they find a park to laze around in the way they did when they were teenagers. It’s harder, now: the brisk bite of winter wind snaps at Victor’s bones and joints in a way he never felt when he and Georgi first met.

“With you back, and Plisetsky … who knows if we’ll even get to send three men to the 2018 games?” Georgi explains, as Victor kicks at a pile of half-melted snow and thinks about the way eras end: quietly and without much protest, like this. “Gazprom wants to bring me on as a commentator. Come on, Vitya, say something …”

Victor hesitates for a moment while he chooses his words carefully. Georgi’s had a rough year while he’s been away and he feels that distance now, especially since it seems like the decision’s already been made. “What I want,” he says finally, “is for you to be happy. But, Georgi …”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not totally hanging up your skates, are you?”

“You mean will I still skate? Sure, I guess …”

“Good,” Victor decides, then and there. “I’m going to trot you out at ice shows until you’re as gray-headed as your old man,” he teases, and Georgi just grins back.

“We’ll have to stop sooner than that,” he quips. “You’ll be so bald by then that the lights will reflect off of your skull …”

Victor bends over, pretending to be mortally insulted, as an excuse to scoop up a whole pile of snow. He fires it Georgi’s way and instigates the kind of snowball fight they haven’t had in years. Walking back to the hotel afterwards, red-faced and shivering, is the beginning of the end of something, but Victor’s not as afraid of it now. Why he’s always conflated these inevitable endings with death, he’ll never know, but right now he’s thinking of piano sonatas, and the way nobody’s meant to stay in the first movement forever.
Yuuri skates again before he does: the JSF schedule has the men finishing up before the women, whereas the Russians are bookended at both sides of the contest. He comes down under-rotated and on both feet for his quadruple flip, a little more nervy than he was in Barcelona, but it doesn’t matter. No one else in the Japanese circuit can manage what he does, and he texts Victor a picture of the gold medal the moment he gets off of the podium.

He calls very briefly afterwards, apologetic. “I have a lot of meetings to take tonight,” Yuuri explains, which Victor can certainly understand: Morooka will have rallied the press around Japan’s ace, world record holder and national champion. It’s all quintessential Yuuri: he’s had the gold medal for all of an hour and he’s apologizing for the inconvenience it creates for Victor. “I’ll try and text you …”

Victor just smiles and shakes his head. “I can’t wait to see it,” he says, which draws a happy-sounding hum from the other end of the line, the kind of thing he’s first heard from Yuuri months ago, after complimenting Hiroko’s katsudon. “Congratulations.”

At the final practice session afterwards, Yuri Plisetsky skates with a kind of furious energy that
Victor hopes he can figure out how to bottle. “Don’t kill yourself before the real thing,” he says, earning a look from Yakov, who’s told him more or less the same thing more times than Victor can count.

“Some of us don’t plan on finishing second, Victor.”

Indeed, Victor thinks, as Plisetsky launches into a furious quad, arm raised overhead. He hears the landing before he sees the output of it, turns at the sharp, crisp crunch that it makes, sees Yuri fight to stay on his feet from far too deeply over one knee. He skates slowly after that, and with telling, uncharacteristic caution. Victor and Yakov share a long long before Yakov barks: “Yura. Over here.”

Victor exhales and slows down, looks around the rink until he sees Lilia. Her face is as unreadable and impassive as he’s ever found it, and he knows it’s hypocritical of him to wonder whether or not they’re asking too much of Plisetsky.

After all: just look at the tradition he’s coming up into, the trail Victor blazed through the stars.

The next day’s warm-up makes it clear that Yuri’s skating on a weakened knee. Victor knows perfectly well that skating through a strain like this isn’t unusual, especially if it’s minor; hell, he’s done it before plenty of times. Still, it puts everyone on edge: Yuri’s completely tuned into his headphones, volume cranked up to a level that can’t possibly be healthy; Yakov and Lilia exchange snark all the way to the rink, and Victor? Victor feels two conflicting, complicated impulses: a surge of annoyance that this may not be the competition he’d hoped for after all, and an inexplicable desire to protect Yuri, somehow, from himself.

“You could always --”

“Shut the fuck up, Victor.”

Victor resists the urge to bodily pick Plisetsky up and drop him on the other side of the boards. It’d be terrifically easy to do. “Fine,” he snaps back, instead. He misses Yuuri, who he hasn’t been able to speak to, time zones being what they are, though during Georgi’s skate he gets a good luck text.

Victor skates out to center ice in a soft grey shirt, asymmetrical and loose, understated compared to some of his previous costumes. Today he looks the part of a modern poet, romantic in a picked-apart kind of way. And it fits: soft guitar chords send him into sweeping circles until he picks up enough speed for his first jump: a quad lutz followed by a triple toe, executed right as Damien Rice croons “you could have my favorite face and favorite name; I know someone who could play the part, but it wouldn’t be the same...”

The lutz is a very hard jump, a way of announcing that he remembers that he’s one of just a handful of men who can do it, and he has to fight to connect the combination, barely ensuring he can keep a hand off the ice in the process. Victor grits his teeth, decides then and there that Yuuri’s learning the Lutz next season, if only so he’s got a reason to keep honing it. This is no time to think of that, though; he has his own program to complete. Victor sweeps into an Ina Bauer that’s in this program just because Yuuri likes them, and he threads it into another combination: a quad toe loop followed by two doubles. Everyone else in the top collection of skaters has favored the single loop for these sorts of combinations, so naturally he’s chosen the road less traveled.

You could be my favorite faded fantasy …

He presses on into a triple axel.
Jumps aren’t the only thing that’ve made Victor unbeatable for years, though; it’s in the way he connects his elements, in the step-sequences that only Yuuri can really manage to imitate. They’re gorgeous by design, choreography that no one else can reproduce. It’s Yuuri who manages to skate them to their maximum potential, the way Victor does, but ultimately the ideas are from the twisted wilds of Victor’s brain: both the roses and the thorns. He’s moving in double-time now, pushing against the deceptively soft chorus and into the bridge. The second verse is darker and Victor’s choreography twists and twines to reflect the shift in tone.

Intuitively, the moment he’d decided to come back to skating, Victor had known the two themes he wanted to craft his programs around, but finding the right song for this had been difficult. When he’d considered what it meant to explore a theme like love, especially after Yuuri’s put such a definitive statement on it in Barcelona, Victor’s thoughts time and time again crawled back to that moment on the beach, listening to Yuuri insist that all he’d needed to be was himself. Since then, Yuuri has seen all sides of him: the light and the dark, the beautiful and the broken, and yet, for all that, he still manages to lean subtly in every time Victor kisses him.

It’s like Sergei said, all those months ago: Yuuri kisses like Victor’s all of the problems he wants to have, and with remarkable awareness about exactly what that entails: more than Victor’s had, this entire time.

Yuuri knew who Victor was long before Victor figured it out for himself.

He’d been out running on their second day back in St. Petersburg when he’d heard it: you could hold the secrets that save me from myself. Victor had stopped, standing on a bridge with a frozen over railing in the early light of dawn, stood immovable as a statue while he listened all the way to the end and then played the song again to be sure.

He’s sure now, gliding into a final quad: it’s the flip, of course, not quite as late as Yuuri’s is, and not as beautifully done as the one Yuuri managed to put in at Barcelona. Of course. Victor’s still getting used to doing them in the second half of his program, adjusting to a new bar. Yuuri is to blame, of course: Victor’s fiancee can’t manage to tolerate more than forty-five minutes of shopping but somehow has the stamina to do something absolutely inhuman at the tail end of four minutes of skating.

A little sloppy. Everything is, right now, after just a few weeks: like he’s just starting the Grand Prix series all the way at the end of a season. He’ll fix it in time for worlds. What’s left now is a combination spin sequence as the music comes to its climax:

‘Cause I’ve never loved, I’ve never loved, I’ve never loved, loved like you …

When Victor ends his spin after the final chord it’s with his arms extended the way they had been that first day in Hasetsu, waiting for Yuuri to take his hand. I’m your coach.

I’m your --

Yours, he’d meant. Just yours.
Victor is so out of breath that he sinks to his knees afterwards, and as he gets up and skates to pick up a poodle-shaped pillow and a fresh bouquet of white calla lilies, he realizes there’s not a dry eye in the house. A young man stands next to Yakov in a navy blue peacoat, wiping his glasses off to --

...

Yuuri.

It doesn’t make any sense; Yuuri still has an exhibition to skate in Sapporo, and unless he got on a plane right after his skate, it’s impossible that he’d manage to be here now --

Oh.

Oh.

Victor races for him, ignoring the screams of the crowd as he hits the edge of the rink and finds his face cradled in Yuuri’s hands. He’d like to preen, or cry, or maybe make an even bigger scene than he made at the Cup of China, but underneath the stern weight of Yakov’s glare he settles for tilting his cheek into Yuuri’s palm and letting his lashes flutter. “Well, Yuuranya. Was it good enough?”

“Vitya, it was perfect.”

Yakov snorts. “I made a list,” he grunts ominously, and he drags Victor into the Kiss and Cry, where Victor pulls himself together to tell Yuuri what a terrible idea it is for him to be here. He’s subsequently recorded telling him off on international television and ignoring his own scores as they come out:

“Yuuri, you are wonderful and I love you, but as your coach, I forbid you from skipping your own exhibitions ever again on my account.”

Yuuri pushes his glasses up with a shrug. He looks exhausted and rumpled, every bit the image of a man who’d won a gold medal in Japan and then boarded sixteen hours worth of flights just to be here. Just to be with Victor for exactly this moment.

Victor doubts he’s slept. “… I’ll take it under advisement.”

Christophe texts later:
They settle in to watch Yuri’s skate, and Victor knows exactly the moment the strain becomes a sprain: it’s in the second jump, and everything from there is painful to observe, watching Plisetsky limp through the path through the flames Lilia has crafted for him. Victor catches himself grinding his teeth, and Yuuri reaches over to unclench his fists. “She’s asked too much of him,” he mutters. It’s an intense program, tremendously difficult, and he’s had his doubts about whether or not Yuri could skate it all season long and go through puberty at the same time, and now he knows the answer.

Yuri downgrades most of his quads to triples, except for the salchow, falls on his axel, and finishes in a very different kind of tears at the center of the ice. By the time he skates carefully back to the Kiss and Cry, clearly favoring the one leg, he’s scrubbed his face of the evidence, hiding behind a large cat plush while the scores announce what Victor already knows: he’s carved out a third place finish, just behind Georgi, and far behind Victor.

They don’t speak to each other, even as they get back out to accept medals, until Victor forcibly offers him a hand up to the bronze medalist’s position.

“I don’t need your help,” the blonde hisses.

“You do and you’re going to shut up and take it.” Victor snaps back, surprised to see Yuri’s expression soften ever-so-slightly. Yuri lets Victor skate him back so that he can keep his foot off of the ice, after that, and Yakov apologizes as he shepherds him away to have a fresh x-ray taken.

Lilia watches. Victor thinks she finally looks shaken. Good, some vindictive part of him thinks, and he feels Yuuri’s fingers try and fail to get purchase on the back of the chiffon of his shirt as he steps forward. “You’ve been pushing him too hard,” he grouses in Russian. “Jesus, Lilia. He’s a child.”

“Are we talking about him, Vitya, or are we talking about you?”

“Him, of course.” Victor says the words at the exact same moment that he realizes he can’t be perfectly sure they’re true. “What he’s doing isn’t sustainable,” he mutters, scrambling for the high ground under Lilia’s scrutinizing, all-seeing gaze.

This woman has seen him at his absolute worst and he’s hardly better now. Victor’s reflected in her eyes; the both of them rigid and temperamental, each overly prone to fits of passion. When Lilia steps
forward, he holds his ground, though it’s hard to do: she carries a powerful, menacing sort of aura, and when she dips a perfectly manicured nail under his chin he lets her do it even if instinct suggests it’d be wiser to back away. “Do you think we could have told him to do things any differently?” She asks.

It’s a simple question and the answer ought to be yes.

Victor is pretty sure they’re now having a conversation about both him and Yuri, and he considers his younger self, chasing the nine ghosts, and then the six, and then the one, until everything he touched turned to gold.

He wants more for Yuri than the Midas curse he gave his life over to. It's a stunning realization.

“No,” he says, finally, which isn’t a surrender, even though he’s already turning to look for Yuuri. “I’m going to be more involved with him from now on,” he says, without asking for permission.

Someday Yakov is going to retire and Victor’s going to take over his entire roster. They’ve never once discussed the possibility but he knows it now, realizes the truth of it the way he knows the sun will rise, the way he knows he’s going to love Yuuri Katsuki unendingly even as they grow old together. He can feel the raise of Lilia’s eyebrow and the quirk of her mouth even if he can’t see it. “Is that sustainable?” She asks him, archly.

Victor does what he hasn’t done since he was a seventeen year old idiot: he flips her off. Behind him he hears a bark of laughter, short and cold and swift. Well, then. It’s an agreement.

“You’ve gotten pretty protective of him,” Yuuri notes as they eventually walk back, speaking in a neutral tone that means something that Victor can’t decode right away. Only later, when Yuuri’s already half-asleep in their hotel room, curled up in Victor’s arms, does he remember to ask what it was Yuuri meant.

Yuuri’s jetlag runs interference with Yuuri’s mouth, and gives Victor the gift of an incredible answer, albeit almost incomprehensibly mumbled into his chest. “... It just reminded me that you’re good with kids.”

Victor has never once considered himself good with kids, but now he can’t help but think of chasing Yuuko’s triplets around the Ice Castle, of teasing Yuri, of children that Yuuri scoops up in his arms and calls his own. “Yuuri?” He asks, because he can’t help himself.

“Mm.”

“... Do you want kids?” Victor vaguely recalls a conversation he had with Saga once, like this; remembers the careful strike of dissonance.

He loves Yuuri more than he ever loved Saga, and he's certain that he can live with a no.

Except the world is strange and Yuuri is wonderful and he’s hoping for a yes.

“Someday maybe,” Yuuri mutters back, which makes Victor’s heart soar. “Probably.” He must feel something in Victor’s body, some uptake in his heart beat or some deep inhale of breath, what with his head cradled against the soft space of Victor’s shoulder. “... Shut up and lemme sleep.”

Victor lets him.

Sometime overnight he gets a text from Yakov with Yuri’s prognosis and notes on the plans for the Exhibition skate. *I told them you’d probably skate Stammi Vicino solo*, Yakov notes, and indeed it’s

"I told them you’d probably skate Stammi Vicino solo," Yakov notes, and indeed it’s
the most logical selection. Sentimental as he is, Victor knows not to risk federation ire by bringing Yuuri out at the Russian championships, and he’s got the costume and everything.

Perhaps precisely because it’s the logical choice, he refuses to do it.

Instead he shows up at the exhibition in his trenchcoat, and he takes it off and skates out to center ice in a suit and tie, coach credentials from the Grand Prix draped around his neck while Yuuri fixes him with a quizzical stare. Then the opening piano notes strike, and this time, Victor skates Yuuri’s program: a softer, somewhat safer version; no point in being a masochist, after all. Besides the Eros program, it’s the only other thing he’s got memorized this year, this record-setting story he and Yuuri composed together.

*Victor Nikiforov skates Yuri on Ice* goes even more viral than *Yuuri Katsuki skates Stammi Vicino* on YouTube. Victor retweets someone on twitter when they use a gif he’s never seen before, from Beijing, as a reaction to the video link.

For a solid twenty-four hours, they’re trending.

Time passes swiftly, after that: Yuuri flies with him to Bratislava for Europeans, where Victor collects another gold while Yuri sulks and texts him critiques from where he’s watching in St. Petersburg.
Christophe carves some redemption into his season with a silver, finishing just ahead of Mickey Crispino. Emil barely misses the podium, followed closely by Georgi, who’s capping off his last appearance at Europeans with a respectable fifth place finish. “Just one more to go,” Georgi remarks.

“Better make it count,” Victor says. He no longer means try and beat me. He means leave something on the ice that you’ll be happy with.

He means let’s all learn to live without regrets.

After Valentine’s day, they’re swiftly off to Taipei for Four Continents. JSF has recently certified Kenjirou Minami, which makes the trip even funnier: Victor insists on touching up Yuuri’s chapstick at every single warm-up. Phichit finally catches on:

“Wow, Victor.”

“Hm?”

“You’re scary, you know that?”

Victor glances over at Minami, who is trying to hide his blush, and failing miserably, every time Yuuri skates past him. “What doesn’t kill him will make him stronger,” Victor quips, and then he grins broadly, cups his hands around his mouth. “Ganbatte, Minami-kun~”

The subsequent meltdown in warm-ups is absolutely adorable.

Yuuri narrowly beats a stabilizing Jean-Jacques, who still looks jittery and shaken coming off of his disappointing outing in Barcelona, but who seems to be rebuilding himself. He’s no longer a threat in this season, Victor thinks, but next year? Next year’s going to be interesting.

And the 2018 Olympics? Oh, what a contest! He’s delighted just thinking about it.

Phichit beams with his bronze on the podium, having barely etched out Seung-gil Lee, Guang Hong Ji, and Leo de la Iglesia for the final spot. On their way back to St. Petersburg, Victor and Yuuri take a layover in Japan, where Yuuri can give his medals to his mother in person while Victor watches.

Before he knows it, they’re headed to Boston. Victor’s not sure how he wound up buying out most of business class, except that it started with his own selfish desires, and then blossomed into wanting to make sure Yuri could keep his leg stretched out for the flight to try to avoid fresh injury. Yakov’s cleared him to skate. Then, somehow, he added Georgi -- a final, glorious send-off to the end of an era -- and, well. There was no leaving out Mila.

“You’re buying your own tickets,” he grumbled at Yakov, after check-out. “I give you enough of my money already.”

“No sum of money is worth putting up with you for, Vitya,” Yakov says, and in this way they’ve yet again exchanged the stilted, strange sort of love that exists between not-father and not-son. Victor doesn’t envy the flight attendants their task of serving a raucous Russian team and polite, apologetic Yuuri Katsuki.

Especially not with Mila Babicheva on board.

“So, Yuuri. You and Victor fly on a lot of planes together, huh?”

“Baba, shut up, I don’t want to even think about that --”
“Wow, Yura. Look whose mind is in the gutter!”

Victor leans in, nosing at Yuuri’s ear, and stage-whispers: “...maybe on the honeymoon?” Yuuri, of course, palms his face away and goes back to his video game, but later, when the lights on the plane are out and everyone’s asleep, he turns on his side to face Victor and asks where would you even want to go?

Victor hasn’t really thought about it, except that he’d like to be back on a beach, maybe, drinking entirely too many alcoholic beverages with umbrellas in them and looking at Yuuri’s ass in his swimming trunks on a pretty regular basis. “To the stars.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“You’re marrying hopeless.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri agrees with a hum, and he squeezes Victor’s hand with a soft smile, pulls down his eye mask. He looks happier than he’s been all season to be on a flight like this one, headed into a big competition. “I know.”

Yuri Plisetsky kicks their seat, and Victor realizes that on the flight back, Yuri and Mila are definitely going to sit in front of them, instead of behind. “Shut up, you stupid saps,” he grunts, continuing a trend where he pretends not to be deeply invested in their relationship, even though he’s obviously been eavesdropping. Victor and Yuuri have had him stay over on the weekends in the guest room of his flat a few times, just to provide a change of scene from Lilia’s house, and every time Yuri’s pretended like he begrudges making the trip and then stolen a book out of Victor’s library on his way out: “I’m just going to finish this, I’ll bring it back next time or whatever.” “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

What the reporters want, going into Worlds, is a storyline about a new rivalry between Victor and Yuuri, some byline they can print about lovers-turned-rivals. What they get instead is a pair of starry-eyed interviews. Yuuri predicts Victor’s going to win for the sixth time; Victor insists that Yuuri’s going to wipe the floor with the competition.

In the end the margin between them is settled by just three and a quarter points.

1 Yuuri Katsuki, Japan: 314.93
2 Victor Nikiforov, Russia: 311.76
3 Otabek Altin, Kazakhstan: 295.14
4 Christophe Giacometti, Switzerland: 270.99
5 Yuri Plisetsky, Russia: 269.97
6 Jean-Jacques Leroy, Canada: 266.72
7 Phichit Chulanont, Thailand: 262.13
8 Georgi Popovich, Russia: 261.84
9 Emil Nekola, Czech Republic: 254.55
Yuuri turns to look at him after the medal ceremony, and takes off his medal, holds it up for Victor to kiss. He’s just about to make good on the promise when Yuuri yanks it away, and pulls him close instead. There are far, far too many cameras, and later, some intrepid buzzfeed reporter will work their way through the gifs to work out what gets said between them while Yuuri’s forehead rests against his, while they gaze at each other, smiling and hopeless and so in love that the word itself gets reinvented by their smiles.

“Let’s get married,” says the gold medalist.

“Let’s,” says Victor Nikiforov, who has never in his life been so happy to settle for second place.

Chapter End Notes

HEADCANONS!

1. GEORGI becomes a legendary commentator in Russia. Like forever. You know you'd watch the shit out of Georgi commenting about the Olympics, come on. "That triple axel was constructed out of heartache and vengeance." "Okay, but was it worth full marks?" "Yes, Kenya. It was worth full marks."

His retirement party is planned by EVGENY, who makes the terrible decision to fly all of their friends out to Vegas. Victor and Yuuri narrowly manage not to get married there, mostly because Victor wants a romantic wedding, not one where he wears a polyester suit rented on the fly, but the same can't be said for Georgi: he wakes up with ALENA and somehow they never seem to get that annulment processed.

She spends the rest of her life bossing him around and complaining that if she'd wanted all of this drama she would've married a woman. Victor is delighted to discover that Georgi's college crush rides again.
**EVGENY** is that horrible permanent bachelor friend everyone has, by which I mean he eventually tries to get married three different times, and each time it ends terribly.

2. **SOFIA** does not become a ballerina. She gets discovered in her teenage years and becomes a high-fashion model; in certain circles, she's just as famous as Victor is. And as she gets older she becomes one of those women who's known for constantly speaking her mind in a really good way. In the shitshow of media-men-abusing-women we're experiencing right now I guarantee she'd be out in interviews just casually destroying several careers. Eventually she becomes the editor of a fashion magazine in Paris, but that's years and years down the line. Point being: she grows up into a menace, but in the best way.

3. **SERGEI AND MARIYA** stay in their respective careers for decades. They're considered mainstays of the Paris culture scene by the time they each retire. SERGEI still makes appearances as a guest conductor, even, by the time he passes away, ages from now. By that point, MARIYA has written two different books on the history of ballet.

4. **VICTOR** retires after the 2018 Olympics. So does YAKOV. Victor takes over coaching for the Russian team at that point, picking up both MILA and YURI on his roster.

5. **YUURI** keeps skating until he's the same age Victor is when Victor retires (~30ish) and by that time, LILIA is also ready to retire, and YUURI becomes an incredibly in-demand choreographer. He and Victor work on a lot of programs together, but he also choreographs without Victor's input for KENJIROU, who develops the rivalry of the ages with Yuri Plisetsky after the 2018 Olympics. Speaking of ...

6. **YURI** recovers from the injuries of this chapter to become a serious contender in the next season. JJ and Yuuri are both regularly seeing therapists for anxiety at that point, so this launches a new golden era of skating where the Grand Prix series is legitimately chaos. Between him, Victor, Yuuri, and JJ, and Otabek, the 2018 Olympics is the tightest margin for who makes it on the podium in skating history.

7. **SAGA** makes up with Victor when she gets an unexpected invite to the wedding, one Yuuri insisted on sending. She becomes ridiculously good friends with CHRISTOPHE. It's the Actual Worst.

GEORGI, EVGENY, and CHRISTOPHE are Victor's groomsmen, which is terrible for entirely different reasons than Yuuri's groomsmen, consisting of: TAKASHI, PHICHIT, and YURI.

8. **VICTOR** and **YUURI** adopt, eventually. They make St. Petersburg their primary residence, but usually summer in Hasetsu. The Ice Castle show becomes a regular feature of their seasons, along with at least one appearance in the ice show PHICHIT launches in Bangkok.